

Parish Self-Assessment Report We Walk By Faith

Saint John the Apostle Catholic Parish & School

1968 Sandbridge Road
Virginia Beach, VA 23456-4602
Rev. Fr. Robert J Cole, Pastor
Chris Finocchio, WWBF Coordinator

“The mission of Saint John the Apostle Catholic Parish is to grow in faith and union with Jesus Christ and one another. We strive to be a place where all are welcome as we respond to the needs of our community and the world through Word, Worship, Stewardship and Service.”

I. Introduction

“I’ve watched our parish grow from a tiny parish, meeting in the local elementary school cafeteria to the Church it is today. I love our parish and feel very lucky to be part of it.”
- Anonymous Survey Response

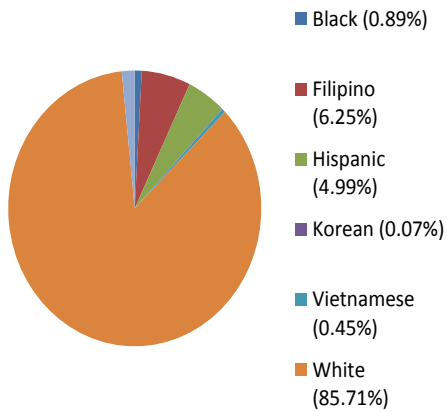
In 1967, some Catholic residents of Sandbridge were granted permission by Bishop John J. Russell to celebrate weekly Mass in their Sandbridge home, celebrants often included vacationing priests. Around 1973, Bishop Sullivan arranged for use of the Saint Simon by the Sea Episcopal Chapel for the emerging community’s Sunday Masses, Memorial Day through Labor Day. When the Catholic population continued to grow, Bishop Sullivan asked Fr. Ray McIntyre, pastor of Star of the Sea Catholic Church, to organize and research the need to establish a new parish. Some time later the Diocese concluded that there was the need for a new parish and selected the 7.7 acre site off Sandbridge Road which had been purchased years earlier by the diocese at the suggestion of Fr. Paul Gaughan. Bishop Sullivan granted the formation and naming of the mission of Star of the Sea parish as The Catholic Community of Southeast Virginia. For the interim, the community celebrated Mass at the Tabernacle United Methodist Church, Sandbridge Road.

The mission was pronounced a parish on May 30, 1989 and Bishop Sullivan assigned the name of Saint John the Apostle to complete the inclusion of all four evangelists for the Virginia Beach area. On June 24, 1995 the church was dedicated and seven years later the school was opened for classes on August 19, 2002. In 2004, an extensive expansion of the parish church, which included the addition of two wings to complete the cruciform design and an expanded sanctuary, was undertaken to accommodate the quickly growing community. A columbarium, Our Lady Chapel & Bell Tower and additional pews have all since been added.

There are 7,257 registered Catholics at Saint John the Apostle (SJA) Parish and our community continues to grow. Our Catholic school has 265 registered students grades K-8 and our religious education program is one of the largest in the Diocese with approximately 900-plus students of all ages.

SJA utilized three primary methods to engage the parish community in the We Walk By Faith (WWBF) process:

Figure 1: Ethnic Identity

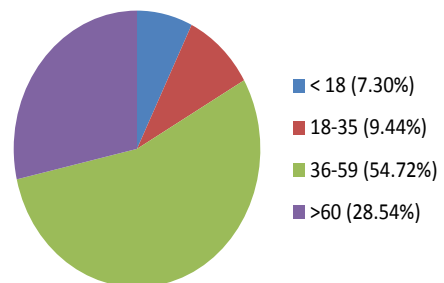


- 1) Dissemination of all WWBF literature via the parish webpage, frequent bulletin announcements and articles in the parish newsletter
- 2) A parish day of reflection, open to all parishioners and encouraged for ministry heads and parish leadership
- 3) Conduct of the WWBF survey administered at all Masses the weekend of April 10th and 11th, 2010

Surveys submitted totaled 1,375, of which 87% of the respondents were SJA registered parishioners. Of the respondents 59% were female and 41% were male. The demographic information from the survey

y, graphically displayed in figure (1), characterizes the majority of parishioners as White/Caucasian with a 15% minority made up of Asian, Black and Hispanic Americans, and a group of individuals that place themselves in the “other” category. The ethnic identity of the parish captured by the survey is consistent, within two percentage points, of the census statistics provided to the Diocese in the parish’s Fiscal Year 2009-2010 Annual Report.

