



DIOCESE of
COLUMBUS

PASTORAL PLANNING

2026-2031



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Introduction

After multiple rounds of feedback, prayerful discernment and fruitful conversation, eight measurable goals have been discerned related to the four pastoral priorities identified by Bishop Fernandes: **vocations, evangelization, Catholic education and formation, and social outreach.**

During the Evangelization Summit in 2022, Bishop Fernandes spoke about his own careful observations and discernment after being appointed the 13th Bishop of the Diocese of Columbus. In the ever-present need to draw people closer to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he noted, “It is not enough to develop a strategic plan. We need to develop an army of committed missionary disciples. Beginning with prayer and discernment, we need to recruit and train the new missionaries...Once we have made new disciples, then we repeat the cycle; that is, the work is ongoing and never-ending. It requires permanent commitment.” The four identified pastoral priorities and corresponding goals directly support that commitment in the Diocese of Columbus.

For background to the year-long process which assisted in the discernment of these goals, please see the “**Pastoral Planning Survey**” **Summary of Results**. In addition to close to 2,000 survey results, the feedback supporting these goals came from 15 focus groups of 8-10 participants as well as 40 individual interviews. There is deep gratitude for the feedback from all, as it represents a desire for growing in our faith, and *“making actual decisions about missionary endeavors, about the direction and tone of our parishes and about the realities of family life, but these decisions only happen after prayerful listening and discernment. This listening demands listening to diverse voices and trying to understand the lived reality of our people”* (Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2022 Evangelization Summit). In that lived reality and as members of the Diocese of Columbus, we set forth these goals to help guide each of us closer to one another and closer to God.

Members of the 12-person Envisioning Team read every comment and shaped the various iterations of the draft SMART goals. The following goals identify some concrete ways in which we can commit to these pastoral priorities over the next five years. The goals were drafted and then shared with stakeholders among four different groups within the diocese: the Presbyteral Council, the Council of Deacons, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and a selection of current diocesan curial staff. The Diocese of Columbus YouTube page contains episodes of podcasts during which members of the Envisioning Team discussed the feedback they read. Additional podcasts will be available soon with content discussing the final goals.

These are diocesan pastoral planning goals. These goals are meant to engage everyone. Members of an individual parish are also, of course, members of the Diocese of Columbus. Where one reads “diocese” in some of these commentaries on the goals, one should see himself or herself. We are all the diocese. Where we read that word, we cannot immediately conclude that it is an effort of the diocesan offices. These goals are meant to help shape and guide the action of the Christian faithful in the Diocese of Columbus so that we know and understand we are moving together with common goals in mind as the Body of Christ.

Pastoral Priority: Evangelization

“Working together, we can better use the new technology to evangelize. The pulpit and church bulletin will simply not do. New technologies, including marketing and data technologies and digital targeting of youth will be necessary.”

— Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2023 Evangelization Summit

Evangelization Goal 1: Increase Communication

Develop a strategic communication plan that provides people in the Diocese of Columbus information on evangelization best practices and access to opportunities available to encounter Christ and grow in their spiritual journey by the First Sunday of Advent 2027.

Commentary: We heard a resounding desire to build awareness, understand, and have access to the many opportunities available for the faithful to not only grow in their faith but be equipped to share it. The timeline will allow for the plan and the implementation of improvement over the next 5 years.

Why?

People cannot take part in what they do not know is happening. The feedback indicated a strong desire for awareness about the availability of these opportunities. Across the diocese there are meaningful opportunities to grow in faith, evangelization events, catechetical resources, ways to invite others into the Church, but awareness of them varies widely from parish to parish and even within the diocese itself. A shared communications plan closes that gap so every parish, regardless of size, staffing, or even language, can reach its people effectively.

Why Now?

