

Sharing the *Joy of Christ* with every person in town! *Evangelization efforts in rural Montana*

St. Michael the Archangel Parish, Conrad and St. William Parish, Dutton sent handwritten Christmas cards to every person, not just Catholics, but EVERY NEIGHBOR in their towns! Fr. Matt Christiaens is the new pastor at these churches (as of July 2023) and before he had even moved to Conrad, he had applied for Faith-In-Action grants from the Foundation to evangelize to the people of North Central Montana.



“I was at a [priests’] meeting and heard someone mention that sending a Christmas card goes a lot further than you’d imagine,” shared Fr. Matt. “It’s the idea that evangelization doesn’t have to be complicated.” But can evangelization really be that easy?

Getting the addresses turned out to be the hard part! “We started at the beginning of Advent and used a Google map street view and went down every street in Conrad and Dutton and said, ‘Who lives there?’ That’s how we made our card list,” laughed Fr. Matt as he explained their process.

They designed their own Christmas card, including a message from Fr. Matt and the Christmas Mass times. Then they called in the troops. “We said we would feed everyone who helped us after the Religious Ed Christmas play and 140 volunteers showed up!” Bundles of 10 cards and 10 envelopes were given to each volunteer along with 10 addresses. They hand-addressed each envelope and the cards included a hand-written message, and the volunteer signed with their own name. “It was important to have that personal touch. I made sure I signed every card

we sent out, too! We finished 478 cards that night with everyone helping—from a five-year-old who drew pictures in the cards to couples teaming up with one addressing the envelopes and the other writing in the card.” The volunteers really liked doing it and had so much fun!

Fr. Matt completed an additional 112 cards for a total of 590 cards sent to

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Conrad addresses and then he repeated the whole process in Dutton, with the parishioners of St. William preparing 200 cards sent to people in Dutton, Brady and Power. In Conrad, the neighborly wishes were repeated with highschoolers caroling and delivering cookies.

“We sent Easter cards, too,” explained Fr. Matt, “with a hand-written message and our Easter Mass schedule, and we will do it at Christmas again.”

This mail campaign showed that indeed, evangelization does not need to be complicated. Not only did the parish reach out and evangelize to all its neighbors, but it also taught the parishioners how a simple and sincere Christmas wish can bring people closer to God and each other.

Did it work?

“It’s hard to say if Mass attendance overall has increased because of it,” explained Fr. Matt, but both parishes received cards thanking them, one saying “I’ve never gotten a card from a priest before!” The Christmas Mass attendance numbers in both Conrad and Dutton were up, “and we’ve had a lot more people come to Stations of the Cross this past Lent who are not Catholic.” Additionally, Fr. Matt reports that in recent years, the Lenten soup and bread lunches had approximately 40 people in attendance; this year there were more than 80 people who participated. Mass attendance numbers overall are definitely reflecting an upward trend.

Fr. Matt explains it best, “This is a really easy way to share the good news that Christ was born for us, and Christ died for us, and with this news we have all that we need for salvation. The cards just help people communicate that. This is a way to help people to evangelize to others; you don’t need to know hard, complicated teachings of the church. Maybe I can’t evangelize like St. Paul, but I can send a Christmas card to a neighbor. The reason this works so well is that with the signature on the card, they are saying ‘I am a parishioner’ and then people see one another about town, and it facilitates another conversation about faith.”

Since 2007, the Foundation has awarded \$1.2 million in grants to our parishes and ministries. We do this through our annual grants program, giving up to \$5,000 in grant money to applicants. Last year was the first year FDOH created an evangelization focus to these grants, renaming the program “Faith-In-Action”. FDOH is proud and excited that we could provide a grant to each of St. Michael’s and St. William’s to share the Good News with their neighbors.



On behalf of St. Michael's Catholic Church, I want to wish you a very happy Easter. The joy of knowing Jesus is risen has the power to lift us from loneliness, darkness, and despair to strength, beauty, and happiness. My prayer is that you might experience this great Easter joy in knowing Jesus has suffered, died, and rose from the dead all because He loves you! If there is ever anything I can do assist you in knowing this great love of Jesus please do not hesitate to ask and always know of my prayers.

God Bless,

-Fr. Matthew Christiaens