Figure 2: Age Make-up



The age make-up of SJA parishioners reported by the survey is found in figure (2). Again, this data is consistent with the parish’s annual report which categorizes the majority of adults between the ages of 31 and 59. However, a meaningful statistic that the survey does not capture (because only confirmed Catholics participated in the survey by Diocesan guidelines) is that 1,424 (just under 20%) of the registered Catholic at SJA are below the age of 13. This data point, coupled with the 1,535 registered married couple families at SJA foretells continued growth in the SJA community, not just from an influx of people moving into the ever growing City of Virginia Beach but also growth from within our current population of registered parishioners.

SJA Catholic Parish community celebrated its twentieth anniversary last year. The incredible growth SJA has witnessed is staggering; in just twenty short years SJA has gone from being the small mission community of Southeast Virginia to the seventh largest parish in the Diocese with a total of 2,477 registered families. Yet we have not lost sight of our unique place

in the community. “You are a light to the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lamp stand, where it gives light to all” (Matt 5: 14-15). The Southeastern area of Virginia Beach is a rapidly growing and transient community with a large military population and plethora of vacationers. This dynamic community is surely a blessing and we at SJA strive to make our parish and school community a place where all are welcome!

II. Word

*“Homilies are motivating and help me grow in faith.
The Catholic education being offered on Sunday is a major draw.”*
- Anonymous Survey Response

Saint John wrote, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name” (20: 30-31). The Word of God has the power to save! As Catholic Christians we are called to know our savior Jesus Christ and to enter into relationship with him. When asked if the Word of God is proclaimed at SJA in a way that helps people to know and love Jesus, a resounding 98% of parishioners responded either “strongly agree” or “agree.”

SJA provides multiple opportunities for parishioners to study and immerse themselves in the Word; examples include but are not limited to the parish’s Christ Renews His Parish (CRHP) program, the annual Lenten Soup Supper Series, the Year of Saint Paul Lecture Series, the annual Parish Missions, and various Bible study opportunities. We also offer *Lighthouse Catholic Media* products and *The Word Among Us* booklet for use during Advent and Lent for interested parishioners who desire material for self-study. When asked if the parish’s adult Christian formation programs effectively teach Catholic values, beliefs and traditions, 67% of parishioners responded favorably.

SJA has a solid Religious Education Program for our children and youth. We have 900-plus students in our religious education program with class sessions on Sunday afternoons and Monday evenings. We have more children than we have classroom space. These numbers do not include those enrolled in the SJA School receiving religious instruction as part of their curriculum. We also have Children’s Liturgy of the Word (CLOW), Sacramental Preparation for Reconciliation and Eucharist, Vacation Bible School (VBS), and the Children of Light Ministry (for children with special needs). 77% of surveyed parishioners responded favorably when asked if the parish supported them in the Christian duty to raise their children in the Catholic faith.

A final observation illustrating that the Word is alive and active at SJA is the thirst parishioners have for the Good News and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Our Director of Religious Education (DRE) does a great job of managing a multi-faceted program. Unfortunately, for some time SJA was limited by a vacancy in our religious education staff and this restricted the amount of adult formation offered at the parish. In their desire to continue their education in the faith, our already well attended Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) program, noted an uptick of already fully initiated Catholic adults attending RCIA for the sole purpose of increasing their knowledge of the Catholic Church. This past spring however, the

pastor hired a new youth minister to take over the religious education program for confirmation and high school youth. It is the pastor’s expectation that this will enable the DRE to increase the amount of adult religious formation offered at our parish.

Strengths

- Personnel in leadership positions – The written comments from both the survey and Day of Reflection indicate an overwhelming fondness and support for the pastor, the deacons and the DRE.

