

The Parish as a School of Discipleship

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RENEWING PARISH GOALS AND STRUCTURES

Imagining the parish as a School of Discipleship started for me when I was doing a day of reflection on discipleship for the ministries of a local parish. We had a wonderful day full of prayer, quiet time, laughter, input, and small group sharing. At the end of the day, I asked the group what they would take away from the experience. The consensus was, “I never knew that I was a disciple!” This threw me because I thought that discipleship and everyone’s understanding of it was a given, especially in that particular parish.

The next eye opener was when I went to another parish and I told the story of parish number one and they said, “We didn’t know that we were disciples either!” That made me think about the new evangelization and what the goals are. We need to start with some basics with our parishioners and focus in on what it means to truly be a disciple of Jesus and not merely a follower. I distinguish between the two because many people were following Jesus which was wonderful. But he asked his closest group to become disciples and take the gospel to all people and baptize them as disciples who were to go and do the same for others. Jesus asked all of us to carry on his mission in our time.

With the church’s call to a new evangelization, parish leadership should take some time to discern and envision their purpose as a parish, whom they are serving, and what is needed to advance the mission of Jesus in that particular locale. Parishes often take their ministry for granted or just do what they think every parish does without assessing needs of the people or area. For example, a parish that I was assisting in has an average age of 33-35 years old. It is a somewhat transient parish because the young adults may be there for a short time due to work. These young adults, mostly single, were from many places around the world. Because they gravitated toward the parish to meet others and for a sense of rootedness, our primary ministry was evangelization of this group. It also meant a new emphasis on welcome and hospitality as well as good preaching, music, liturgy, RCIA, special events like parish missions, small group gatherings for prayer and sharing, and community events so that the parish felt like a home.

The parish I am serving in now has a slightly different population. It is a mixed age group with a large group of young adults with children. They have moved from the city to a suburb but are still commuting to the city for work. The focus in this parish is also on hospitality and welcome, and community in order to educate and form disciples for mission. Both parishes are about a new evangelization but have to go about this in slightly different ways while maintaining all of the things a Catholic parish does on a regular basis.

What I find most helpful in both of these parishes is that ministry is intentionally focused on what the pastor, staff, consultative bodies, and parishioners together surface as needs. From the needs, goals should be surfaced and prioritized and a timeline developed for each goal along with who will be responsible for each. The goals should be our *desired outcome* and provide clear ideas of what we want to achieve in our parish. Parishioners who have potential leadership skills should be identified in order to achieve our goals along with developing a plan of action for mission and ministry.

This kind of goal development process is actually *community capacity building*. Discussing and listing your assets as a parish, finding out what is most needed, assessing your “successes” so far, and deciding on what you would most like to develop is a collaborative, healthy way to move forward and promotes:

- ✦ Opportunities for groups to understand the purpose and ministry of all of the groups that make up a parish.
- ✦ Group structures to ensure good leadership and strength in the ministries.
- ✦ Formation and skill training opportunities for individuals and groups to ensure confidence in leadership and ministry.
- ✦ Support through pastor and parish staff to provide practical ways to enable the development of skills and structures.

As Pope Francis stated in his recent apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way.’ I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of re-thinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (33).



Key to all of this is the mission statement of the parish. It is not just a nice statement to hang on the wall but rather a strong statement to identify the way in which this particular parish is living out and advancing the mission of Christ in this locale at this time. In other words, how are we being “missionary” to our parishioners, the larger community, and encouraging parents to be missionaries to their children? A mission statement is not necessarily set in stone for all ages but should change as populations and needs change just as our goals will change. That does not mean that the essence of parish changes, just that we look at the people, mission, and structure regularly.

Again in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis quoted from the Aparecida Document, “we cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings; we need to move’ from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry.” Our mission statement, goals, and discernment move us toward missionary activity.

Of course, a key part of this is evaluation. In my experience parishes rarely do evaluation of ministries, programs, liturgy, preaching, or music. Nor do they look at these major ministries in the light of their mission statement and how these ministries are actually forming disciples of Jesus Christ.

We have to remember that today’s parish is diverse, not only in cultures, but also in generations.

This means there are varying levels of understanding of and commitment to the faith which can often cause tension and even discouragement on the part of pastor, parish staff, and parishioners. By assessing the needs, setting our goals, and doing periodic evaluation, we can focus the parish as a school of discipleship.

DEVELOPING DISCIPLES THROUGHOUT ALL AREAS OF PARISH LIFE

One of the weak points in the universal church is adult faith development. We fully admit that most of our educational works center on children and yet it is essential that we support our parents in the faith so that they can hand on the faith to their children. And yet, we don’t help them to be the “parent-catechists” that they need to be. Parents have found

it very beneficial when we incorporate learning into all of the meetings, special events, and intergenerational events that we plan. We keep the following in mind as we prepare topics and meeting formats:

- ✦ Adults learn best in small groups and through reflecting on their experience.
- ✦ Adults are interested in exploring and growing in spirituality and having questions answered.
- ✦ Adults want to make a difference by participating in meaningful work.

