

“We Walk by Faith”

Parish Self-Assessment Report

**St. Olaf Catholic Church
104 Norge Lane
Williamsburg, VA 23188**

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I. Introduction

The St. Olaf faith community was formed as a mission of St. Bede parish in the summer of 1989. By early 1992, the community had grown sufficiently for the mission to be designated a parish and on June 1, 1992, the mission was officially named in honor of St. Olaf, recognizing the local Norwegian culture of upper James City County. Over the next three years rented space in Norge Elementary School, Our Savior's Lutheran Church, and the Toano Women's Club.

By 1994 the community of 200 families needed a permanent church home. A multi-purpose space to seat 250 was planned for worship, fellowship and Christian formation. The current building was dedicated by Bishop Walter Sullivan on the feast of St. Olaf, July 29, 1995. Members of the faith community made many of the sacramental furnishings for the worship space.

The parish continued to grow and was guided by a Pastoral Coordinator until June 10, 1999, when the first resident Pastor was named. As the community increased to 400 families, three Mass times on a weekend were needed to meet the needs of the parish. In 2003, when the mortgage was paid on all the buildings and the parish grounds, it became obvious that the community would soon need a larger, permanent, worship space for Mass.

A committee was formed to plan a new church but it was unsuccessful for a variety of reasons. The pastor's health was deteriorating and he was apparently no longer able to be involved in key decisions. Questionable decisions and proposed actions were being made by only a few individuals who acted completely on their own. Achieving consensus of the parishioners was never a consideration in those decisions. The situation became emotionally stressful to even attend Mass due to the presentation of proposed actions by a certain individual. Various meetings were confrontational for many parishioners. This was dividing the parish and approached the point of non-reconciliation between various factions and members of the parish. The diocese became involved, suspending building plans until an appropriate time in the future when the newly assigned pastor felt that building could again be considered. The parish had to "mend" first.

By 2007, the parish had grown to over 650 families. The parish had mended with the vast majority of parishioners willing to move forward together, and plans could again begin to materialize for a new Church. Together, as a faith community, the parish has made a commitment to build a new worship space to seat 600 parishioners with the expansion to 750 for certain occasions.

The parish community is aware there will be an eventual realignment of the various parishes and subsequent reassignment of the priests within the diocese of Richmond. Parishioners acknowledge the existing shortage of priests and that diocesan representatives are searching for solutions so that the needs of every Catholic can be satisfied. Building a new church, a huge undertaking for a pastor, becomes more burdensome if the pastor has additional parishes to serve. As a

community, we are hopeful that the size and needs of St. Olaf will guide the Bishop in his decision regarding future alignment and pastoral assignments.

The members of St. Olaf parish are predominately white non-Hispanic families with approximately 7% minorities. We have a large number of young adults and children, but the main body of the parish consists of a community of retired persons. Parish demographics are representative of the demographics of our location in the northern end of James City County.

The parish mission statement is:

“We, the Catholic Community of St. Olaf, are called under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and grace of God, to actively celebrate our faith within a community of believers, to be witnesses of God’s love and compassion for all, by our commitment to justice and peace, and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus, our Risen Lord, by our words and our lives.”

II. Word

The entire faith community – from youth to retirees – shares in the ministry of catechesis. Parish leadership strongly supports formation for all age groups. Many within the parish feel they are called to be life-long learners. This number increases each year as adults and youth wrestle with the issues in their lives that reveal the presence of Jesus and causes them to form questions. The parish continues to be committed to challenging and supporting adults as they develop a mature faith so that they might live as Christ-like disciples in their families and communities.

The parish is engaged in supporting the youth of the parish to discover and name their faith through multiple experiences. There is an increased effort to reach out to youth in new and varied venues. Parents are influential agents of catechesis for the children and youth but are challenged to balance work, family, and faith. The parish is flexible to meet these competing needs.

The pastor is dedicated to increasing participation of parishioners in religious and social programs. He has made a personal effort to be a life-long learner himself as he opens up more formation opportunities for the community. During liturgies, the parish supports and prays for those going through formation for sacraments. This is verbalized within the intercessions during weekend liturgies.

