

FINAL REPORT OF THE Q GROUP

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I. Introduction

In 2017, Guardian Angels Parish celebrated the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding. As part of that celebration, the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) formed our committee, called the “Q Group,” to help develop a vision for the parish’s future. This report is the final product of our committee’s efforts over the last year and a half.

Our goals, set for us by the PPC, were to identify Guardian Angels’ historical strengths, to develop a vision for Guardian Angels to strengthen faith in the future of the parish, and to give all parishioners a voice in developing this vision. More specifically, we were asked to help parish leaders plan for the future by finding out what is being done well at Guardian Angels, by finding out what can be done better, and by identifying strategic priorities or themes that can guide the PPC in improving existing programs and ministries or creating new ones. Our ultimate and overriding goals were to help grow the membership of Guardian Angels and to find whatever ways we could to support the parish in enriching the spiritual lives of its members for many years to come.

The rest of this report is loosely organized around these goals. First, we discuss Guardian Angels’ historical strengths. Next, in discussing how Guardian Angels can be better, we identify three important themes that emerged from a parish-wide survey in 2018, from informal interviews of active and inactive parishioners, and from our committee’s discussions. Within both sections, we suggest courses of action for consideration by parish leaders. In an appendix at the end of this report, we included information about the process and guiding principles we followed as a committee.

One last introductory note: Guardian Angels Parish is much smaller now than it was a generation ago. Membership at Guardian Angels and weekly Mass attendance have declined steadily since the early 1970s. More recently, between 2010 and 2018, weekly Mass attendance dropped nine percent, from an average of 1,816 to 1,649. Over that same period, annual enrollment at Guardian Angels School dropped twenty-five percent, from an average of 565 to 426, and annual enrollment in CCD classes dropped fifty-two percent, from an average of 263 to 126. (The 426 figure for 2018 school enrollment includes pre-school-age children, who were not part of the school population in 2010, so the net

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percentage decrease is even greater.) These declines are consistent with trends within the larger Catholic Church, and we kept those trends in mind in making the recommendations in this report. For Guardian Angels to grow again, or even sustain its membership at the present level, we need a fresh approach to engaging current and prospective parishioners.

II. Historical Strengths of the Parish

The good news is Guardian Angels can draw on many existing strengths in planning to meet the challenges of the future. This section describes a few key historical strengths that our committee identified.

We have a wide range of parish service organizations. Guardian Angels offers parishioners a wide range of opportunities for service, worship, and faith formation, and many of these opportunities are available through our network of parish service organizations (PSOs). As part of our committee’s research, we compiled detailed information on twenty PSOs, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Fathers’ Team, “Soup and Speaker” series, Mission Twinning, and Eucharistic Adoration. While the parish should continually review its PSO offerings, there is a strong foundation in place. Almost seventy percent of respondents to the parish survey believed that Guardian Angels already offered enough faith formation opportunities.

We have strong clergy and a strong staff and benefit from access to Mount Saint Mary’s Seminary and the Athenaeum of Ohio. Guardian Angels has a professional and skilled group of clergy and staff. Fr. Thomas King and Director of Youth Ministry Bradley Barnes were singled out by survey respondents as particularly valuable to the parish. Historically, Guardian Angels has benefitted greatly from being in close proximity to talented faculty, interns, and students at Mount Saint Mary’s Seminary and the Athenaeum of Ohio. Former weekend associates Fr. Anthony Brausch and Fr. Earl Fernandes got high praise in the survey.

We have many “legacy” families and a sense of community tied in part to geography. Guardian Angels is closely linked to the Mount Washington community. Many parishioners grew up there and attended Guardian Angels School. Other young families in the parish buy or rent first homes in Mount Washington. A number of these families eventually move to Anderson Township (seventy-one percent of survey respondents lived in Anderson), but remain parishioners at Guardian Angels. Because of these dynamics and the reputation of the school, we have a lot of “legacy” families—families with multiple generations worshipping or attending school here—who are deeply committed to the parish. In survey responses, Guardian Angels was said to be “unpretentious,” with a “family feel” and a sense of “neighborhood closeness.”

The rest of this report focuses on ways that Guardian Angels can be better, but we should not lose sight of the parish’s strengths and should make the most of them in attracting new members. To do this, we recommend the following:

- Parish leaders should create succession plans for PSOs. We need to prioritize

identifying and recruiting future leaders of the PSOs. We also suggest conducting a regular review or audit of PSOs to ensure they are effective and staffed with enough volunteers. Consider closing down PSOs that are inactive, folding them into other PSOs, or at least noting in parish records that they are inactive.

