

The Evangelizing Church of Now

In looking at the demographic landscape of churches in the United States, there has been an alarming trend of lowering numbers of young adults engaged in our parish communities. It seems a majority of the Catholic population of those aged 18 – 34 is now statistically missing. It has been noted, children as young as the age of 13 are choosing to leave the faith after celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation. This reality is alarming. So where did they go? Why did they go? And most importantly, how do we get them back?

The answer to the question of “Where did they go?” came quickly; they became what are now coined as the “none’s”. Meaning they have chosen to not attend church.

“Why did they go?” In doing research, I discovered a book by Brandon Vogt, RETURN, Helping Your Child Return to the Faith. In this book, he claims the number one reason young people are leaving the church is personal. They “lack a personal relationship with Jesus Christ”. In addition many moral and theological objections are mentioned. A study by St. Mary’s Press of Minnesota Inc. in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) recently published the book Going, Going Gone, describing three preliminary categories of disaffiliation as being the injured, the drifters, and the dissenters and there is no single reason why many younger people raised as Catholics no longer identify with the church.

“How do we get them back?” Brandon Vogt, in his book RETURN, describes a seven step method for a parent to help a child return to the faith; Step 1 Prayer and sacrifice, Step 2 Equip yourself with the Catechism and a Bible, Step 3 Plant the seeds, Step 4 Start the conversation and listen, Step 5 Move the dialogue forward, Step 6 Invite and connect and Step 7 Close the loop.

In response to the study in Going, Going Gone, it is time to heal them, connect with them and love them back to faith.

Sally Mews, author of Inviting Catholics Home, offers a different process. She describes a nonjudgmental approach along with equipping oneself with a renewed commitment of peace, security and joy of the love of our Lord and to provide a spirit of healing and reconciliation:

Many parents are upset when their children no longer attend church and wonder what they can do to bring them back. The answer lies in nonjudgmental acceptance of their children’s choices and renewed commitment to their own faith development. We can’t make anyone else return to the Church (or do anything else they don’t want to do for that matter). We can pray for others and invite them to return, but ultimately the choice is theirs. We can focus on our own walk with the Lord and renew that commitment. If others observe our peace, security, joy, and love of the Lord, they are likely to be drawn to the same source. Faith is caught, not taught, and it can never be forced.

We can invite others and let them know they’re always welcome to attend or return to the Church. However, the key is to understand the difference of making a nonjudgmental invitation versus becoming a pest, hounding or badgering someone else, especially one’s own children. Sometimes it’s hard for parents to accept their children as adults who need to stand on their own feet and make their own life choices. Many returnees have said they left the Church precisely because religion was ‘shoved down their throats’ by their parents and so they rebelled as soon as they left home. If our Father in heaven allows us the freedom to make our own choices in order that we may learn, grow, and develop faith and strength of character in our own time frame and in our own unique way, than we as earthly parents must strive to do the same. Faith is made stronger when it’s allowed the freedom to grow and develop rather than being forced or controlled.

As individuals and parents, we can do something. We can follow this good advice and bring them back to the faith one by one. But is it enough? Do we need to approach this situation from a broader scope?

In facilitating programs for parishioners who are interested in helping their child or loved one return to faith, it is apparent the most important part of the program is the last piece where participants engage in discussions with fellow parishioners centered on “why the person they love has left the faith.” It is notable that following the closing and prayer, no one leaves quickly when the program ends. People stay and talk with one another, empathize and sympathize; provide one another support and it is in these moments of gathering where through God’s love and mercy, sometimes new answers are found for those searching for new ways to connect their loved one with faith.

Being a part of this experience has provided insight into the need for a broader approach to the issue within our parish communities. When I go into a parish community and ask how many know a loved one who is away from the faith, 75-80% of hands are raised. The time is now to do something together. My proposal therefore involves a multi-level approach to the issue. First, by using the person to person approach which is very effective integrated with a process where everyone in the parish community gets involved.

We need to change the mindset of the “people in the pew” and create a new missionary mindset for all. I’ve heard people say, “Our young people are the church of the future”. Let’s change that to the church of now! I’ve heard people say, “We’ve always done it that way”. Let’s try something new. I’ve heard people say, “They’ll come back when they get married or have a baby”. Let’s do all we can to connect them now!

Some young adults have been hurt. Let’s heal them and reconcile. Young people feel the church lacks good examples of authentic faith filled people. Let’s invite them in to talk. Young adults feel the church is religious, not spiritual. Let us see and share in their spirituality. Young adults know much more than older adults thanks to the revised Catechism and systematic theological methods of the 1990’s and 2000’s. Let’s allow young adults to come and teach us what they know. Let’s come to learn, experience, and grow in faith together.

The recent V *Encuentro* gave us an insight into a process for fruitful discussions; learning and sharing together, imagining new and effective ways of being church. The new methodology in *Living as Missionary Disciples* offers a process for creating missionary disciples in evangelizing churches. The *Joy of the Gospel* and the 2017 USCCB *Joy of the Gospel Convocation* show us that unity in diversity is possible, how to recognize the landscape and discover possibilities for renewal, that our faith is about work and witness, and through it all it requires a missionary mindset.