Needs

- Adult religious formation – For some time SJA was limited by a vacancy in our religious education staff. This past spring however, the pastor hired a new youth minister to take over the religious education program for confirmation and high school youth. It is the parish’s hope that this will enable the DRE to increase the amount of adult religious formation offered at our parish.
- Religious education and catechists – We have more children than we have classroom space. Some of our elementary school children must be taught by their parents at home because there is not enough classroom space. Also, The parish struggles each fall finding enough volunteer catechists to support our CCD program.

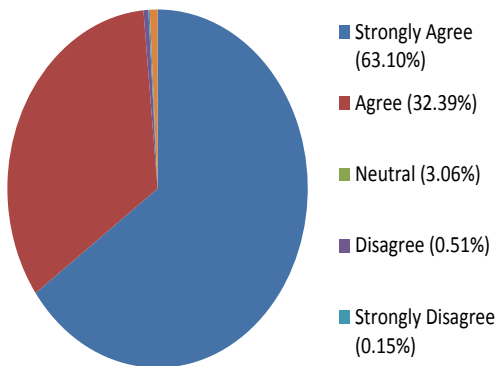
III. Worship

“Every week I leave Mass wanting to be a better Catholic.”

- Anonymous Survey Response

The Catechism tells us that the “Mass is the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC 1324). From Sunday Mass, to weekly Adoration, the Eucharist and various liturgical services form the centerpiece of the SJA community. When asked if the liturgies at the parish enhance their worship of God, 96% of surveyed parishioners responded favorably.

Figure 3: Liturgy Enhances My Worship



SJA has a vibrant music ministry, which adds to all our liturgical services, and has “something for everybody”. The Saturday Vigil Mass has contemporary music (Youth/Teen Choir); the music at Sunday Masses is more traditional with a cantor, small ensemble/cantor, and the SJA Adult Choir at the 7:30, 9:15, and 11:00 a.m. liturgies, respectively. The music that is chosen must meet the following criteria: 1) be musically sound; 2) be textually sound; and 3) emphasize and support the readings of the Mass. Meditation pieces and choral anthems are frequently provided and come from various genres and sources. The music is seasonally and liturgically correct. The music director has an advanced degree in sacred music and is an

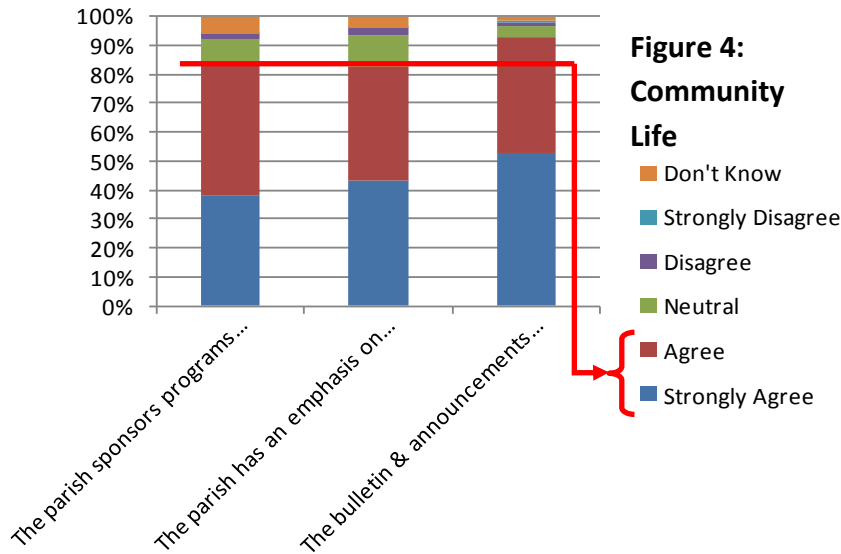


Figure 4:
Community
Life

accomplished pianist, organist, vocalist, choral director, and composer.

When we gather for worship, we experience the Word of God as a community gathered at Mass. It is during the Mass that the Good News is proclaimed and lovingly preached to the community so that we can apply it to our daily lives. 97 % of parishioners responded favorably concerning the homilies provided by the pastor and deacons. One

parishioner responded, “Father Rob has a way of giving a homily that helps you to understand the word of God. He is awesome. Deacon Vern, Deacon Joe, and [our DRE] John Domingo - they are all very knowledgeable and offer and teach a lot.”