- Continue our close partnership with the Athenaeum. Consistently having a seminary intern involved at the parish is important in carrying on this partnership. We should look for other ways for parishioners and seminarians to interact, perhaps by regularly inviting seminarians to attend parish events or scheduling tours or service projects for parishioners at the Athenaeum. Being so near the Athenaeum is a tremendous benefit that we should strive to use to the parish's full advantage.
- Find ways to recognize and celebrate alumni of Guardian Angels School and work proactively to keep them members of the parish. The friends, families, and social circles of alumni of Guardian Angels School are rich sources of new parishioners. Too often in recent years, once the last child has graduated, school families move on and reduce their involvement at Guardian Angels. We need these families to stay and help keep the parish vibrant.

III. Themes and Recommendations

This section presents three major themes that emerged from the parish survey, from informal interviews with active and inactive parishioners, and from our committee's discussions. We also present in this section our recommendations for dealing with the challenges inherent in each of the themes.

1. We should work toward transparency in appointing people to positions of leadership and in setting priorities for the parish. Our survey and informal interviews revealed that not enough parishioners know who the leaders of the parish are or how those leaders make decisions. Fewer than half of respondents to the parish survey (only thirty-eight percent) felt well-informed about the topic labeled "Parish Committees and Organizations." One survey respondent said it seems like positions on parish boards are reserved for those with close relationships with the staff, while another said the parish relies too much on the same people all the time. Another said Guardian Angels offered many opportunities to get involved, except on the PPC and the five boards that report to the PPC (Education/Faith Formation, Finance/Operations, Ministry, Worship, and Stewardship). Several felt there is no mechanism for parishioners to have input into decisions by the PPC or even to ask questions of PPC members, and would like parish leaders to be more accountable to the parish as a whole.

Newcomers to the parish, especially those without children in the school, often find it difficult to "break in" to the Guardian Angels community because they do not know how to get involved. Even when parishioners have become involved, some felt that parish leaders were not open to new ideas and opinions. Volunteers who are not encouraged to offer new ideas can easily disconnect or withdraw. At the extreme, this can cause attrition in parish membership. Eventually, Guardian Angels' PSOs will have too few volunteers to stay viable as their leaders "grow weary" (in the words of one survey respondent) from

having too much to do and too few other people to rely on.

Besides surveying parishioners, we also sent surveys to more than sixty PSOs, about fifty of which are listed in the parish's annual guide book and directory. We got responses from only twenty PSOs, or roughly one-third of the number on record. This survey showed that some people serving on PSOs did not realize that they are in fact part of a PSO or that each PSO is supposed to be overseen by one of the boards that report to the PPC.

We need to do more to publicize the duties of the PPC and its component boards, the names of the parishioners serving on these boards, and how parishioners are chosen to serve on the boards. We recommend the following:

- Update parish governance documents. There should be literature (for example, an organizational chart) available to all parishioners that lists the members of the PPC, the members of the five PPC boards, and all active PSO volunteers. These documents should be revised on a regular basis. Many parishioners may not realize that some of this information is in the annual directory (and new parishioners do not always receive the directory), so it should be published at least a few times a year, if not more frequently, in the Mass bulletin. We also suggest that members of the PPC be available after Mass on fellowship Sundays so more people can meet and interact with them in a conversational setting.
- To encourage participation by a wider group of parishioners, and to enlarge parishioners' sense of ownership over Guardian Angels' future, we should consider term limits for positions on the five boards and the at-large positions on the PPC. We should also consider whether to fill these positions through open elections.
- In advertising open leadership positions, we should strike the difficult balance between being direct about the time commitment, responsibilities, and expectations for each position and not intimidating parishioners or discouraging them from volunteering.
- Encourage PSO volunteers to personally recruit others who are not involved. We should consider scheduling a PSO "fair" or "showcase" to introduce parishioners to these organizations.
- Consider asking a member of the staff to take responsibility for putting interested volunteers in touch with appropriate groups within the parish, and for facilitating communication and cooperation between the various groups and ministries.

2. We should improve our inclusiveness and outreach efforts. In this section we discuss two naturally related themes together—inclusiveness and outreach. Guardian Angels needs to take more active steps to connect both with current parishioners and with people outside the parish.

As we already pointed out, one of Guardian Angels' great strengths is its sense of

family and community. But we cannot let that strength become a weakness by becoming too insular or inward-looking. Many current parishioners, as well as people who attend Mass regularly but who are not members of the parish, do not feel fully welcomed into the Guardian Angels community. One survey respondent said that Guardian Angels can be “cliquish,” and others saw a divide between parishioners with children enrolled at Guardian Angels School and families without children in the school. Comments about this school/church divide appeared again and again in narrative responses to the survey. One person said most parish activities were offered through the school, not the church; another said the sense of community within the school does not translate to the whole parish. We recommend the following:

- Foster a welcoming culture for new parishioners and guests, to include more and better outreach efforts. We should try to engage parishioners and guests on both a spiritual and social level. This could involve having current parishioners reach out to guests of similar ages or with similar backgrounds. We suggest encouraging all parishioners to introduce themselves to other worshippers, especially guests, before and after Mass.
- Plan more social events to welcome new parishioners and re-engage long-time parishioners. The picnic to celebrate Guardian Angels’ 125th anniversary in September 2017 was well-attended and gave parishioners a chance to meet and get to know others.

