



PLANS OF HOPE

HOUMA-THIBODAUX PARISH PLANNING

DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

CHAPTER 11

SECTION 6



WHAT?

What is *not* working and *why* is it not working?

The structure of evangelization within the Catholic Church has always been sacramental in nature. The Church has succeeded for over two millennia because the sacraments remain the center of evangelization and experience. Formation within the church, or formation strategies, have slowly changed throughout the different times and seasons. It is not our intent to review the entire survey of adult formation in our Catholic history. However it would be beneficial for us to take a look at the most recent trends.

Let's begin by asking: what has the Church relied on to form adults? Sherry Weddell, author of *Forming Intentional Disciples* states, "Since the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Catholic retention strategy has been (a) childhood catechesis and (b) sacramental initiation." These strategies were a direct response to the crisis of the Protestant Reformation. For hundreds of years, Catholics have relied on the sacraments, specifically the sacraments concerning major life events. It has long been the strategy that eventually all Catholics make their way back home. There has long been the belief that fallen away Catholics would return once they had their own children. On the heels of Protestant Reformation Christian formation began with childhood catechesis and eventually, as one grew older, was limited to the Sunday sermon.

Returning to Sherry Weddell, we learn, "the majority of Catholics are sacramentalized but not evangelized." She responds to this failing Catholic culture of evangelization by saying, "God has no grandchildren," meaning that God only has His beloved children. This emphasizes the importance of a relationship with God and the vital need for all Catholics to assume their identity as a child of God, not a grandchild of God that follows the faith simply because the generations before them have done so. She states that most Catholics "do not know an explicit, personal attachment to Christ".

Catholics that receive childhood catechesis are taught the basics of Catholic theology and traditional practices. There is value in the substance of what is taught, but the weakness in this approach to formation is that it is purely intellectual formation. Of course, the crisis of a postmodern culture requires a strong theological response; however, there is little in this approach concerning a living relationship with Christ. This gives way to the cries and complaints of so many young adults of the bombardment of “meaningless” information in Catholic CCD which has led to the “graduation of Catholicism” after Confirmation.

One familiar group can point to the explanation of the rising failure concerning the ancient, heavily relied on Catholic evangelization strategies: Millennials. This new generation of influencers, which now comprises the largest generation in our nation, has been raised differently and therefore are responding to Catholicism and the idea of religion differently. Multiple studies reveal the unaffiliated and atheistic trends that are currently sweeping the United States. In many actual practices, moral relativism or amorality, a growing desensitization or moral numbness, and an increasing dehumanization and coldness are all rising swiftly.

Older strategies that rely on Catholics coming back for the sacraments are no longer an option for evangelization. They aren't working and the data is evidence for this. Partial evidence of this is the fact that less than 40% of 25-45 year-olds are getting married in the church. If they aren't going to Mass or getting married in the Church, why would they raise their children in the Church? Weddell states, “We can no longer depend upon rite of passage or cultural, peer, or familial pressure to bring the majority back. In the twenty-first century, cultural Catholicism is dead as a retention strategy. In the twenty-first century, we have to foster intentional Catholicism rather than cultural Catholicism.”

As with most things in life there is good news and bad news. **Let's start with the good news: people are hungry.** The encouragement can be found in the hunger with adult parishioners for more. As mentioned in Section no. 1 “*Why is adult formation a Diocesan planning priority*”, the results of the March 2017 Disciple Maker Index reveal the longings of nearly 4,500 Houma-Thibodaux parishioners. The results of the DMI clearly confirmed the **need** for adult formation.

- 44% Expressed explicitly that they want to grow in their spiritual life
- 48% Expressed implicitly that they want help being formed as a disciple
- 46% Expressed implicitly that they want help in their relationship with God
- 35% Expressed implicitly that they want help via Bible study or Bible teachings
- 53% Expressed either an interest in or openness to participating in a small group

Interestingly enough, all 38 parishes in the diocese scored lowest in the following two statements:

1. The parish is a place that helps form me as a disciple
2. I feel confident having a conversation about the faith and sharing my personal testimony

Celebrating the good news motivates us to find solutions. There is a lot at stake. Now, **here is the bad news:** for the most part the Catholic Church in the United States has not changed the culture of adult formation within parishes. Generally speaking, in most parishes across the county, adults are left to figure it out on their own. The accelerated availability of more relevant adult formation resources has made it easier for entrepreneurial Catholics to find “meat” to feed their hunger. However, in most parishes, adults are not given a clear direction on how to become mature disciples. So that we don't repeat the same mistakes, let us take a look at what is not working and why it is not working.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING? "GET INVOLVED."