Strengths

- Homiletics – The raw score percentages and written comments from the survey indicate the vast majority of parishioners are pleased with the homilies at Mass.

Needs

- Church acoustics – Although the parish possesses a state of the art sound system and recently purchased individual amplifiers for the hearing impaired, the acoustics of our worship facility are poor and many parishioners complain that it is difficult to hear from the side-wings and the back of the Church. A finished ceiling within the Church may help with the acoustics.
- Space – Completion of the Phase 1 building project to add additional meeting space and re-locate the office to the parish campus with the school is greatly needed.

IV. Community

“Strong community, we love the link with the school; RCIA and CRHP are wonderful at SJA.”
- Anonymous Survey Response

SJA is a vibrant community of believers. We strive to foster a sense of belonging and an environment of hospitality where everyone is welcome. There is a “Parish & Community Life Group” at SJA which is comprised of different ministries and committees that strive to create a structure through which the spirit of Christian community and fellowship can be nourished and grow. It encompasses ministries that strengthen and celebrate the unity of our parish and our parish’s role in the greater community.

Some of the organizations involved in this group include: Boy Scouts/Cub Scouts, Bereavement Consolation Team, Parish Social Events and Dance Committees, Parish Advocates for Persons with Disabilities, and many more. Numerous other activities are also available to parish members to enliven the SJA faith community: CRHP, Knights of Columbus (K of C), Little Company of Mary, bible studies, youth groups, and Adoration, just to name some more. Various meeting times range from weekly, to monthly, to quarterly and are scheduled by ministry coordinators and volunteers. Information concerning the almost fifty different programs, ministries, activities, and resources is published every other year in the Parish Ministry Guide; a copy has been included with this report. The parish ministries are committed to involving all members in the sacramental life of the community in numerous facets: baptism and first communion are scheduled during regular weekend liturgies, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) involves almost nine hundred youth, and RCIA prepares adults for entry into the life of the Church and the SJA community. In addition, programs are in place to take communion to the homebound and sick and once a year the stewardship ministry fair invites all parishioners to get involved in the sacramental life of the community.

The sense of community and the welcoming feeling at SJA are probably one of the most unique and most loved characteristics of the parish. When asked if the parish sponsored programs and activities for the purpose of building fellowship among the parishioners, 83% of those surveyed responded favorably. Figure (4) provides a more detailed breakdown, but as one parishioner put it, we are “young, large and continuously growing. We all seem to want to build a stronger community.”

Strengths

- Improved relationship between the Church and the School.
- New pastor is a welcome addition.

Needs

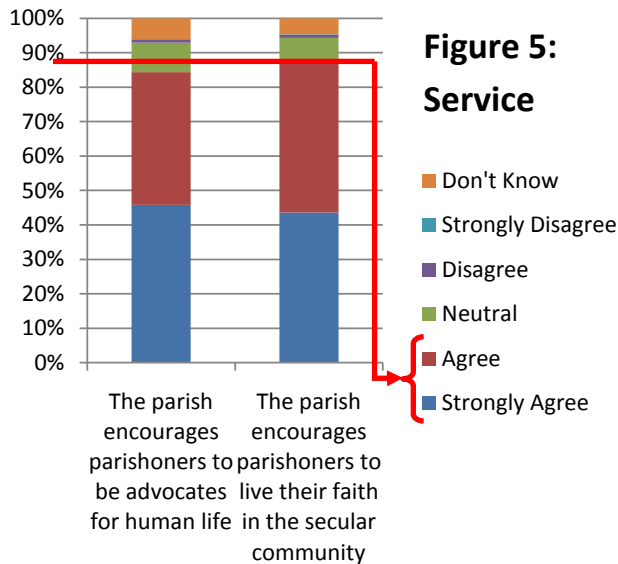
- Facilities – Completion of the Phase 1 & 2 building project to add additional meeting space and re-locate the office to the parish campus with the school is greatly needed. Additionally, SJA still needs to complete the church’s interior roof; sanctuary area and we are quickly outgrowing our parking facilities.
- Debt – We still need to pay off our parish debt of 3.6 million dollars.

V. Service

“Community that’s getting stronger all the time; great Pastor inspires us with his homilies and guidance. Our outreach and youth programs are our strongest areas.”