Guardian Angels has to make a concerted effort to attract young families to maintain a critical mass of worshippers and volunteers. One way to do this is by building in more opportunities for children to participate in the Mass, possibly through an expanded music ministry. Another way is to improve the CCD experience for students not enrolled in Guardian Angels School or another Catholic school. The year-long duration of the CCD program and the weekday-evening class schedule are not convenient for many working families or even conducive to learning for the youngest students.[‡] Other churches in our area provide child care during worship services and during programs for adults (and advertise that it is available) and there is some demand for this at Guardian Angels as well.

Also, the RCIA program can be made more accessible, even within the guidelines prescribed by the diocese. The RCIA program cannot follow a “one size fits all” model given the diverse backgrounds of potential candidates and catechumens and given that in many families, both adults must now work full-time. The parish needs to look at the spiritual needs of each candidate and catechumen on a case-by-case basis and structure the RCIA program accordingly. We recommend the following:

- Strengthen the CCD experience and sacramental preparation programs for children not enrolled in Guardian Angels School. We should consider offering an accelerated schedule for completing CCD requirements.

[‡] Beginning in fall 2019, CCD classes will be held on Sunday mornings before 10:00 AM Mass.

- Explore the possibility of a Sunday school for the youngest children in the parish.
- Make the RCIA process more welcoming. Investigate ways to shorten or restructure the RCIA process so that it appeals to a broader range of people.
- Consider scheduling an annual stewardship/discernment Sunday, and perhaps staff an information booth for PSOs after Sunday Mass.
- Continue to use the parish website and social media platforms to spotlight opportunities to get involved.
- Work to ensure that parish committees are inclusive of a diverse group of people representing the whole Guardian Angels community.

Besides improving outreach to current and prospective members of the parish, many survey respondents would like Guardian Angels to do more outreach to the surrounding community. More than half (fifty-two percent) of respondents said they would like more chances to join community service events. Some respondents said the parish does not do enough to support issues of social justice. We recommend the following:

- Do more to promote opportunities for community service through existing ministries like the Society of St. Vincent De Paul.
- Plan community service events geared toward young families and allow children to participate as volunteers.

Communicating effectively with younger generations is a challenge in any organization. “Millennials” and those in the post-Millennial generation, “Generation Z,” communicate much more often with digital interactive technologies than with the methods usually preferred by older generations. It is imperative that we constantly reassess how we communicate information and whether we are doing it effectively. We have a well-established social media presence, and our website is easy to find and use and provides plenty of general information. Details about specific events are sometimes sparse or relegated to hard-to-find links. Also, parishioners “get involved” largely on paper, by filling out a form. Descriptions on the website of various programs and ministries do not always clearly explain how to get involved, what getting involved would mean, or even whether new participants are welcome. We recommend the following:

- Within the descriptions of PSOs on the parish website, add more details about meeting times and locations, who should consider joining, and what skills are needed, if any. In other words, besides just describing a PSO, use the website to attract, invite, and actively engage new volunteers. Whenever possible, provide contact information for the PSO leader or specific instructions for how to use the website or a social media platform to get involved, rather than making potential volunteers search through the annual directory for information or

submit a “Time and Talent” form to the parish office.

- Provide plenty of details about parish events on social media, including the “how, what, when, where, and why” of what is happening and why people should participate.
- Publicize parish events through local media outlets, including in traditional media like television and newspapers. Some parishioners feel that not enough is done to “advertise” Guardian Angels locally and throughout greater Cincinnati.

3. We should strive to improve the worship experience. This last theme relates to parishioners’ actual worship experience. For Guardian Angels to stay a vital community, where all worshippers feel welcomed and connected to God, we need to place Christ and the Mass at the center of the parish. The worship of God and the journey to Heaven, as experienced through the Mass, should be the common bonds that unite us. At the Mass we come together to worship and offer ourselves to Christ and, through Christ, to our Heavenly Father, and to receive Christ in Holy Communion. The Mass should be the most sacred and beautiful experience of the week for each parishioner and guest, and the church should be the most sacred and beautiful place we visit. In short, the Mass itself should lift us up to God. The parish should work to make the Mass as warm and welcoming as possible while still preserving the solemnity that makes the Eucharist “the source and summit of Christian life.”

Survey results and interviews frequently brought our committee back to the topic of music. In every congregation there are strong opinions about the music ministry, and Guardian Angels is no exception. Many parishioners would like our music ministry to expand, both through a much wider selection of hymns and choral responses at Mass and through increasing the size of the choir. Many parishioners would like more chances for children and youth to sing in church. For some, the music ministry is such an essential part of the worship experience that neglecting to revitalize it from time to time will cause them to attend Mass elsewhere.