III. Worship

The experience of worship at St. Olaf is spiritual, respectful and welcoming. The community is extremely pleased with how the liturgies enhance their prayer life overall. It is felt that the music lends itself to enhancing the worship experience and at the same time encourages participation. The homilies are perceived as helpful and thought provoking.

In addition, Deacon Tom Thompson has provided faith filled homilies from a married/family life perspective. He has been an asset to the overall liturgical experience of the community. Daily prayer and devotion are threads that are constantly encouraged throughout the year.

The community feels included in the Worship experience. People with disabilities serve as Eucharistic Ministers and are choir members. Children are included in the worship by frequent participation in the music with rhythmical instruments. Children also share in the Liturgy of the Word by coming together bi-monthly for instruction on the Sunday Gospel reading. Before leaving for this instruction, children participate in conversation with Father Pete and bless to the assembly as they depart.

IV. Needs

The mission of Sojourners is to provide spiritual support to the sick, acknowledge newcomers and assist at funerals by preparing a reception following the funeral liturgy. Sojourners are constantly seeking ways to improve the physical and spiritual well-being of St. Olaf parishioners and the larger community of friends. The Sojourners have ministered for over 12 years and the coordinator was recently appointed a standing member on the Pastoral Council.

The Sojourners are also involved in on-going programs and activities designed to build fellowship with all our parishioners. Sojourners welcome newcomers by sending post cards of welcome and new parishioners are invited to a welcome reception held twice yearly. The entire parish is invited to attend through announcements to this worthwhile program for newcomers.

Sojourners, with Eucharistic ministers of the sick, visit members of the parish in nursing homes, hospital, and those who are homebound. Special effort is made to check on those parishioners living alone, giving attention to material as well as spiritual needs, including distribution of the Eucharist to the homebound.

The youth minister's charter is to welcome and to engage the youth to become active members of the parish. Activities include religious education classes, guitar lessons, pizza parties, dessert night with a sing along and the project of running a haunted forest for Halloween. During Lent, the youth ministry is responsible for one week's Friday Stations of the Cross, including soup and bread at the conclusion. A special youth picnic starts the year in September and there are multiple occasions of a youth mass during the year.

Confirmation candidates attend weekend retreats with various surrounding parishes and are encouraged while candidates to become lectors. After confirmation, youth are invited to be commissioned into the Eucharistic ministry. The youth ministry also provides the servers at Mass and other liturgies.

The parish slogan, "All are welcome," is a measure of the hospitality shown by parishioners. A time of fellowship follows each mass. A committee provides various

treats and refreshments to all attendees, encouraging people to remain, socializing after mass. This encourages an atmosphere of friendliness and togetherness.

The parish bulletin is a source of information that provides the parishioners the latest happenings at St. Olaf. This news is especially helpful to those who might have been away any particular weekend. The bulletins can be picked up at the parish office if a parishioner has attended mass elsewhere the previous weekend.

V. Service

The Charitable Giving Program, established in the past 16 months, demonstrates new strength of the parish. The Charitable Giving Program gives a designated percentage of weekly offerings to local needy charities that may receive insufficient funds from other sources. The contribution enhances the ability of these charities to serve the local community. The charities are examined by a member of the Pastoral Council and a report is made to the Pastoral Council and the Pastor regarding the distribution of funds. The Pastoral Council gives the final approval for these distributions. This program has brought St. Olaf closer to the ecumenical community and in tune with the needs of diverse groups such as the elderly, the less fortunate, the neglected/abused, and mentally/or physically handicapped adults and children.

We are the only Catholic parish in the vicinity that operates a food bank. It is open to anyone in need from 10 AM to Noon, Monday through Thursday. The program does not refuse anyone but a family can only draw food more than once in a month in exceptional circumstance. The food that is distributed will feed the family of 4 for a full week.

