

# A Five-step Process for Evangelizing Parents

04/06/2016 by Jared Dees

If I had to pick one issue that gets the most passionate response in workshops and keynotes I have given in recent years, it would be unengaged parents. It is also one of the top five things I hear from religious educators who reach out to me for help via email.

I understand the frustration. We pour out our time and energy into teaching these kids, but some of the parents aren't even coming to Mass on Sunday. It is frustrating, I know.

We can complain all we want, but the only way to change that behavior is to **evangelize**.

We must take on a new approach to reaching the parents of the students we teach. If you think about it, you and I may be the only point of contact between them and the Church. It is our **duty** to be an evangelizing presence in the lives of the entire family and not just that students we see in the classroom. So, what does that really mean? How can we evangelize the parents and not just the kids?

First, consider this:

## What Evangelization Really Is

What you will find in this article and in my book, *To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach*, may not seem like evangelization at all.

- Evangelization is not catechesis alone. It is not teaching.
- Evangelization is not just "sharing your faith" as people commonly describe it.
- Evangelization is first and foremost a process by which we build relationships. We build relationships of trust and mercy with others. Then, we invite them into a relationship of trust with Christ himself.
- The way Jesus evangelized is this: he healed those who felt left out and wounded by sin and separation, he proclaimed a message of good news to people who were not his disciples yet, and, finally, he taught his disciples to continually grow in their relationship commitment to following him.

This is a process we can (and must!) imitate as we evangelize the parents in our religious education programs and Catholic schools.

## Envisioning Something Different

Before we look at some of the ways to evangelize, let's get clear about what an ideal parent would be like.

Let's get clear on what we are working with God to create.

Imagine this:

*Parents drop off their kids at their parish religious education program excited for them to learn about the Catholic faith. When they pick them up, they ask their kids lots of questions about what they learned. The kids have smiles on their faces and a lot to talk about. This, in turn, gets the parents excited too. They are inspired to learn more themselves. Armed with the resources provided by and suggested by their kid's teaching and the parish leaders, they go to explore and learn more. This sets the parents on a path towards deepening their faith. At the same time, they start to get more involved in the parish as volunteers. Working with other volunteers they hear about other opportunities to go deeper in their faith. They get invited by multiple people to go on a weekend retreat at the parish or the local diocesan men's and women's conferences. These experiences leave a lasting impact on their lives. They are on fire for their faith and their kids begin to witness that passion coming from their parents. The kids, then, become passionate about their faith too and grow up to be amazing Catholic parents too.*

Sounds great doesn't it? It may be idealistic, but this is the reality for many parents and many parishes. The challenge before us is cultivating this journey with more and more of the parents we serve. Your first reaction might be: OK, great, but what does that have to do with me and my situation? My parish doesn't sound like that.

Maybe not, but the change can start with you. Don't wait for someone else to take the lead. Stand up, make some changes and start with the kids and parents that you serve right now.

I wrote *To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach* as a resource that I think will transform the perspectives of individuals like you and then spread to an entire team or community. It has to start somewhere. You don't have to wait for new programs to start healing, proclaim, and teaching.

So, let's get started. How can we evangelize parents? Or, more directly:

- How can we heal parents who are wounded by sin?
- How can we proclaim good news to Catholic families?
- How can we teach and guide them to be dedicated disciples?

## **Five Steps to Evangelizing Religious Education Parents**

### **1. Forgive them.**

As I've spoken with catechetical leaders, catechists, and teachers on the road at conferences or via emails, I am sometimes taken aback by the sense of anger and resentment many people have towards unengaged parents.

I can certainly understand where they are coming from and I don't mind being a sounding board. Their frustrations have been bottled up for so long, that they often need to vent. It is heartbreaking to work so hard but not see the kids at Mass on Sunday.

So, that leads us to step one in evangelizing parents.

We have to forgive them.

Look, I am a parent. Many of you are parents. Parenting is not easy. Children do not come with an instruction manual. It just might be that the parents you serve are doing the best they can with the situations they are in.

They need help. That's why they are bringing their children to you.

Read that again:

They need your help. . . so help them!

Forgive them for not being there and not doing the things you wish they did at home. Think of it as a temporary stop along a path towards that vision of parent involvement you read a moment ago. They will soon be one of the parents you see volunteering at everything and giving back to others.

To get there, though, we have to forgive them in our hearts.

And the best way to do that is to . . .

## **2. Get to know them.**

Try this: Get out your attendance list or seating chart for your class. Now, next to each student's name, write down the names of at least one of their parents. (I'm talking first name basis here.)