In survey responses, parishioners generally said Guardian Angels has attractive and well-maintained buildings and grounds, and many take great pride in the beautiful gathering space. But others pointed out that the sanctuary is drab and dimly lit and that the temperature is often uncomfortable. Pews are aging and many kneelers need repair. We recommend the following:

- Significantly broaden the range of musical selections and add more appearances by children’s choirs. Mix traditional, sacred music with contemporary music. Consider a different musical theme for different Masses (for example, one mostly sacred, another mostly contemporary) so parishioners can worship with music that fully engages them.
- Add to the beauty of the church’s interior. Add interior lighting and find out if the

temperature can be kept more consistent.

- Continue to make prayer books available during Advent and Lent. These proved very popular in survey responses.
- Explore ways to better “advertise” the benefits of the Catholic worship experience. Strive to make the Mass an experience that unifies long-time parishioners, new parishioners, and guests.

What should bond our parishioners together is the worship of God, and specifically the Mass and our collective journey to Heaven. One of Guardian Angels’ most pressing challenges is reaching out to and re-engaging parishioners who do not regularly attend Mass or who do not fully understand the tenets of their Catholic faith. Finding ways to help these parishioners return to the sacraments must be one of our primary missions. For those already consistently observing the sacraments, the parish must support them in furthering their knowledge of the faith and in deepening their love of God.

IV. Conclusion

Guardian Angels has a long and dignified tradition and an active and devoted core group of parishioners. But the Catholic Church and the Catholic education system in the United States continue to deal with declining rates of participation, and that decline is happening at Guardian Angels, too. Within the last decade, Catholic parishes in other cities in Ohio, particularly Cleveland, have closed or been consolidated into others. Some of this decline is attributable to demographic changes in these communities. Much of it is unfortunately the result of the well-publicized priest abuse scandal and the wider Church’s response to the scandal.

As parishioners in that core group age, it will be crucial to form new strategies to attract and keep new members. With deliberate and focused efforts to persuade others to worship at Guardian Angels and become involved in the life of the church, we believe we can maintain a healthy and vibrant parish for another 125 years.

Appendix

This Appendix provides more information about the Q Group’s process and guiding principles.

A. Composition

The Q Group represented a cross-section of parishioners. Members included lifelong parishioners, new parishioners (including parishioners new to the Catholic faith), parishioners with children enrolled at Guardian Angels School, parishioners with children enrolled in secular schools, and parishioners without children. The Q Group also included two staff members. Although one member served as liaison to the PPC, the Q Group worked independently of the PPC and did not collaborate with the PPC in preparing this report. Parish staff members recused themselves from meetings where the Q Group discussed the drafting and revising of the report.

B. Guiding Principles

Early in its discussions, the Q Group decided to be guided by these principles: In formulating a future vision for the parish, the group (1) would not deviate from foundational Catholic practices and values; (2) would focus on long-term priorities, not on the “how to” of implementing specific initiatives; and (3) would be inclusive of people who actively practice their Catholic faith and individuals and families who are not actively engaged with the church.

C. Process

The Q Group met approximately every other month from October 2017 through April 2019. Members took turns leading discussions at each meeting. Minutes of each meeting through October 2018 were made available on the parish website. From December 2018 forward, the Q Group met to discuss the drafting and revising of this report. No minutes of those meetings were kept.

During 2018, the Q Group conducted a parish-wide survey. More than three hundred parishioners responded. The survey results were both quantitative and qualitative in nature; respondents were allowed to write narrative answers to many questions. The narratives provided a rich source of information about life at Guardian Angels and about parishioners’ perspectives on their faith experience. Although the Q Group made a deliberate decision not to quote extensively from the survey responses, excerpts of some responses are included in the report. The conclusions and recommendations in this report are based on the results of the survey, informal interviews of active and inactive parishioners by Q Group members, and from research done by Q Group members. The final report was written collaboratively by the entire group.

D. Four Pillars

Starting in fall 2017, the Q Group decided to center its work on four “pillars.” These “pillars” were essentially themes that the Q Group used to guide its research and discussions and the process of formulating a vision for the parish’s future. The four pillars are: (1) seeking improvement and more efficiency in existing church ministries; (2) helping practicing Catholics become better Catholics; (3) bringing non-practicing Catholics back to the faith; and (4) welcoming non-Catholics into the fullness of the faith.

Sub-committees of Q Group members explored each of these four pillars. Each sub-committee first devised a set of strategic questions to guide further research and discussion. Then each subcommittee spent several months developing recommendations based on consideration of its strategic questions, its own research, discussion during Q Group meetings, and analysis of the survey results.