Parish leadership and volunteers are constantly seeking ways to improve the physical and spiritual caring of the parishioners. All the areas are regularly evaluated and discussed with the intent to strengthen the ministry over the next 5 years.

VI. Plans for renewal and meeting parish needs

For the next several years St. Olaf parish will be heavily involved in the Capital Campaign and building a new church. As a community, we are building a much needed larger worship space. Plans include modification of the existing worship space to become a multi-use parish center. Our parish is committed to building a new church, with enhanced multi-use capacity for the use of the parish. The new facility will help us meet our present space needs, as well as the projected future needs.

We are equally committed to maintaining our present efforts to meet the existing spiritual, educational and social needs of our parish community. The long term goal is to have adequate, modern classrooms that can serve a multiple of parish functions as meeting and educational rooms.

VII. Diocesan Support

The diocesan support needed is for the Bishop to consider the somewhat unique circumstance of St. Olaf parish in the realignment of parishes within the diocese.

Construction of the new church and associated detail requires the full time oversight of a pastor. We would ask for consideration of the welfare of the pastor as he ministers to the particular needs of the congregation. Serving over 650 families and their spiritual needs alone is a large assignment; supervision of all of the aspects of building a church is an added responsibility for consideration. Any additional assignment to other parishes during this time could be an onerous mental, emotional and physical burden on the pastor.

Additionally, there are still a few known dissenters, opposed to the efforts to build our new church. This small group writes letters to the Bishop and other parishioners and generally attempts to cause unwarranted friction within the parish. Continued support by the diocese to the overall desires of the parish to build the new worship space would be deeply appreciated.

VIII. Conclusion

St. Olaf parish is a medium sized parish that provides a bonding atmosphere of a “small church.” People come to the masses not because of the need to fulfill their obligation to the Catholic faith, but because they feel welcome and at home. Father Pete and Deacon Tom impart spiritual guidance while the parishioners themselves exude fondness, compassion and love for each other. While there are grander churches with a more “church-like” atmosphere, it is the congregation that makes up the body of this church named St. Olaf. People care for each other and now are unified in the actions to construct the new church.

Just 18 months ago, we were a greatly divided group for a number of reasons. The efforts of several individuals, determined to force the parish to build a new church with a large contribution from a questionable donor, caused much division. A number of events occurred, at too fast a pace, defying logic and common sense. With the involvement of diocesan leadership and concerned members of the parish, the situation was salvaged before it became totally out of hand and embarrassing to the larger Catholic community. During that 10-12 month period, many good and devout Catholics left St. Olaf due to the friction. Many have now returned as the situation has become clear and defined. Father Pete has personally led the unification efforts of this parish, and only through his leadership have we become one again.

The liturgical consultant and the architects have held many meetings with the parishioners to ensure that plans for the new church conform to the desires of the parishioners, adherence to the rules of the Diocese of Richmond, James City County and the Catholic Church. Attendance has exceeded predictions by 200% at all of the various meetings with parishioners to discuss the worship space and potential construction. The faith community is very attentive, interactive and the desire of each parishioner is shared publicly. These meetings are open and generally attended by over 150 parishioners. On one weekend, as an example, there were meetings on Friday, Saturday and Sunday in order to allow as many people as possible to participate. Some 500 parishioners attended at least one of the sessions.

The success of the Capital Campaign efforts and on-going communication about the building project has greatly encouraged confidence among parishioners that it is a worthwhile effort; it is going forward with the consensus of the majority. The parish is proud of the commitment to build the new worship space. A goal of \$1 million was established and as of April 22, 2008, pledges from over 248 families out of the 650 families in the parish, for \$1,149,115 have been received. Additional pledges have been promised and the overall participation has far exceeded expectations.

We believe, as a community, that we are on the right path, guided by the grace of God, with the correct people in control, collaborating with conscientious parishioners who serve as members of various committees, envisioning the future. It is a bright future and the vast majority of parishioners know that worship space is going to reflect their desire to worship God, where all are welcomed to the community of faith at St. Olaf.