Feedback suggests a desire to hear more about the diocese’s evangelization priorities. Digital habits continue to shift faster than many parish communication strategies. Waiting further widens the gap between parishes with strong communication and those without. There are also many exciting and important events in the near future which can serve as opportunities for encounters with Christ such as: 2027 World Youth Day; 2029 Eucharistic Congress; 500th Anniversary of the Guadalupe Apparitions in 2031; and in 2033, the 2000th Anniversary of the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven of Jesus and the Great Commission to go and make disciples. In this same period of time, we can also expect a papal visit to the US. We want to be prepared to participate in these events.

What Happens If We Don’t?

Evangelization efforts continue to depend on the individual initiative of each parish rather than coordinated diocesan support. Those parish initiatives should absolutely continue because so many parish teams do this well. This goal increases awareness of those opportunities in order to increase engagement and collaboration. Without it, engagement will likely remain uneven, and those chances to invite people back into a life of faith may be missed.

“If we are not convicted by our encounter with Jesus and by our Faith, if we do not really believe it, then no one else will. Are we convicted of it? Enough to go out and tell others about it? The New Evangelization catches fire when we really begin to understand how much our God cares about us.”

— Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2023 Evangelization Summit

Evangelization Goal 2: Youth and Young Adult Evangelization

Conduct a comprehensive review of all youth, young adult, and campus ministries by Advent 2027, identifying both best practices and gaps to foster their ability to evangelize.

Commentary: We need a short period of time to understand what the best practices and gaps are. Once that is complete, the identified ministries will inform the 5-year plan and reaffirm our commitment to youth, young adult, and campus ministries. This goal must be sure to include various ethnic communities present in the Diocese of Columbus within these identified age demographics.

Why?

Young people are far more likely to encounter and embrace their faith through peers than through programs alone. Existing efforts within the diocese show this works, but they are not yet available to everyone who could benefit from them. It is also important to examine efforts that have been successful outside the Diocese, such as the Vietnamese Youth Eucharistic Movement.

Why Now?

The formative years of high school and young adulthood are a narrow window. Every year without a diocesan-wide peer discipleship structure is a year in which fewer young people build the relationships and habits of sharing their faith that carry into adulthood.

What Happens If We Don't?

Peer evangelization stays limited to the parishes and schools that already have it or to apostolates with whom certain groups within these demographics are already engaged, and many young people elsewhere miss a proven pathway to lasting faith engagement. The diocese also continues losing young adults during the years in which they are most at risk of drifting away from active practice of the faith.

Pastoral Priority: Vocations

At the 2022 Evangelization Summit, Bishop Fernandes described characteristics of an Evangelizing Community as a Church that goes forth, shows initiative, is involved or engaged with its members, accompanies others, is fruitful, is joyful.

Vocations Goal 1: Culture of Vocations

Each school and parish will adopt a plan to promote opportunities for discernment of God's call to the priesthood, Catholic marriage and consecrated life by Advent 2027.

Commentary: It is important that parishes are involved in supporting families with promoting vocations, but the Envisioning Team felt convicted about including schools as they offer significant influence in the lives of young people. While considering schools and parishes, ethnic communities which are not parishes and do not have schools are an important part of this goal. This goal also reaffirms that all of the faithful are responsible for vocations. Noted in this particular goal are the vocations which might be most commonly discerned among young people: priesthood, Catholic marriage, and consecrated life; this is not to the exclusion of other important vocations, such as the permanent diaconate, which can be discerned at a later age. Among young people, schools and parishes are an excellent avenue for promoting these types of vocations.

Why?

Every vocational path depends on people first hearing and responding to a call. While awareness of the importance of these vocations and the promotion of them has greatly improved throughout the Diocese of Columbus, that invitation is not happening consistently or intentionally across parishes and schools.

Why Now?

The pool of people forming its vocational identity today will shape the diocese's ministry capacity for decades. Delaying integrated discernment programming means fewer people even considering these paths before life circumstances narrow their options.

What Happens If We Don't

Inquiries into the possibility of discerning the priesthood, consecrated life or even marriage remain at insufficient levels. Failure to build a culture of vocations will result in a diminished pool of those willing to undertake ministry in the Church as priests and consecrated persons, which will adversely impact the long-term future of the diocese, even as the number of Catholics continues to grow.