What follows is a format to help make this happen in a parish community, cluster of parishes or even in an entire diocese. This is a possibility of how conversations can begin in parish communities and over a period of time bring the issues at hand to light so we might all work together as a unified community. Scripturally based using the journey of the faith story of the woman at the well for reflection, church documents for formation, experiential activities and finally integrative parish conversations and summations, a four session process might look something like this:

Session 1:

- Scripture: Woman at the Well: John 4:1-10
- Living as Missionary Disciples: Element 1 – Encounter, pgs. 9 - 14
- Joy of the Gospel, Encounter – a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (EG 3) and a church which goes forth as missionary disciples (EG 24)
- Discussion: Share a basic chart describing present generations of people. Ask people to self-identify and group themselves in the room with others of the same generation. Ask them to affirm or add comments to the basics provided about this generation. Ask a spokesperson from the group to share the conversations.
- Large Group Summary: Ask the groups to discuss how the beauty of this diversity can actually be unifying. Use the analogy of how an arrangement of many different seasonal flowers can be extremely beautiful. (USCCB Joy of the Gospel Convocation)
- Experience: “Go Forth”: Purposefully go to a place where there are people from a different culture, socioeconomic status or generation that is different from one’s own. Try to encounter one person in conversation. Ask each participant to create a journal entry describing the experience and to share it with another church member before Session 2.

Session 2:

- Scripture: Woman at the Well: John 4:11-26
- Living as Missionary Disciples: Element 2 – Accompany, pgs. 14-15
- Joy of the Gospel, Spiritual Accompaniment (EG 169-173)
- Discussion: Share the 2 definitions of the word periphery: (1) the outer limits or edge of an area or object and (2) a marginal or secondary position in, or part or aspect of, a group, subject, or sphere of activity. Using both of these definitions work together in multigenerational groups to identify who they see as being on the periphery of the parish community. (USCCB Joy of the Gospel Convocation)

- Large Group Summary: Ask the groups to take turns sharing table by table the peripheries they had identified. Agree that there are many people who feel they are on the peripheries. Together pray for a church which is willing to take one step in accompanying someone on one of the peripheries.
- Experience: “Go Forth”: Purposefully go and meet with someone on the periphery. Have two accompaniment conversations with this person. The first conversation is to listen. The second conversation will be to respond. Create a journal entry about this experience and share it with one other church member before Session 3.

Session 3:

- Scripture: Woman at the Well: John 4:27 - 40
- Living as Missionary Disciples: Element 3 - Community
- Joy of the Gospel (EG 287) Mary Star of the New Evangelization
- Discussion 1: Read two definitions of the word ritual: (1) a series of actions or type of behavior regularly and invariably followed by someone and (2) the prescribed order of performing a ceremony, especially one characteristic of a particular religion or church. Preparation for evangelizing is a necessity. Ask each member of the group, in one minute or less using either definition 1 or 2 and share one ritual that helps them go into the world ready to share the faith of Jesus Christ.
- Discussion 2: Read two definitions of the word tradition: (1) a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on in a certain way – example: Easter, Christmas, Sacraments and Mealtime prayers and (2) the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way – example: a saying you hold true such as “Jesus is with you always”, “The love of God is in your heart”, and “The presence of the Holy Spirit connects us”. Ask each member to write down their tradition and pass the piece of paper to the right of them and have the person receiving the paper share what is written.
- Large group summary: It is in preparing, sharing our traditions, prayer and pondering as Mary did, that we can all participate in sharing faith within our communities and to those on the peripheries of our community. We all have a ritual or tradition to share. We all have something to witness to our faith in Jesus Christ.
- Experience: “Go Forth” and have a conversation with someone you are acquainted with, who is away from the faith (a young adult if possible) about one of your spiritually meaningful rituals or traditions and how this tradition is an important part of your faith. Ask them if they have a spiritually meaningful ritual or tradition to share. If you feel comfortable, invite them to or into an upcoming community event, ritual or tradition.

Session 4:

- Scripture: Woman at the Well: John 4:39-42
- Living as Missionary Disciples: Element 4: Send
- Joy of the Gospel (EG 20-23) Missionary Joy
- Discussion: Ask participants, based on this process, “How do they feel they are being sent?” Ask each person to write one sentence to answer this question.
- Allow quiet time for individual reflection. Ask each person to identify three different points in their life where they felt God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit most present and create a journal entry.
- Experience: “Go Forth” to write a personal witness statement using the three points written during this session. To go and discover more people who are on the peripheries, particularly young adults and have a peaceful, faith filled conversation. To explore the depths of one’s own faith through participation in the Sacraments, personal prayer, bible study, catechesis, community service and justice activities, and to use the grace and strength derived from these activities to share the Gospel message with all those you meet.

Now is the time to be an evangelizing church of missionary disciples. Let’s be both religious and spiritual; practicing our faith in multiple ways. Let’s talk about the hard questions of faith. Let’s be an evangelizing community, sharing our rituals and traditions. Let’s learn together because everyone knows something and no one knows everything. Let’s share our faith freely and without judgment; be a church of God’s love and mercy; a church of compassion, healing and reconciliation. Let’s be a church that goes forth joyfully, without polarization, loving, knowing and serving God together; remembering there is plenty of room for everyone! With a new missionary mindset, we can become the evangelizing church of now!

Respectfully submitted by Terrie Baldwin, Diocese of Cleveland

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