-Anonymous Survey Response

There is significant effort to solicit the time, talent and treasure of parishioners. SJA has a robust Outreach and Social Justice program that promotes and coordinates the charitable efforts of the SJA family to assist the needy. We strive to expand our outreach beyond the parish boundaries through identification and coordination of charitable activities that will foster family orientated ministries. We educate the parish on ways to help the less fortunate and attempt to



**Figure 5:
Service**

accomplish our mission by developing continuing relationships between the parishioners and the recipients of our outreach support. There are approximately a dozen various outreach ministries at SJA, to include but not limited to Feed Our Neighbor, Hope Haven, Meals on Wheels, Sandwich Brigade and Right to Life, just to name a few.

Our efforts are often ecumenical in nature and through reputable organizations to ensure our giving is to those who are truly in need. Our efforts with Samaritan House support battered women and children in need with food, legal advice and psychological counseling. Our efforts through the

Crisis Pregnancy Center provide alternatives to abortion on an ecumenical level. Legislative efforts are being developed. We work with Sullivan House which is a low-income senior residence facility. Additionally, the Social Outreach Committee is working to develop a more active Human Development campaign.

When asked if the parish encourages parishioners to be advocates for human life and live-out their faith in secular community, over 84% of those surveyed responded favorably. Figure (5) provides a more detailed breakdown.

Strengths

- Very professional and accommodating parish staff.

Needs

- Understaffed – SJA has only one priest, 5 full time and 2 half-time administrative employees to service its 2,477 families.

VI. Plans for renewal and meeting parish needs

*“Our parish has grown and blossomed under the leadership of Father Biber and Father Cole”
- Anonymous Survey Response*

One Year Goals

- Begin Phase 1 construction
- Continue to improve relations between the Church and School
- Refine organizational structure and expand community life activities

Five Year Goals

- Pay down the parish debt
- Sell current rectory and purchase a new residence
- Begin Phase 2 construction

- Increase inter-parish and inter-faith activities
- Correct issues raised by the WWBF survey

VII. Diocesan Support

“This is still a growing parish and I believe we are moving in a positive direction by acquiring Fr. Robert Cole as our pastor.”

- Anonymous Survey Response

SJA is a young and vibrant community. Few people who are familiar with the parish and school community would question the fact that the Holy Spirit is alive and at work within our parish family.

Maintaining a good working relationship between the Diocese and our parish is important. Fr. Cole has a good working relationship with the Diocese. The Diocesan Office provides a directory for parish staff support including Human Resources guidelines and rules to keep parishes on the same page. Diocesan staff has been particularly supportive of SJA by assisting with our Information Technology (IT) needs. The recent merging of the Office of Catholic Schools and Office of Christian Formation, into the Office of Catholic Education, is seen as a very positive sign for continuity of our religious education programs.

SJA however is not without areas of needed improvement and although the Diocese may not be able to solve our difficulties, being aware and sympathetic is helpful enough. The remaining 3.6 million dollars required to pay off the parish debt is extremely constraining as we seek to add needed staff and improve our facilities in order to properly service our ever growing community. Additionally, as we attempt to chart the parish’s future direction, continuity in leadership is vital. In our short twenty years SJA has had four different pastors. Such frequent turnover is not conducive to developing and executing a viable and consistent future plan for our growing parish. The survey overwhelmingly indicates the parish’s support for our current pastor Fr. Cole. We ask the appropriate Diocesan office and the Vicar for Clergy to consider this fact when reviewing future pastoral assignments. Even a cursory review of the survey’s written comments reveals the strong approval rating our current pastor has and the parish’s desire to keep his leadership as we move forward with the significant work of the Phase 1 & 2 building campaign.

III. Conclusion

“In whole I think that SJA is a positive Catholic Christian force in the area.”

- Anonymous Survey Response

The need for Christian witness in our world today is undisputable. By virtue of our Baptism each of us are called to be witnesses for Christ and his Church in the places where we live and work. “All Christians are called to this witness, and in this way they become real evangelizers” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21). We take this role very seriously at SJA, making our parish a place where all are welcome. The WWBF survey results indicate that the majority of parishioners, in our growing community, approve of the current status of SJA and our future direction.