

Saint Mark's New Member Ministry Workplan

Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, Beaver Dam, WI

Encouraging Visitors

Saint Mark's is a 155 year old family size parish in the city of Beaver Dam in South Central Wisconsin. Members and potential members come from Beaver Dam and a half dozen other communities within a 25 mile radius. The area has a somewhat stable economy with a number of industrial plants, a state prison, large regional warehouses, a technical school and academy. However, in recent years Saint Mark's has noticed that fewer persons come to our doors unsolicited, a number of young families have moved away for various reasons and some older members are deceased or cannot actively participate.

Since 2008 we have undertaken a number of strategies to attract persons to Saint Mark's, to welcome them when they attend services and events and to help incorporate them when they indicate an interest in our parish community. We are now evaluating the results of our strategies and making plans to establish new strategies and re-set existing ones.

Strategies to Inform Our Neighbors and Community

In this regard we have undertaken strategies to inform the church neighborhood and wider community that Saint Mark's is an active, friendly and vital congregation to visit:

- Our parish is listed in the local Yellow Pages and worship services listed in the local newspaper.
- We maintain a comprehensive website with information about Saint Mark's, a service schedule, a list of parish ministries, the parish history, important links and a page that provides distance and directions from a specific inquirers home. See: <http://www.powerweb.net/stmark/>
- In 2010 we revamped and published a colorful "Welcome to Saint Mark's" pamphlet for mailing to newcomers and to hand out when visitors arrive at the church.
- Our priest and members provided the Sunday service for the 2010 Beaver Dam Lake Days celebration, a community ecumenical service.
- Featured the Asbury Clowns (United Methodist) at our services on Good Shepherd Sunday 2010 and 2011, preceded by a photo and article in the local newspaper, inviting the public to attend. A reception with treats and balloons followed the service.
- At our spring rummage and bake sale we placed small printed crosses with contact information for Saint Mark's printed on the back in the bags of sold items.
- We celebrated an Earth Day Celebration Service with coverage in the local newspaper.
- We invited friends and neighbors to our celebration of the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi and the Blessing of the Animals after the worship the past two years. We were successful in bringing several neighbors and their pets to this event.
- Saint Mark's continues a long tradition of a Christmas Cookie Walk each December with city-wide distribution of flyers, newspaper coverage and mailings to previous participants. This has become so popular that our huge cookie sale is sold out within an hour. In addition, two other churches in town have also taken up the tradition.

- We are avid participants in the Diocesan Haiti Project, with numerous child sponsors and givers through the Diocese and Episcopal Relief and Development. Jan Byrd, Project Coordinator until recently, gives regular reports during announcements at church services and has planned information sessions during parish coffee hour.
- We are in the process of planning for mailings to newcomers in the community. Because the local utility company no longer provides address information we are investigating other ways of locating addresses for newcomers.
- For fifty years Saint Mark's has designed and sold decorative Christmas stockings, tailor made to the requests of the purchasers. Orders from within the community and throughout the country reach capacity early in the year. News coverage and colorful webpage displays help inform the public of our project. See our project at: http://www.powerweb.net/stmark/pages/christmas_stockings.htm

Welcoming Visitors

We looked for ways to involve the members of our family-sized congregation in welcoming each other and visitors in a special way by:

- Having one or more greeters at the front door to welcome persons to services, help with coats or directions, and to hand out the service bulletins.
- Our priest welcomes Sunday worshippers by greeting them on the outside sidewalk in all but the most inclement weather. She is also very good with making subsequent personal contacts with newcomers.
- We have name tags for members, encourage members to wear them, and offer name tags to visitors and repeat visitors. A name tag rack is located on the wall of the narthex for storage between services.
- We make a special attempt to involve everyone in inviting each other, newcomers and visitors to the weekly coffee hour following the service.
- Our ushers ask all visitors to sign our guest book and we offer them a welcoming pamphlet. We also have welcoming cards and pencils in each pew for visitors to complete with their name and contact information, if they wish.
- Our Porch Visitor Program is a means by which we welcome visitors and guests to St. Mark's. In the past one or two lay people have made a brief, friendly follow-up home contact, thanking the person for visiting and leaving a newsletter and small item, such as a loaf of bread or flowers. We have found it to be an important evangelism ministry that any member can help to carry out. Because sometimes people are not home, we are initiating a new strategy. When a visitor walks through the door on Sunday morning, they are greeted and welcomed by one of our Porch Visitors and given a loaf of bread with a note attached that includes our web site and thanking them for joining us. They are asked to leave their name, address and e-mail in our Guest Book. Rev. Mail follows up by sending them a note in the mail. If they leave their e-mail, our newsletter editor follows up with a thank you and inquiry if they would like an electronic copy of our newsletter, the St. Mark's Messenger.
- Ushers offer a coloring book and crayons kit to families with small children and we have a cry room available with a rocking chair, toys and sound system if needed.

- We inform parents of the option to have children age 3 or older to attend Christian education classes during the first half of the Sunday service. We have a nursery with a rocking chair and toys for parents with infants.
- We handed out and encouraged members to complete a “discovering your spiritual gifts” checklist at last year’s parish meeting.

