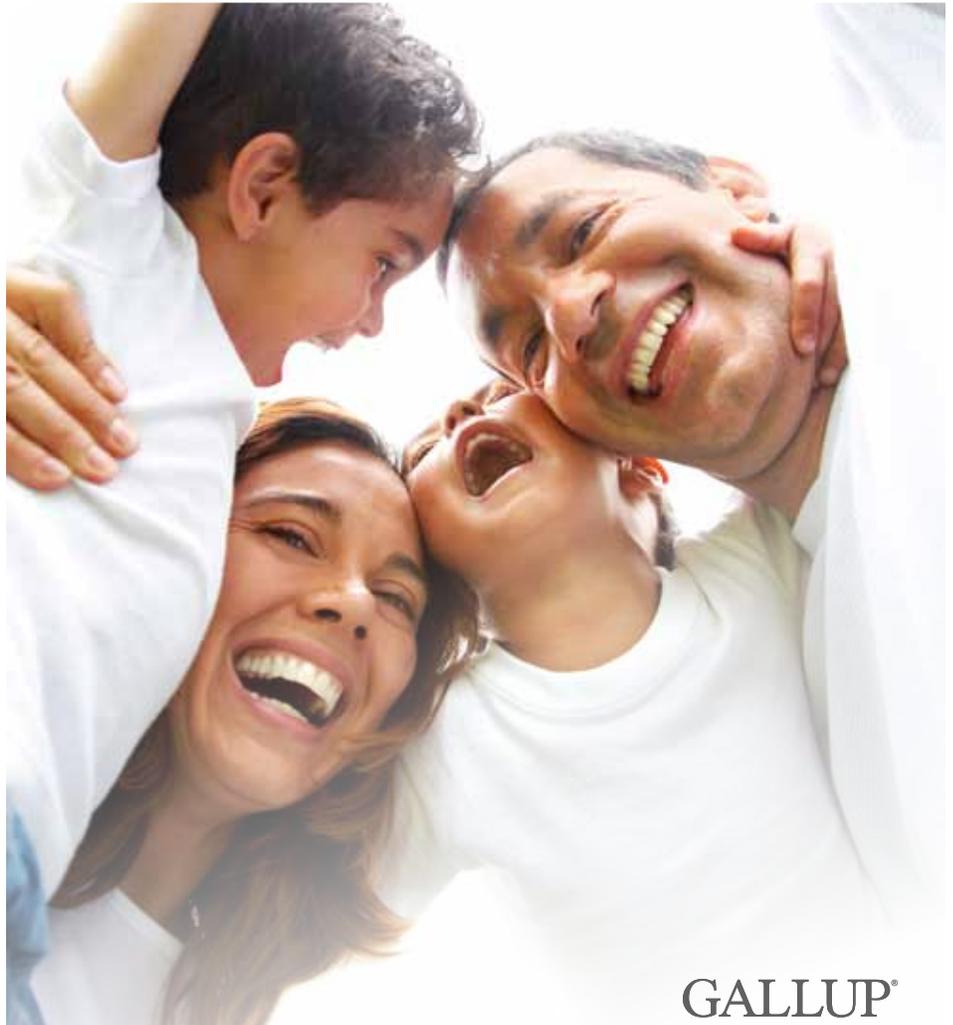


INSIDE AN ENGAGED CONGREGATION

A Case Study of
The Church of St.
Gerard Majella
Port Jefferson
Station, New York



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INSIDE AN ENGAGED CONGREGATION

What does an engaged congregation look like? What steps does a successfully engaged congregation take to get to an optimum level of engagement? The following case study portrays a church that has successfully done the work of becoming engaged. And it is not an independent, fast-growing, high-energy Protestant mega-church in the suburbs of a growing Southern city. This is a Catholic parish in the Northeast — Long Island, to be exact.

Welcome to the Church of St. Gerard Majella in Port Jefferson Station, New York. It's a parish with about 4,000 families in its boundaries and about 1,200 active families, and it partners with three other parishes in a regional Catholic school. On the surface, you would find nothing remarkable about St. Gerard. But if you looked beneath the surface of this parish, you'd discover an exciting, vibrant, and growing community of committed Christian disciples.

