

Article 5 of 6
Meeting the Pastoral Needs of Parishioners within the Context of a Vibrant Parish
(Part 3)

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In the last issue of the North Country Catholic, we discussed three elements that can impact parish vibrancy: (1) leadership style, (2) communication, and (3) lay leadership. In this issue, let's look at (1) evangelization, (2) involvement of children and youth, and (3) music.

1. Evangelization: Children/Youth, Young Adults, Seniors

Comprehensive and strategic faith formation for all parishioners is critical to developing vibrant parishes, as well as in building parishes with informed and committed communities of intentional disciples. "In vibrant parishes, the people themselves and the culture they build create an environment where faith has the freedom and the opportunity to grow. In other words, parishioners advance their own spiritual journeys and support the formation of those around them by contributing to the parish's prayerful culture." (Simon, p. 73)

Furthermore, parishes need to advance beyond what some call "maintenance parishes", satisfied with sustaining their current membership with little or no outreach and commitment to bringing back into the church those who have left, fallen away, or those who might be looking for a church that will offer a welcoming environment and nourish them spiritually.

"In the end, the purpose of evangelization is not to "make converts" or "fill the pews" but simply to open doors—to let others know the Good News that Catholic faith has made a positive difference in our lives and that God's love is available to others as well... Evangelizing opportunities include community-service programs, social events, sacramental celebrations, and mission work." (Simon, p. 146)

Evangelization and faith formation go hand-in-hand. "...discipleship is the central focus of vibrant parishes—an area in which they simultaneously excel and see potential for more growth toward spiritually mature faith." (Simon, p. 59) "For our purposes, we use the terms spiritual growth and discipleship somewhat interchangeably to indicate the process by which individuals or parishes deepen their faith, become closer to Jesus, and draw others to him as they mature in their faith." (Simon, p. 58)

Parishes need to constantly survey their parishioners, youth as well as adults, to determine their areas of interest. They also need to develop scripture-based sessions for children and young adults, as they serve as the future of the Catholic Church. This is how faith formation communities are formed. As parishioners grow in their faith formation, they also begin to develop a strong bond with the other parishioners within the parish grouping. As these bonds develop, the parishioners then become more committed and active members of the church community.

Faith formation does not happen by accident or incidentally. It can only occur through long-range planning that is developed, organized, and offered by the parish community. "From our interviews with pastors we learned that strategic planning is essential for deepening discipleship. How do parishes accomplish this strategic planning? They have parish leaders who (1) acknowledge spiritual maturity as a goal to be pursued, (2) allocate resources

(human and financial) to support spiritual growth initiatives and (3) implement strategies and campaigns that respond to the current needs of their parishioners." (Simon, p. 59)

2. **Engaging Children and Youth in Meaningful Ways**

The need to engage children within our faith community in meaningful ways cannot be overemphasized. They are the future of the church. If we fail to get children connected with their faith, they will continue to be among the 50% of adult Catholics who leave the church at some point.

"Children are an integral part of the Sunday experience, and they need to be accommodated." (Simon, p. 104) Some parishes designate certain masses as "children's Masses" and utilize children as lectors and cantors. Including young musicians is also a very good way to get children involved in church services and in contributing to making the parish more vibrant.

It would be unreasonable to expect every parish grouping to hire an individual to develop and run a program for the children and youth within the parishes. This would be cost prohibitive. However, there is no reason why the diocese couldn't be divided into regions with the hiring of a Youth Ministry Assistant, reporting to the Director of Youth Ministry, for each region. Expenses could then be shared by groups of parishes, thus sharing resources and enabling the diocese to develop additional programs for youth in parishes across the diocese.

This would also provide a team for the Director of Youth Ministry to work with in developing ideas and programs. Parishes should also be encouraged to identify volunteers to assist with any of the activities as needed. The planning, organization, and execution of the activities would be the responsibility of the paid staff, but they will need support from volunteers to ensure adequate supervision and assistance for all activities.

Children and youth could grow spiritually through the careful selection of a variety of activities. In addition to scripture study, there could be activities and field trips that focus on areas such as: being better custodians of the earth and our environment, building sound character and morality, assisting the sick and elderly, etc. These activities could involve service projects, carefully selected movies with follow-up discussions, game nights, sports competitions, etc. Programming for children and youth needs to be multifaceted and include meaningful learning and growing experiences that nurture and develop personal and spiritual growth. This can only occur, if there are a sufficient number of lay leaders with the time and responsibility to research, develop, and offer the kinds of activities mentioned.

3. **Music**

Music can inspire an emotional response and fully engage participation in the liturgy. "Music responsive to the liturgical seasons as well as the cultures and languages that make up different assemblies moves the hearts and spirits of those who play, listen and sing. (Simeone, p. 3) Music goes a long way to helping to create an active vibrant parish. We are fortunate to have an almost endless supply of wonderful, engaging, and meaningful sacred hymns. In some parishes, more care needs to be taken to select hymns that parishioners can sing, enjoy, and find inspiring. "Vibrant music is essential to the vibrant liturgies celebrated in the parishes of this study." (Simon, p. 119)

Cantors sometimes feel they are offering a recital, as few parishioners join-in to sing. If you have a vibrant parish and everyone is engaged in singing, you will never know that there is a cantor at all. This is as it should be.

Large churches sometimes have different music styles designated to specific Masses. They might have the children's choir on Sunday at 11:00 a.m. and a Folk Mass on Sunday at 9:00 a.m. That's fine for large churches, but certainly not necessary. What is important, however, is that we have music that, by its very spirit, engages parishioners.

As mentioned in the section, *Engaging Children and Youth in Meaningful Ways*, having young musicians involved with a small choir can get children involved in meaningful ways and add to the vibrancy of the service.

There is a wide variety of music to select from--some rather modern and others quite traditional. "There is no optimal type or style of liturgical music. The strong music ministries in our sample were diverse and mixed. One Midwestern parish exhibited a huge range in their music: one weekend it was contemporary, two weeks before that it was Celtic, the next week it was more traditional. Both the type of music and how that music is made were unique to each vibrant parish we surveyed." (Simon, p. 121)

The key here is balance. "Whether it is bringing in a marimba player the parish loved for the Christmas Mass or inviting a vocal group in to make the music more harmonious, our parishes work at developing music programs that resonate with the people they serve." (Simon, p. 122)

Perhaps one cautionary note. Tastes in music vary greatly, depending on a person's age and music preference, so care needs to be taken so as not to alienate people with music that is too extreme for them to tolerate. Again, let's go back to the use of balance when deciding on what music to select. Nevertheless, music is an integral part of our liturgy and can serve as an excellent vehicle for engaging and inspiring those in attendance.

In the next article, we shall discuss (1) technology and (2) hospitality and socials. Again, it is hoped that you will find ideas presented in these articles that will lead to parish discussions and creativity.

Reference Cited:

Simeone, Denise (2009, July 20) National Catholic Reporter.

Simon, William E. (2016) Great Catholic Parishes. Indiana: Ave Maria Press.