



PLANS OF HOPE

HOUMA-THIBODAUX PARISH PLANNING

DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

CHAPTER 11

SECTION 5



WHAT?

What do we see happening across the United States?

To appreciate what we see happening in the Catholic Church in the United States let us begin by appreciating the progression of thought within the US Bishops. The USCCB has published three major documents with regards to adult formation and evangelization.

- In 1992 they released *Go & Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*.
- A few years later, in 1999, they published *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Formation in the United States*.
- Most recently, in 2017, they released *Living as Missionary Disciples: A Resource for Evangelization*.

In 1992, the Committee on Evangelization's document focused heavily on encounter. They wrote about the need for an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, the need for conversion because of this encounter, and the call to share the Gospel with others.

In 1999, the Committee on Education's plan was primarily intended for those in leadership, whether that be on the diocesan level or in the parish. Themes emphasize the need for diverse learning, adult Christian living, home or family centered ministries, and small groups. It calls parishes to prepare their parishioners to act as disciples.

In 2017, the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis shifts from *making* disciples to *forming* disciples. The document outlines four components of formation: encounter, accompaniment, community, and mission. There is also a great emphasis on docility to, and dependence upon, the Holy Spirit. This most recent document emphasizes three additional keys:

1. Discernment and the need for prayer
2. Fruitfulness, the need for formation that bears fruit
3. Planning the fosters evangelization

Living as Missionary Disciples also stresses the importance of intentionally investing in the formation of disciples. This is a shift from previous documents in that the focus in 2017 is forming the people that are already in the pew. Essentially, instead of bringing in people and making disciples, we are forming the ones we have and equipping them to go out.

WHAT IS CONSISTENT IN ALL THREE DOCUMENTS

All three of the aforementioned documents mention four things that we should pay attention to.

NUMBER ONE: **ENCOUNTER**. *Living as Missionary Disciples* clearly states, “The purpose of evangelization is to lead people to **encounter** Christ.” Whether named as “encounter” or “experience” all three documents highlight the need for a personal relationship with the person of Jesus Christ.

NUMBER TWO: **CONVERSION**. *Living as Missionary Disciples* clearly states, “The purpose of evangelization is to bring about faith and **conversion** to Christ. Faith involves a profound change of mind and heart, a change of life, a ‘*metanoia*.’” This is echoed in both earlier documents. Jesus Christ demands a response.

NUMBER THREE: **BEARING FRUIT**. *Living as Missionary Disciples* clearly states, “The parish must be concerned with **bearing fruit** throughout the discipleship process. ... The work of pastoral planning ought to **bear fruit**”. The 1999 document has an entire section illustrating what this fruit would look like. The 1992 unpacks how “the fruits of evangelization are changed lives”.

NUMBER FOUR: **INTENTIONALITY**. All three documents outline concrete steps that can be taken to succeed. The mere fact that action plans are included as such illustrates the need to be intentional. *Living as Missionary Disciples* clearly states, “It is important to regard ... (the) need of evangelization and **intentional** spiritual formation, thus shifting the paradigm from maintenance to mission in the parish.”

WHAT IS CONSISTENT IN ALL THREE DOCUMENTS ARE THE VERY THINGS BEARING FRUIT NOW

ENCOUNTER. Research on analyzing trends within the Catholic Church, as well as nondenominational communities, reveals just how influential a life-changing **encounter** with God can be in one’s sustained commitment to Christ. There is no one single program that is the answer for every Catholic parish. However, the initiatives that are most successful across the country all share a common ingredient: they help facilitate **encounter** with the living God.

As we look at what we see happening across the country we notice that **encounter** is facilitated in a number of ways. Naturally you would expect to see opportunities for prayer, a retreat, or the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Indeed, these components are shared amongst successful ministries. Encounter is also being facilitated in the more personal settings. There is a growing attention to the need for *relationship centered adult formation*. Small groups seems to provide a dual function. First, they allow for greater flexibility. Second, participants experience God through each other, in the vulnerability of small group conversation, and in the consistency of someone holding them accountable.

CONVERSION. Most Catholics don’t struggle with conversion because they don’t believe in the value of it; most Catholics struggle with a change of lifestyle because there’s no one there to support them and hold them accountable. Again, this seems to be one of benefits of the small group format. We should not underestimate the isolation with which people live their lives, as well as the culture of isolation within our own Catholic culture.

Resistance is an expected part of one's spiritual life. Resistance is an indication of where God is moving in our life. For example, if God is getting close to an area in our heart that is filled with pain human nature being what it is seeks to protect itself and often pushes God away. While we all long for conversion many of us resist it because we resist the associated with change. Isolation breeds hiding, and most of Americans live in isolation. Community fosters vulnerability and receptivity. Therefore, the relationship between small groups and conversion is that authentic Christian relationships help people stay engaged with God when they would naturally want to run.