“To go forth to the spiritual and existential peripheries demands courageously leaving our comfort zone...We cannot simply maintain what we have or had. Second, the community of missionary disciples takes the first step: it shows initiative...We need to be proactive rather than reactive. We need to be spiritual entrepreneurs for Christ.”

— Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2022 Evangelization Summit

Vocations Goal 2: Discernment Pathways & Accompaniment for the Priesthood

Priestly ordinations are consistently sufficient to meet or exceed the needs of the diocese by 2040.

Commentary: This goal timeline is obviously beyond the 5-year plan. However, within this five-year period we are looking at these numbers and intending to track positive progress. This work will be ongoing, and it takes a long period of time to not only continue to foster vocations but also to see the fruits of that goal. The Envisioning Team wanted to help the whole diocese maintain an awareness of what the priestly needs are projected to be. The implementation planning for this goal contains actuarial numbers that the diocese needs to maintain in order to have the number of priests desired to provide for the pastoral care of the faithful. This goal will not sacrifice quality for quantity in order to artificially inflate numbers in the seminary. It will, however, give the faithful a realistic picture of what a healthy number of seminarians and priestly ordinations would need to be for our diocese which is increasing in population and ethnic diversity.

Why?

The number of priests directly determines how many parishes, schools, hospitals, apostolates and other curial offices the diocese can adequately staff and serve. Current enrollment trends put at risk the ability to have priestly influence in these key roles and ministries.

Why Now?

Seminary formation, leading to ordination, demands a minimum of seven years, so current enrollment numbers determine ordination numbers nearly a decade from now.

What Happens If We Don't?

The actuarial numbers are carefully calculated based on the discerned and desired needs of the Diocese of Columbus. Failure to meet enrollment goals means that current priests will carry heavier pastoral and administrative burdens in their ministry in an already growing diocese. Moreover, the diocese will again face the difficult choice surrounding parish mergers, church closures, reduced availability for continuing education for priests, and reduced availability for chaplaincy service in schools and hospitals among other ministry needs which require priestly influence or leadership.

Pastoral Priority: Catholic Education and Formation

“When the faith is presented as “rules” or a series of teachings, it is not well-received, or, at least, it does not touch or awaken the soul. When it is presented with severity and judgment, it simply does not attract. Parents, as educators of their children, along with teachers and catechists, ought to radiate the joy of being loved by the Lord.”

— Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2025 Evangelization Summit

Catholic Education and Formation Goal 1: Adult and Family Faith Formation

Measure baseline participation in adult or family faith formation opportunities and increase it by 25% by 2031.

Commentary: We need to understand the current level of participation in all faith formation offerings (for example, but certainly not limited to: adoration, Men’s and Women’s Conferences, parish schools, PSR programs, family-based catechesis, adult faith formation, users of Formed.org, parish-based men’s, women’s and couples’ retreats, etc.). Understanding this baseline more concretely will give parishes the ability to identify opportunities for growth in areas of participation and prioritize efforts within the parish.

Why?

Faith formation, sacramental preparation, adult education, small faith communities, and family-based catechesis are means by which evangelizing catechesis, vital to lifelong discipleship, is carried out and impacts families effectively. Without a consistent measurement of participation, it will be difficult to understand where growth is happening and to identify new opportunities for growth on the parish level.

Why Now?

Setting a baseline is the first, necessary step before setting any growth target. Each year without knowing the baseline is another year of presuming, through anecdotal evidence, that faith formation is growing or declining rather than tracking real progress.

What Happens If We Don’t?

If we do not engage this goal, the diocese will operate without reliable data on participation in formational opportunities, making it difficult to direct resources where they are needed most or to know whether formation efforts are succeeding.

“Christ, the object and content of catechesis, education, and formation, is the guide whom we have found, yet we also find authentic guides, in the lives of the saints, who “shine like stars in the world” (Phil 2:15), and in the lives of so many parents, catechists, teachers, and members of the Christian faithful. The task is daunting but not impossible.”

— Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2025 Evangelization Summit

Catholic Education and Formation Goal 2: Teacher Recruitment, Retention and Formation

Implement a comprehensive strategy to recruit, retain, and form Catholic school faculty and staff who are faithful Catholics by September 2027.

Commentary: Catholic schools are encouraged to hire Catholic teachers who are able to make a profession of faith and oath of fidelity, and teachers who, if not Catholic, are respectful of the Catholic faith. Educators should meet the expectations outlined in the Office of Catholic Schools Strategic Vision and the Bishop’s recent pastoral letter “Catholic Education: An Act of Hope.” Our Catholic schools are a unique and important aspect of ministry in the Diocese of Columbus. They are a place of evangelization and an opportunity for integration of the Gospel into learning and living. We are striving to recruit Catholic teachers for our Catholic schools. The Office of Catholic Schools has been working to recruit, retain, and form faculty and staff; but this goal will assist in evaluating those methods and tracking the outcomes of those methods according to strategic standards.

Why?

Mission-aligned teachers and staff are what make Catholic education distinctively Catholic. High turnover or misaligned faculty disrupts that continuity and strains a school’s ability to form students well.

Why Now?

Every year without a successful recruitment, retention, and formation strategy means more lost institutional knowledge and more schools scrambling to fill roles rather than investing in mission alignment.

What Happens If We Don’t

Turnover remains high, formation pathways for new hires remain informal or inconsistent, and schools spend more time and money on staffing gaps instead of strengthening Catholic culture and instruction.

Pastoral Priority: Social Outreach

“Catholic Social Doctrine, in particular, our outreach to the poor, the marginalized, and the migrant, as well as our educational endeavors, help show forth the merciful and maternal face of the Church.”

— Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2022 Evangelization Summit

Social Outreach Goal 1: Outreach Visibility and Transparency

All parishes, schools, and apostolates in the diocese will complete and publish an annual report of social outreach activity by Advent 2027.

Commentary: The date is chosen to give a year’s time to inform parishes, schools, and apostolates, and for the goal owner to request and receive feedback on how those entities report. Parishes, schools, and apostolates were chosen because they encompass the most populated aspects of all of the faithful in the diocese. The goal is to increase transparency and build an awareness of service opportunities for those who desire to be more involved but are unsure of how to get involved in social outreach.

Why?

Pastors, Deans and diocesan leadership cannot coordinate resources or celebrate impact they cannot see. A standardized report gives every parish a shared, reliable picture of parish outreach efforts.

Why Now?

Without a common template, each parish tracks or does not track outreach differently, making need and impact invisible. The longer that continues, the harder it becomes to build a coordinated response across parishes.

What Happens If We Don’t?

Parishes keep operating with incomplete or inconsistent information, gaps in service go unnoticed, resources are not matched to where they are needed most, and a collaborative sharing of resources cannot be effectively implemented.

“Just as wind pushes against a sail and causes a boat to move upon the water, so too the Spirit of God pushes the whole Church to go forth into the world, attentive to the signs of the times and the needs of the people, jettisoning that which is obsolete.”

— Bishop Earl K. Fernandes, 2022 Evangelization Summit

Social Outreach Goal 2: Rural and Inner-City Reach

Identify communities with unmet needs and seek opportunities to meet those needs through collaborative and strategic relationships with parishes, schools and apostolates by Advent 2027.

Commentary: This goal uses the word “communities” intentionally as a way to promote the idea that the needs of others often go beyond our parish church grounds and beyond “members of the parish” and into the communities in the diocese. Additionally, these opportunities may serve others in non-financial ways, using time and talent.

Why?

Some parishes have strong outreach capacity, and other parishes are in communities with real gaps in capacity for service. A structured needs assessment makes those gaps visible in communities so parishes can help each other rather than working in isolation.

Why Now?

Corporal works of mercy address urgent, present needs. The longer gaps go unassessed, the longer people in those communities go without the support the Church is positioned to offer.

What Happens If We Don't?

Outreach capacity remains unevenly distributed, parishes with fewer resources continue to struggle alone, and opportunities for parish-to-parish collaboration go unrealized.