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Meeting the Pastoral Needs of Parishioners within the Context of a Vibrant Parish
(Part 1)

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The last article in this series summarized the results from the Living Stones Planning Committee (LSPC) survey that asked parishes to identify their strengths and areas that need further development. In this article we begin to discuss how parishes can become more vibrant and better meet the needs of all parishioners.

In order for real change to occur, people need to feel a sense of urgency. "Transformation of an enterprise begins with a sense of crisis or urgency. No institution will go through fundamental change unless it believes it is in deep trouble and needs to do something different to survive." (Lowney, p. 23) We don't like to alarm people, so perhaps we have downplayed or minimized our situation more than we should have. I think the data corroborates urgency, but, whenever possible, we try to discount any negative indicators suggesting there is something wrong with our traditions and/or ways of doing things. We need to have the humility to realize that we are heading in the wrong direction and we are not clear on how to change course. We are fortunate in the diocese to have abundant talent. If we have the will and perseverance, we can make a difference and implement changes that will ensure the future health of all church groupings in the Diocese of Ogdensburg.

It isn't easy to change what we've been doing for generations or to think differently. However, this is what Jesus was confronted with when he faced the conditions of his time and we are no different. "The first thing that must change is our culture, the ways we think, operate, and make decisions. Such change never comes easily, above all to a church with a sacred tradition and a venerable history. For that reason, we must create a "burning platform" for change, a widespread conviction that the status quo is no longer sustainable. The burning platform for change is not yet ablaze in our church." (Lowney, p. 2)

This is frightening on one hand, but challenging and invigorating on the other. We can no longer accept the often heard response--"It is what it is." Rather, "it is what we allow it to be." We can make change and we can make a difference. We just need to recognize that conditions are serious enough to warrant a commitment to change. Again, we must have the will and perseverance of faith and action to tackle the tasks that lie ahead.

People sometimes ask what a vibrant parish looks like. Let me share a short observation with you. A few weeks ago, my wife, Molly, and I were in Amelia Island, Florida, and attended a Mass at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Fernandina Beach, Florida. I have to say that, if a parish is vibrant, you actually feel its vibrancy. You didn't have to be inside St. Michael's Catholic Church more than a few moments to realize that vibrancy was present. The warm welcoming was unmistakable. The church was full, and everyone participated. The environment was such that everyone wanted to participate, whether it was singing or recitation.

People are often too quick to come up with excuses for why we can't become more vibrant. We need to ask the Holy Spirit for guidance as we move forward. We can do better. "Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that the modern church must grow "by attraction," yet here in the United States, we've demonstrated no meaningful ability to attract. The Pew Research Center found that we manage to attract only one adult convert for every six adult Catholics who walk away from the church. Meditate on that statistic for a moment--six leave

for every one that joins." On the other hand, "evangelical churches are thriving as net winners, attracting more members than they lose." (Lowney, p. 21)

We need to be humble enough to acknowledge that we may not be adequately meeting the pastoral needs of our parishioners and, as a result, they may go elsewhere. The ideas on developing parish vibrancy are not new and have been included in a book I would recommend for everyone to read, *Great Catholic Parishes* by William E. Simon, Jr.

The book was recommended in an article included in *America Magazine*. The following endorsement certainly peaked my interest.

If you're looking for the components of vibrant parish life, and what you can do to make them happen in your parish, go no further. Bill Simon and his Parish Catalyst team have researched deeply and prescribed wisely. This is the book we parishioners (and our pastors) have been waiting for so that we can make our parishes welcoming, vibrant, meaningful, and faith-filled. Paul Wilkes—Author of [Excellent Catholic Parishes](#)

In gathering ideas and information for this book, diocesan offices, ministry leaders, and pastoral professionals across the country were asked to identify healthy, vibrant parishes and the pastors who lead them. A sample of more than one hundred exceptional pastors and parishes in the United States were identified and then contacted and interviewed to determine what the parishes were doing that made them healthy and vibrant. In addition to the original parishes identified, those vibrant parishes also cited other parishes that were also considered vibrant parishes. This ended up making up the base of parishes and pastors consulted, and the information gathered was then included in the book, [Great Catholic Parishes](#).

The parishes included reflect a wide range from city to rural and wealthy to struggling. In my judgement, the book was well worth reading and brought to the forefront a number of concrete ideas we've been discussing, as important elements in developing vibrant parishes.

Obviously, what is realistic and possible for one parish community might not be for another. This will, to some degree, depend on the financial and human resources that are available. Nevertheless, every parish must strive to become more effective and develop a team of parishioners charged with this task. We also need to be realistic that significant change will take years to accomplish, but nothing will happen without parish teamwork or absent ongoing strategic planning.

There is another factor, community support, that needs to be acknowledged in developing vibrant parishes. Parishes can sponsor activities to make for a more vibrant parish, but unless parishioners within those parishes come out and support those initiatives, nothing will happen. Too many Catholics have become apathetic and do not commit to their religion and spiritual growth as they should. It is critical that parishioners come out and support their parish activities whenever they can. It is so easy to come up with an excuse that "I can't attend because it isn't on a good day or at a good time." We all need to take our faith seriously and participate in ways that will develop us both personally and spiritually.

I attended a parish dinner recently that was designed to develop a sense of parish community. This is certainly an example of an event that a vibrant parish would offer, but it falls short, if parishioners don't come to support and participate in the community event. In this case, the attendance was respectable, but every seat in the parish center should have been filled. We are fortunate to have so many committed parishioners throughout the diocese who give of their time and talent to offer a variety of events to parishioners. This is to be acknowledged and commended.

I believe our parishes have a great foundation upon which to build more vibrant parishes. The task now is to broaden and deepen how we serve all parishioners. We can do this by referring back to the summary of key data submitted by parishes to the LSPC that was included in the second article in this series. Parishes have already identified those areas where they need more lay leaders and programming support, if they are going to become more vibrant and better meet the needs of all parishioners.

We shall finish this article by acknowledging that developing vibrant parishes is a shared responsibility. The parishes need to develop and offer programs that address parish needs, but parishioners need to come and participate in those activities to demonstrate their commitment to the community and their commitment to personal and spiritual growth on all levels.

It may be appropriate to end with the Hemmingway quote included in the last two articles:

Today is only one day
in all the days that will ever be.
But what will happen in all the other days
that ever come
can depend on what you do today.E

Ernest Hemmingway
For Whom the Bells Tolls

In the next few issues of the North Country Catholic, we shall discuss ideas on how to become more vibrant and in a position to more effectively meet the pastoral needs of all parishioners.

References Cited:

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