St. Gerard Majella was chosen as the subject of this case study to demonstrate that engagement does not depend on location, worship style, tradition, or ecclesiology. Rather, it depends on addressing the issues uncovered by an analysis of the twelve items that Gallup research has shown drive the engagement of any congregation. And any leader, if he or she is willing to do the work involved, can improve the engagement level — and subsequently the Spiritual Health — of his or her congregation.

But it does take work and persistence. Engagement does not happen overnight, and there is no magic pill you can give each of your members to make them more engaged. However, if you stick to it and incorporate strategies to address the twelve items that measure engagement, you will succeed in improving the soil of your church — and become a church that produces amazing fruit.

The 12 Items of Engagement

1. As a member of my congregation I know what is expected of me.
2. In my congregation my spiritual needs are met.
3. In my congregation, I regularly have opportunities to do what I do best.
4. In the last month, I have received recognition or praise from someone in my congregation.
5. The spiritual leaders in my congregation seem to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone in my congregation who encourages my spiritual development.
7. As a member of my congregation, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my congregation makes me feel my participation is important.
9. The other members of my congregation are committed to spiritual growth.
10. Aside from family members, I have a best friend in my congregation.
11. In the last six months, someone in my congregation has talked to me about the progress of my spiritual growth.
12. In my congregation, I have opportunities to learn and grow.

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The Beginning: A Focus on Outcomes

The story of St. Gerard Majella's journey toward engagement really began in 1991, when Father Bill Hanson and Father Chris Heller were appointed copastors to this rather nondescript parish in a middle-class neighborhood of Long Island. St. Gerard wasn't the biggest parish in the diocese, and it was far from the most prestigious. The building was built as multiuse space, and didn't have a permanent sanctuary. It's tucked away in the neighborhood, on a side street with no distinguishing landmarks. In other words, you have to be intentional about getting to St. Gerard's, because it's not really "on the way" to anywhere else.

Fr. Bill and Fr. Chris came to a parish that really didn't have a clear understanding of why it existed. Okay, if you were Catholic and lived inside its boundaries, you were supposed to go there, but there really wasn't much to draw you in. Most of the congregants had a very nonchalant attitude about their church; they knew it was there, they went when they had to, and didn't let church "interfere" with their real lives.

St. Gerard also had a \$500,000 debt.

But Fr. Bill and Fr. Chris are men of commitment, passion, and vision. They also love people and were determined to turn St. Gerard around. They knew they had to give St. Gerard a sense of purpose, and so they adopted a mission statement for the parish based on Acts 2:42-46:

They devoted themselves to the Apostles' instruction (Evangelization), and the Common Life (Community), the Breaking of the Bread and the Prayers (Liturgy). A reverent fear overcame them all, for many wonders and signs were performed by the apostles. Those who believed shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one's need (Service).



The two pastors then created a visual around the four elements of their mission statement:

They were spurred on in their efforts by the release of the Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Stewardship which had as one of its central themes that "Once

one chooses to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, stewardship is not an option" — stewardship of treasure, stewardship of vocation, stewardship of the Church; in short, stewardship of all of life. Fr. Bill and Fr. Chris believed that their mission statement for St. Gerard Majella addressed the major themes of the Pastoral Letter.

They also believed in creating a climate of financial stewardship, so they implemented an expectation of proportional giving among their parishioners. They advocated a "take a step" approach to stewardship, encouraging members to "step up" to tithing in 1% increments. Slowly but surely, the situation at St. Gerard began to turn around. A symbol of the change that was occurring was the transformation of the parish gift shop. What was once an actual shop selling rosary beads and other items became an office space for a parish "gifts coordinator," who helped connect members to ministry opportunities based on their gifts.

The Engagement Connection

Analytical and always pushing forward, Fr. Bill and Fr. Chris asked questions about their parish that are pretty typical for leaders who want their churches to grow:

- Why don't more people join our church?
- Why don't they stay?
- Why don't they serve?