Our Physical Premises Must Be Inviting

We evaluated our physical premises, inside and out, and made a number of improvements to make Saint Mark’s a more attractive and welcoming place to visit and worship in. In this regard we:

- We had a professional landscaper re-design our front yard in 2009 and undertook a major planting of trees, shrubs and flowers that highlight the front walkway and invite attention to the front double doors.
- We installed low energy efficient lighting in the church, social hall and Christian education rooms.
- Late in 2010 we completely re-carpeted and painted the interior of our church, social hall, narthex and Christian education areas.
- Our rest rooms are conveniently located off the narthex. We provide stools for children at sinks and drinking fountains. We have a changing table in the women’s room and a supply of baby needs. We also inform visitors of the location of rest rooms and the coffee hour in our Rite II booklet, inside cover.

Our Liturgy and Newcomers

We believe that our liturgy needs to be welcoming and inclusive for visitors and members. Because newcomers may not be familiar with our liturgy we believe that we have to “go the extra mile” to explain what we are doing and why:

- We print a Sunday bulletin with lectionary texts to help newcomers follow the service.
- We published a Rite II pew booklet with the Sunday liturgy and music and instructions and with a “Some Things to Know When You Worship With Us” introduction inside the front cover. It explains when we stand, sit or kneel as we are able during worship, who can receive communion and how, where to find prayers and hymns, and other information.
- We offer large print prayer books for persons who may need them.
- We work hard to achieve musical excellence, with our hymn selections, our singing, and with a small choir on special Sundays. We have a fine, digitally updated pipe organ and an organist that plays well and encourages robust singing.
- We encourage parishioners to assist newcomers by finding pages in the prayer book and hymnal when needed.
- We supply each pew with a bookmark shaped welcome card and a pencil if they wish to leave their name or want to request a visit or more information from the church.

Incorporating New Members

We see incorporation as an ongoing cycle. Incorporation is the involvement and attachment each person has to our community and ministries to each other and to the wider community, and related to individual assessment and utilization of spiritual gifts. Sometimes newcomers self-identify interests they have – like the person with artistic talents that provided art work or those who do stitchery for our Christmas Stocking project. For others it requires discernment, study and prayer to find the match. Sometimes the “match” is a project entirely new to Saint Marks. And, finally, there are times that long-standing members become physically or spiritually frail, and now need the assistance offered by persons new to the community. When we are successful each of us will not only serve the Saint Mark’s community, but will go into the world to love and serve the Lord.

Some of the specific strategies we have tried are:

- Offering Advent and Lenten “Soup and Bible Study” groups and make a point to invite newcomers.
- Taking meals or special treats to newcomers and families with special needs and offer transportation if needed.
- Spiritual gifts assessments and lists of important ministries.
- Sending birthday greetings to every member of the congregation and on Sundays offering personal blessings to each member with a birthday, baptismal anniversary or wedding anniversary.
- Photographing our special events and posting photo displays and publishing group photos in our monthly newsletter, “Saint Mark’s Messenger.”
- Inviting newer members to participate in group activities such as our public “brat fry,” yard and garden work, the altar guild, and the Christmas stocking project.
- Our rector, although part time, attends most of our events to represent Saint Mark’s as pastor. She also meets individually with newcomers to answer questions and to learn their expectations and needs.
- We are planning a spiritual gifts “refresher” and hope to organize a newcomer brunch.

Evaluating Our Workplan Strategies

At a congregational meeting on May 22, 2011 we discussed our progress in attracting and incorporating new members and made note of the areas needing improvement. Several new families have visited Saint Mark’s and so far all of them have returned one or more times. Two families said they learned about Saint Mark’s by doing an internet search and found our website. Others described Saint Mark’s as extremely friendly and fun to be a part of.

Our New Member Ministry group met on June 26, 2011 to again assess our work plan strategies and to suggest new strategies. We also became aware of new resources from the Diocesan office and plan to utilize them as we re-set our plans for 2012. New ideas were added and older strategies were re-formulated.

After another month of refining the plan was submitted to the Vestry on July 20, 2011 and approved as a Challenge Grant application.

Re-Setting Our Plans

Areas we plan to further assess and re-plan:

- We need to find more ways to inform newcomers in the community about Saint Mark's.
- We could add new content to portions of our website to better meet the needs of persons looking for a parish home. The website also needs photos of people involved in our ministries.
- Perhaps we would find a Facebook page useful.
- We need to look at freshening up our nursery and staffing it when it is needed.
- We are looking at organizing a sexual awareness workshop to help assure safety of children in our care.
- We will perform a "hospitality audit" and evaluate the results.
- We will begin to review materials on inclusion as an important framework for our evangelism plans.
- Many of us could use training and role playing on how to invite others to attend our church.
- We may need a spiritual gifts refresher.
- We might want to organize newcomer brunches, or similar gatherings in the future.
- Some of our leaders might attend a "Beyond Survival" workshop offered by the Wisconsin Council of Churches.
- We are looking at sending a team to the Diocesan Church Development Institute to develop better skills at assessing our community and parish needs, planning and carry out our plans and developing a stronger community within our parish.
- Some of our long range goals, including regular mailings to newcomers to the community, may require special funding and we are applying for a Diocesan challenge grant for this purpose.
- Because our Fireside Room is not handicap accessible we need to find for ways to accommodate members, visitors and newcomers for events in that area, and to seek an ultimate solution in terms of a lift, ramp or elevator.

Approved by the Vestry: July 20, 2011