

## Senior ministry is 'on fire' at St. Catherine Parish in Austin

By Carla Smith | Correspondent

Although the current news cycle is brimming with troubling reports regarding the nation's elderly in the midst of the pandemic, they are thriving at St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Austin — thanks, in part, to a vibrant and innovative senior ministry.

St. Catherine's senior ministry groups like Prime Timers and Crafty Ladies have found new footing in the age of social distancing and online meetings because leadership and membership have not allowed the pandemic to stop them.

Led primarily by Pam Neumann, director of adult education, and Laurie Metzler, former liturgy director, the ministry continues to provide seniors with opportunities to share experiences, learn new skills and acquire useful resources to support their current life journey. Because many seniors who chose to retire in Austin to be close to their children and grandchildren are now isolated, enrollment in ministry offerings has nearly doubled. And as the pandemic has forced change, participants and leaders have adjusted accordingly.

"Originally, my goal was to bring to seniors the healthy spirituality and theology that I had been given during my studies and training," Metzler said. "For many seniors, this is the stage of their lives when they have the leisure to pursue a study of their faith, reflect on life questions and deepen their prayer life. It breaks my heart that we can't get together in person, but I get excited seeing them online and sharing lives."

Metzler and Neumann, with the assistance of a Senior Ministry Board, have developed an official mission statement as well as beliefs and goals for the group. But when shut-downs and shut-ins unexpectedly have occurred, they have proven flexible and resourceful by pivoting with online opportunities and virtual offerings.

The parish quickly learned the seniors are far more comfortable using technology than anticipated. The ministry conducts meetings via Zoom and one of its most popular events to date was a series on how to effectively use smart phones to stay in touch with families and each other.

"I have always been dedicated to the importance of intergenerational and lifelong learning, and we've discovered our seniors are more comfortable learning technology than we perhaps thought and especially when they have the help of adult children and grandchildren," Neumann said.

The group usually takes summers off but with the loss of in-person worship and fellowship, coordinators felt continued companionship — albeit virtual — was needed more than ever. Since the pandemic began, they have



Fr. Pat Coakley, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Austin, talks with members of the parish's senior ministry during a gathering in 2019. (Photo: Laurie Metzler.)

launched a series of online offerings, including a six-part series on seniors finding grace in these times and a weekly discussion on the previous Sunday's Gospel.

Over the last three years, the ministry has reached nearly 200 seniors through a mixture of events, ranging from religious education and spirituality to practical information such as the role of grandparents in the spiritual lives of their grandchildren. The group's Thursday morning Zoom programs include topics such as reflection, Scripture, church history and even movies. In addition to livestreamed presentations and socializing, prayer resources, outreach and matters of interest to seniors are also shared.

These types of opportunities for participants to grow and understand God's love benefits them and the entire community as there is so much wisdom to be mined from seniors, said Father Pat Coakley, pastor of St. Catherine Parish.

"It is so important that we as a parish value our older parishioners for who they are and what they contribute to our parish life," he said. "These are very experienced people who love their church, bring stability to our community and are wonderful prayer warriors. We don't engage with the senior ministry because we have to. We do it because we love them."

The lectures and meetings not only educate participants, they also serve as a place to make new friends and take part in a fun and vibrant social life many crave yet lack. The ministry is a way of engaging senior parishioners, reducing loneliness and assembling those with common interests and needs in a church community where they find both companionship and support.

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Father Louis Brusatti, a retired priest who has been an active presenter for the ministry for many years, agreed with the importance of seniors remaining connected in a group of their peers and said their enthusiasm for learning has been an inspiration to him as an educator.

“They are an essential part of parish life having developed, supported and been central to the parish for many years,” Father Brusatti said. “They have been an inspiration to me and certainly deserve the best of our attention during their golden years.”

Leaders said the members of the senior ministry are unabashedly eager to help and bring enthusiasm to every event. They also provide new perspectives, wisdom and purpose with joy in their hearts and smiles on their faces.

“They want to help, and they show up,” Father Coakley said. “They give us great encouragement and are great role models to their own children as to what a devout, committed Christian and Catholic looks like.”

Flexibility and fun are part of the ministry’s success, as is being faithful, Neumann said.

“The upheaval and uncertainty have been a sure test,” she said. “But acknowledging that God is in charge, we will continue to follow his lead and see where he takes us next.”

By enhancing the lives of seniors and providing a wide variety of meaningful and interactive spiritual, social and educational outreach and intergenerational experiences that allow them to prosper and grow in union with God, St. Catherine’s senior ministry is living out the advice of St. Catherine of Siena herself: “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.”

For more information about St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Austin, visit [www.stcatherine-austin.org](http://www.stcatherine-austin.org) or call (512) 892-2420.