These questions were constantly on their minds, and they kept searching for the answers. Then it dawned on them: Maybe they were asking the wrong questions! Maybe they should turn them upside down, and instead look at them from a positive point of view:

- Why do people join our church?
- Why do they stay?
- Why do they serve?

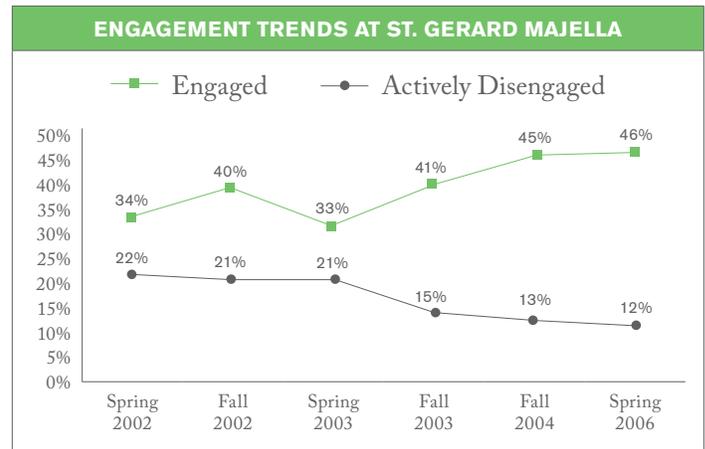
They were convinced that the answers to these questions would tell them more about St. Gerard and its strengths and potential than would their negative variations. But how would they go about measuring responses to these questions? And how would they relate them to their mission of inviting, serving, giving, and thanking? Those were questions they wrestled with continuously.

About the time that Fr. Bill and Fr. Chris decided to start asking different questions to find out more about their parish, they became aware of the research our team at Gallup was doing in congregational engagement. They soon realized, much to their delight, that the four relevant outcomes we identified as inviting, serving, giving, and life satisfaction were almost identical to their mission statement. And even more exciting to them was the fact that we had identified the questions that influence the outcomes.

They decided to ask us to help them measure engagement in their parish, and four years ago, as of this writing, they began using our tools to help them measure and improve it.

Over that four-year period, St. Gerard has measured engagement six times. After each measurement, a Gallup consultant spent one or two days with parish leaders in a strategic mapping process to develop strategies for addressing engagement issues. Fr. Bill, Fr. Chris, and the lay leadership have implanted those strategies, and have seen an increase in the proportion of engaged members in their parish. They have incorporated the language of engagement into parish life, so that members know the difference between engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged members.

They have made banners that ring their worship center depicting each of the 12 items of engagement so that members can see what engagement means — and what is expected of them in response. They have clarified the expectations of membership — and revisit those expectations on a regular basis. They have expanded the “take a step” approach beyond financial stewardship to include the outcomes of engagement, urging members to take a step forward in serving, in learning and growing, and in inviting. They have used the imagery of the “blood test” to get their members used to the idea of and importance of measurement to determine the health of their parish.



They have seen engagement grow during this four year period, from 34% engaged to 46% engaged.

What’s more impressive, however, is that St. Gerard cut the percentage of actively disengaged members by nearly half — from 22% to 12%. And they accomplished this decrease by not focusing on it! Instead, they emphasized the positive and devoted their efforts to increasing engagement. As a result, active disengagement went down without the church dedicating an inordinate amount of time and resources to addressing it.

Now, the members of St. Gerard Majella are no longer nonchalant about their faith. Walking into any event at St. Gerard’s one can feel a palpable sense of excitement and positivity. God’s Holy Spirit is moving in St. Gerard in a way that’s truly remarkable; some would call it a miracle. But it’s a miracle that took vision, perseverance, and a lot of hard work to bring about.

Oh yes — remember that \$500,000 debt? It’s now a \$2 million surplus, part of a campaign to build a new sanctuary.