The best example of adult faith formation that we have at present in the church is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Years ago when I worked with RENEW (a parish renewal process), we always presented it as the “RCIA for the already baptized.” RENEW was about adult faith formation and discipleship through small Christian communities (SCCs). Today it still holds that this is a great method for adults. A parish can be intentional about its adult faith formation by utilizing the SCC style. This should not be seen as just another parish activity but as a foundational style of learning which encourages encounter with Christ and discipleship.

It is also important to take note of all the things you have going in the parish that are adult faith formation but you might not readily characterize as such. I made a list of all that is going on in our parish and it was quite an eye-opener. For example:

- ✦ Liturgy and worship — the first catechesis: Mass, homily, music, Scripture, prayers
- ✦ Liturgical training: lectors, Eucharistic ministers, servers, sacristans
- ✦ RCIA
- ✦ Parent meetings
- ✦ Catechists: training, formation, retreat
- ✦ Sacramental preparation
- ✦ Parish bulletin

- * Bereavement group
- * Stewardship council
- * Lecture series
- * Lenten reflection series
- * Faith sharing groups: Advent weekly, Lent weekly, ongoing small groups
- * Book clubs
- * Working with ministries
- * Website and other electronic and social media

Under each category there are multiple sessions, as in every parish, but the purpose of the list is to see how we could integrate formation and action for discipleship. That idea keeps us focused so that staff planning incorporates our mission statement and goals into these ministries.

Another useful tool is to do simple surveys with parishioners and parents. This allows us to hear what their needs and desires are, and, when we implement we remind them, “You asked for this!” The survey gives them a sense of participating in the planning for program development.

The purpose of the parish ministries is threefold: How can we help people encounter Christ? How will we engage them in the life of the parish: *Word, worship, community, mission?*

How will we help them live their faith in the world — *family, work, neighborhood?* All heads of ministries along with parish staff and consultative bodies must integrate these concepts into their meetings and projects, along with prayer and faith sharing.

BEST PRACTICES

Some best practices that foster discipleship in a parish are:

- * Emphasizing welcome and hospitality. This is the first frontier of evangelization. If we are not a welcoming, smiling parish that celebrates the Risen Jesus, people won't want to be part of it.
- * Developing a “New Member Ministry” whose purpose is to interview all new parishioners and identify their interests and talents, and invite them to share their journey and use their gifts for stewardship and discipleship by joining a ministry.
- * Understanding that we are *Gathered and Sent* as a community. Meetings begin with a formal *gathering* prayer and end with a formal *sending* prayer to be strengthened and “sent” forth to bring the good news in the ordinary circumstances of our lives.
- * Forming parishioners to understand their baptismal call to ministry and mission.
- * Building standards of excellence in all aspects of the liturgical celebrations so that an encounter with Jesus can take place.

- * Promoting a day of service for all parishioners to reach out to the local and world communities, to offer direct service to the poor and those in need, to learn about issues that cause poverty and injustice. This is a great opportunity for families and individuals to join together in multiple projects like Habitat for Humanity, Shoe Boxes for Soldiers, painting a homeless shelter, stocking the food bank, parish cleanup, helping seniors with household chores, and more.
- * Promoting small faith sharing groups and using prayer and faith sharing in parish meetings.
- * Evaluating by regularly asking the questions: “Are we authentic Christians?” “How are our parish and our parishioners role models to each other and the larger community?” “How do we witness Christ?”
- * Engaging parishioners through a parish assembly process to get ideas, set goals and priorities.

In summary, I would say that the essential elements for new evangelization and forming disciples in the parish are:

- * Understanding our parishioners and engaging them in the life of Christ.
- * Using creative imagination in visioning and planning.
- * Including parishioners in program development.
- * Providing experiences for all age groups.
- * Developing their understanding of discipleship.
- * Assisting parents in handing on the faith to their children.
- * Living out our faith in daily life.

OUR CALL AS PARISH LEADERSHIP

St. Paul in Ephesians 3:14-21, fervently prays that the disciples will know God deeply and “have strength to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth, of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

As parish leadership, our role is to help all encounter God in the deepest recesses of their souls and to live the encounter with passion and commitment as disciples of Christ. It takes a lot of planning to make the parish a *school of discipleship* but that is what we should be. As Fr. Ron Rolheiser, the contemporary spiritual writer, often says, “When you don't know what else to do, keep meeting because Pentecost happened at a meeting and we are in the upper room!” Meetings generate ideas and give us plans of action as we continue to advance the mission of Jesus in our time. That is our calling! ■

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