For years the most common response from Church leadership to someone hungry for more was to "get involved." There are a number of traditional Catholic ministries that were populated over the years by parishioners who saw service to the Church as the natural "next up." However, this is no longer proving to be the case, at least as the *first* step. We do not want to foster a religious narcissism that is solely focused on "me and Jesus", but we must admit that people simply have more options than ever. Research indicates that today's Catholic is already overextended in their juggling responsibilities at work, at home, and lifestyle. Within parish leadership is a great degree of emotion regarding *how* to maintain traditional Catholic ministries, as well as *if* we should. What we do know is that expecting adults to "get involved" in service before they have had an awakening is not working.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING? ONE SIZE FITS ALL.

The generational analysis in *Section 4* reveals the ever-widening differences between generations in our pews. The reason we see "the same people" always coming to "the same thing" is not necessarily because there is a lack of interest from others. It is more than likely because we have failed to appreciate how diverse adults are. Our inability to take seriously the influence of technology with regards to pedagogy has left us thinking that everyone is interested and learning the way "I" do. Younger adults respond to formation differently than generations before them. Seniors in a pew may not want to show up at night. Expecting all adults to respond to one "Bible study on Tuesday night" is not only unrealistic, it is also outdated.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING? ONE TOPIC FITS ALL.

The aforementioned generational analysis not only indicates *how* people learn but *what* they are interested in learning. Unfortunately, in most parishes, it is the expectation that people come to the parish campus for the learning. This means we are limited by our facilities and calendar as to how much we can offer and what we can offer. Research indicates that Catholic adults are hungry, very hungry to learn and be formed; however, our structure of adult formation is too often depended up on who is teaching, specifically who is teaching *live*. Even with the abundance of more relevant video based resources, many parishes still cling to the priest or live presenter doing the teaching. Again, this means *one* topic. Adults who are hungry for more, but not interested in that topic, are left feeling outside the loop. It is rare to find a single topic double tap into everyone's interest.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING? ON CAMPUS AS THE ONLY OPTION.

There is great value in having the parish campus feel like it is alive. There is great comfort in coming "home" on the property where we worship on Sunday. If we are to maximize our impact in the lives of all those who are indeed hungry for formation we cannot continue to expect that people's pace, lifestyle, and schedule, as well as the topic they are interested in, will fit in the time slot or location we offer. Providing ministry on campus is indeed a good idea. However, best practice research clearly indicates the success of small groups meeting in people's homes. These offer a increased variety of what can be studied and when they can participate. The flexibility of small group gives birth to dozens of benefits. What is not working, or what is not maximizing parish influence, is only providing opportunities on campus.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING? MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK ABOUT LIFE.

Many of us limit adult formation to intellectual formation. There is a need for solid theological formation. People need to know more about the Bible, morality, and what the Church teaches about controversial issues. However, the rising tide of non-denominational Christian growth indicates the response from adults when we connect faith to their real lives. For example, how many of us host events prior to the holidays preparing people who struggle with the holidays. Whether it be recently bereaved or other circumstances we often miss opportunities to meet people where they are. Or, let's look at another example: retirement. Most pastors would admit that's the largest percentage of those in a pew are our retirees. However, we often miss the opportunity to help people discern what retired life might look like in terms of their response to God. Here's another example. How many parents struggle raising kids with hyperactivity or attention deficit? It may not seem to be something that the Catholic Church has an authority to speak to, but how many parents would show up if we offered something substantial to help them in their ordinary life? More than you think. What's not working is us and missing opportunities right in front of us. We should not presume that adult formation is limited to traditional theological topics.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING? THE ABSENCE OF CHILDCARE.

Many pastors may look at this one and be tempted to quickly move on to the next topic. Why? Because many pastors do not see an abundance of young families at Mass on Sunday. They may dismiss the thought that young families would be interested in ongoing formation. Research indicates that committed Catholics raising young children have just as much interest in formation as do older adults. In fact, the arrival of children in their life often raises new questions about where they are in their faith. The difficulty is found with trying to focus while at church with their children or the difficulty of consistent childcare week after week to engage with formation. Statistics clearly indicate that parishes who provide free childcare often see a dramatic increase in interest from parents.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING? DILUTING LEADERSHIP.

In the 2017 USCCB document entitled *Living as Missionary Disciples* there is substantial attention paid to the need for pruning in parishes. No pastor gets excited when he reads that he has to prune things in his parish. Most pastors are non-confrontational by nature. Perhaps this is why we have landed in the rut we are in. What the US Bishops are indicating is that perhaps some of our best leaders are in ministries that are no longer bearing fruit, or worse, some of our leaders are not engaged in adult formation because they are trying to sustain ministries in the parish that need to be reconsidered. Just because a ministry was started, even out of authentic need, does not mean that it will be around forever. The church is always been most effective when we adapt to the needs of the day. In most of our parishes we have limited resources and only so much time on the calendar. While new leadership may come forward it will take time to effectively form new leaders. New wine may not fit into old wine skins. Expecting new leadership to follow in the footsteps of previous leaders is not always healthy. It may be time for some parish leaders to move on to other opportunities. We should certainly be cautious, about parishioners having to choose between new trends of adult formation versus old structures that may not be bearing fruit. And with that, we would do well to learn more about pruning.