The Power of the Right Fit

One of the most powerful strategies Fr. Bill and Fr. Chris implemented during their measurement of engagement was helping people discover what they do best. They decided to use the Clifton StrengthsFinder — an online assessment that identifies an individual's five "Signature Themes" of talent — in their small church groups as an exercise in self-discovery and spiritual growth. (The themes are drawn from a taxonomy of 34. Examples of themes include Achiever, Learner, Relator, and Strategic.) That turned out to be the decision that really took things to the next level: The excitement and enthusiasm of the small church-group members who were involved in strengths development spilled over into the rest of the parish, and now members call into the parish office wanting to sign up for a talent group.

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At St. Gerard, talent discovery is not just another program, but is an integral part of who they are — the language of talent and the Clifton StrengthsFinder are a basic part of their church culture. As you walk into St. Gerard, one of the first things you notice in the lobby/narthex area is what they call their "Wall of Fame." Every member who has received a StrengthsFinder assessment has his or her picture posted on the wall, and beneath the picture are listed that person's five Signature Themes of talent. The staff — both clergy and lay — have shirts with their Signature Themes embroidered on them. Fr. Bill is frequently seen in a polo-shirt that lists his top five themes: Connectedness, Ideation, Learner, Self Assurance, and Responsibility.

Every member who has received a StrengthsFinder assessment also has a lanyard-style name tag with his or her picture and Signature Themes on them. Lifting up the unique talents of individuals helps others recognize the extraordinary way in which we all are created, and celebrates the special contribution each person can make to the community and to the life of the Church.

It doesn't stop there. Marie Guido, the gifts coordinator whose office used to be in the now-defunct gift shop, sees the unique way God creates people as a powerful way for them to discover ways to be involved in ministry. She has countless stories of transformation to tell about people who have discovered their greatest talents and then identify for themselves a ministry that fits their talents. "It is so amazing," Marie says, "to see people discover their strengths and then they see a ministry that is right for them — instead of us having to go out recruiting to 'fill slots!' It is so refreshing and such a joy!"

The Fruits of Engagement

Focusing on engagement has given the leadership of St. Gerard a new freedom. Instead of just trying to guess what programs and strategies will address issues and needs in the church, they can concentrate their efforts on things that will really make a difference in how their church functions. They have also been able to address concerns with accurate information rather than speculation. Accurate information also comes in handy when addressing objections of the actively disengaged. Fr. Bill was once approached by a woman who said, "I don't think I like all the changes that are going on here and all this measurement stuff — and there are a lot of other people I've talked to who feel the same way!" Fr. Bill replied, "I understand your concerns, but you should know that thirteen percent of the congregation agree with you, and forty-five percent agree with the direction we're going." The woman was speechless. She has since decided that the direction of the congregation really is for the best, and has started to become more engaged.

"As I look back on the incident," recalls Fr. Bill, "I was amazed at how calm I was in responding. Usually a comment like that would tear me apart, and I'd be saying to myself, 'Gosh, what if it's true? What if there really are a lot of people who don't like where we're going?' And I'd be filled with self-doubt. But now that I know what the numbers are, I have accurate information that really tells me how we're doing."

Navigating a Big Change

About two years into their measurement of engagement, the Bishop informed St. Gerard that, due to the shortage of priests, Fr. Chris was going to be moved to a parish on the other side of the diocese. The two priests informed the members of St. Gerard, who were understandably saddened by the news. Fr. Chris was beloved by the church, and his leadership had been greatly appreciated.

But what's fascinating and totally counter intuitive — and an indication of the power of engagement — is that when the church did their engagement measurement a few months after the announcement, the percentage of engaged members actually increased. That is not typical; usually engagement decreases when there is a change in leadership.

“I attribute it to the spirit of our members,” says Fr. Bill. “In conversation after conversation, people would tell me that they would have to become more involved in the church because Chris was leaving. They knew his leaving would leave a void, and they would have to step up to fill it. They also knew they would have to step up and do more because we would be down to one priest, and they didn't want to lose the momentum we had going. I'm so proud of them!”

From this case study, I hope you've gotten a sense of what an engaged congregation looks like and feels like. Your congregation can be like this, too. You can improve your congregation's engagement level, and not just “do church” any more, but experience the joy of truly being the Church.