BEARING FRUIT. There have never been this many quality adult formation resources available to Catholic parishes as they are today. The emergence of Ascension Press, the Augustine Institute, as well as pioneers such as Bishop Robert Barron and Matthew Kelly have ushered a new era of Catholic publishing and resource development. Now more than ever pastors realize the need to do “something” with the adults. Priests have always “talked shop” with each other; however, there is a growing interest amongst pastors to hear what's really working.

Parishes that are making a difference in people's lives are asking good questions before they introduce ministry in the parish. They are focused on initiatives that are bearing fruit and are proving to bear fruit. Parishes that simply go from one thing to the next are busy, but they don't see the impact of peoples lives from all of their investment of time and energy.

INTENTIONALITY. At some point in the last five years the words “strategic planning” became the buzz within the Catholic Church. It seems as if everybody's hosting a Synod or diocesan-wide planning process. Even the Pope and the US Bishops have recently exhorted parishes to connect evangelization with planning. Whether it is because of the urgency of the exodus from the Church or because of the awareness that we need to do “something” we must pay attention to the fact that a lot of people are planning.

WHAT WE SEE HAPPENING ACROSS THE COUNTRY. THE GOOD STUFF.

RESOURCES ARE THERE. Again, as mentioned above there have never been this many quality adult formation resources available to Catholic parishes as they are today. The video options from Ascension Press, the Augustine Institute, and Bishop Robert Barron, as well as authors such as Matthew Kelly, Christopher West, or Dr. Brant Pitre have provided an availability of resources like never before. It may be a bit overwhelming if you don't know where to start or how to put them altogether, but the good news is there's a lot out there.

SMALL GROUPS. *What* parishes are studying is as unique and varied as the parishes themselves. *How* they are forming adults is also varied and unique. We did find that the use of small groups is becoming more and more popular as it is shown to be more and more effective. Some small groups are meeting off-campus, while other small groups meet on campus. Some resources “feel” large group in format and then conclude the night in small group. There are lots of ways to utilize small groups, but the use of small groups is on the rise.

SMART PHONES HAVE CHANGED THE WORLD. On average, Americans check their phones once every 12 minutes. They engage with it for actual use more than 80 times a day. Smart phones have shrunk the size of the world to the size of one's hand. The variety of apps has changed the way people approach formation because it has changed the way people access learning. The Liturgy of Hours. Daily Mass readings. Podcasts. YouTube even has some good Catholic stuff. And, of course, the Pope tweets. We could go on more extensively about the impact of technology. Smart phones are here, they are not going away. There are ways to meet people where they and use social media to our advantage.

WHAT WE SEE HAPPENING ACROSS THE COUNTRY. THE BAD STUFF.

SMART PHONES HAVE CHANGED THE WORLD. On average, Americans check their phones once every 12 minutes. They engage with it for actual use more than 80 times a day. Wow ... that's ... disturbing. Pope Benedict XVI commented, "The youngest, born into this condition, seem to want to fill every empty moment with music and images, out of fear of feeling this very emptiness. This is a trend that has always existed, especially among the young and in the more developed urban contexts but today it has reached a level such as to give rise to talk about anthropological mutation. Some people are no longer able to remain for long periods in silence and solitude." People are more connected than ever, yet are more isolated and lonely than ever. Even under the guise of something good, things like Catholic apps, we can't forget *who* we are and *what* we are. We are made for relationship. Smart phones, and so much more, are having a dramatic impact on cognitive development, contemplative capacity, and how we relate to other people.

CHANGE. One thing we see across the country is just how difficult it is to change. Change sometimes requires confrontation and most pastors are nonconfrontational. It is painful to admit that much of what we do in the parish does not bear fruit in people's lives. With a thinning congregation, aging buildings, and more limited financial resources, parishes are now forced to ask themselves where they are going to invest.

What we see is that parishes who have asked the hard questions, have undergone some form of parish evaluation, and have had strong priestly leadership are the parishes that are bearing fruit. Unfortunately, most parish leadership won't make the tough call. For example, "we" know the choir is bad, but "we" don't want to let go of the choir director because they have "so much power" in the parish. "We" don't want to change the DRE because they know so many people in the parish. "We" know the secretary continues to alienate parishioners, but "we" don't want to let them go. The Church has never been in need of leadership as she is now. What we see across the country is that the Church is in need of parishes that are ready to make decisions that will lead to bearing fruit.

INTENTIONALITY. Similar to the comments made above when we look across the country we see a direct connection between parishes that are thriving and those that know *why* they are thriving. There is an intentional decision to do what they are doing. They know *where* they are going, *why* they are going there, and *how* they are going to get there. In the same vain, many parishes continue to do what they've always done. There is no plan and there is no one pushing for there to be one. Many pastors feel alone. Other pastors simply try doing it alone. The good news is that there are many thriving parishes in our country.

The question is not whether it can happen in your parish, the question is how much time and energy, as well as the discipline of discipline, do you have to make that happen in your parish?