How well did you do?

If you don't know the parents this way yet, then that should be your first goal in your newfound approach to evangelization. Just get to know their names.

Next, get to know them. Connect with them on a human level. Ask questions before or after class. Email them to check in or to ask for personal prayer intentions that you can offer on their behalf (see step 3).

The more you communicate, the more you will build up a level of trust through which you can help them continue on that path towards an ever-deeper relationship with Christ.

**Action Step:**

Pull out your list of parents and email addresses. (Don't have one? Ask the office for one right away.) Pick a parent and send a brief email telling them about how their child has done in class and asking them how things are going.

**3. Pray for them and follow up.**

So, you've developed a real, personal relationship with the parents. You might not be best friends, but you certainly know a little about them and their personal lives.

Next, pray for them.

I don't mean in a general way like, "Please God watch over so-and-so." I mean pray about a specific intention that they desperately need in their lives. If you don't know what to pray for, that's good. This gives you an opportunity to ask if there is anything you can offer up in prayer for them.

Then maybe a week or two later or the next time you see them before or after class or at the parish, check up on them. See how things are going. See how that prayer is impacting their lives.

I guarantee you that this small effort to personally pray for some of these parents is going to go a very long way. Their hearts will be touched. I know it because it is the one thing I can say I did best as a way of evangelizing parents. I may not have convinced them to do anything or take any extra step along their faith journeys. But, that one act of mercy—praying for someone—is touching. It shows what this community we call Church is all about.

**4. Send them inspirational and informational resources.**

A few quick questions for you:

- How are you personally growing in your faith right now?
- What are you reading or listening to or watching?
- How are you praying?
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Your students' parents know you. They trust you. They know you are living your faith to the best of your ability. They won't mind if you share a little bit of what is inspiring you lately.

So, send them stuff.

If you are loving the Rosary, send them links to them about how to pray it.

If you are a big fan of the Bishop Barron videos or the Matthew Kelly Lenten series, invite you parents to watch it too.

Maybe they will, maybe they won't. What matters is the invitation. If you didn't invite them in, they would never open the door.

Which leads me to:

## **5. Invite them.**

### **5a: Invite them to Help.**

Many of you are reading this because someone someday invited you to help. They asked you to be a catechist or to consider becoming a teacher. Thankfully, you said yes and here you are.

You could always use an extra hand in class, right?

Invite parents into your class to help out. If you teach with centers (and I think you should), then assign a center to one of the parents. They will get some hands on interaction with all of their kids and especially their own sons or daughters.

Have them come in to read at the beginning of class. If you are focusing on a Scripture passage, for example, have the parent come in as the reader. Or, if there is a certain section of the textbook that you want to cover, have a parent come in and read it.

What will this do?

- Parents will feel welcome in your class (and, therefore, the church!)
- Parents will be encouraged increase their confidence in their own faith.
- Parents will want to prepare and learn more about what you are teaching.
- Most of all, the children will see their parents living their faith as witnesses. What a powerful gift to give to those kids!!

### **5b: Inviteable Events**

Probably one of the biggest realizations I made in researching *To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach* is that the most successful parishes and ministries always have something to invite people to. They have what I call inviteable events.

These events can be retreats or small faith-sharing groups. They can be adult faith formation sessions.

They can be liturgical experiences like Stations of the Cross or Eucharistic Adoration.

All of these experiences can shock people out of their ordinary lives. They can introduce participants into a new way of thinking and living.

Most importantly, the people present welcome newcomers. That sense of welcoming shows that the parish is a community of mercy and support—a welcoming community.

The only way these inviteable events grow, however, is through personal invitations.

That may seem redundant, but this is really important. Inevitable events grow because individual people extend personal invitations to others to join them.

Bulletin announcements, Facebook invites, and flyers in the back of the church are not enough. The experience has to be so great that people want to talk about it and invite their friends through personal, face-to-face conversations, text messages, Facebook messages, emails, etc.

Whether someone accepts the invitation or not isn't the point. The point is the invitation itself.

Why? Because . . .

### **We are Cultivating Good Soil**

With that invitation extended, a seed is ready for planting. You and your relationship has cultivated some good soil. These parents are ready to receive the grace of God. They are ready for the Sower to sow the seeds of faith so that their lives may be transformed and then, in turn, their families may be transformed. Thank you for dedicating your time and heart to service of your students and their parents.

May God continue to push us to grow as his disciples. May he light a fire within us that will spread and be shared with the parents who entrust their children to us.