

# The Benedictine Promise

A chapter in -

## Fill All Things:

*The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*

The Core Frameworks of Parish Life

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# III. THE BENEDICTINE PROMISE

## The Benedictine Promise: An Exercise

1. Thinks of an event or experience in the parish that seems significant to you. It may have been something that produced a lot of anxiety or emotional energy among people. What happen and who was involved?

2. **Stability** – In what ways did you want to flee from the experience? What did you do? What was in the experience that was graceful? How was God’s presence seen and acknowledged in the relationships or circumstances?

3. **Obedience** -- What listening took place? What was it that that you didn’t want to hear? What was your response? How did you experience God’s presence in the listening and responding?

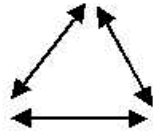
4. **Conversion of Life** – What was in the experience that was a call to a new way? How did you experience God’s presence in that new possibility?

5. Other thoughts? For example -- Is there a way in which a rub in one of the elements was compensated for by the others? Was there some dynamic or interaction among the elements?

## The Benedictine Promise: A Diagram Overview

The three elements of the Benedictine Promise, and the whole of Benedictine spirituality, can help us see some of the hidden dynamics of parish life.

**CONVERSION OF LIFE** As a parish we find God on our journey together and in the new places we will go as a parish; in losing life to find life; in our openness to transformation.



**STABILITY** As a parish we find God here and now in the relationships and pattern of our life together.

**OBEDIENCE** As a parish we find God as we listen deeply to the world; to Scriptures; to the church, now and through the ages; to each other; to the creation; and to the deepest longings and prayer of our heart.

Benedictine spirituality is part of our Anglican DNA. It's the way of the Prayer Book and is embedded in much of the way we function as parish communities. We can make use of it in the work of congregational development: 1) as a way to see and enter into the depth of our own culture as Episcopalians and 2) because it is the spirituality of particular communities that have developed a capacity, over time, to maintain their integrity while renewing themselves in adaptation to the environment.

### Looking at the dynamics of parish life

You might think in terms of the whole parish or of a specific event or experience.

What is the predisposition you see in the parish's behavior toward stability, change, or listening processes? Which direction do we generally tilt towards? Which is our anxiety often focused upon?

In the parish's expression of stability, conversion of life, and obedience what seems healthy to you, what unhealthy? Is the stability simply being static? Is the conversion simply being driven by an impulse to change? Is the obedience endless listening and process, too little listening, or a facade of listening?

### Developing a parish culture that is marked by:

**Stability** – Especially seen in Liturgy, prayer and relationships.

**Obedience** – Seen in our openness to listen, and respond to, one another, our bishop and the larger church.

**Conversion of Life** – Out of our life of stability or obedience we see and act on new challenges and opportunities for mission and building up the Body of Christ.

## The Benedictine Promise: An Exploration

*A life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humor, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking brings us close to the actual existing world and its wholeness.* Gary Snyder

The Benedictine tradition includes a promise of stability, obedience, and conversion of life. That "promise" is not only a commitment made in community, it is a lens into the inner life and dynamics of a community. We have seen the health of a parish that is grounded in a rich and complex prayer life; in which there is deep listening, both interpersonal and in communal discernment; and where there is an openness of minds and hearts to the future that God offers. We have also seen parishes that seem to express a shadow side - where stability is turned to frozenness and obsession with parish traditions; where obedience has either become legalism or has no hold at all; where conversion of life is the cover for self-absorption in which change is driven by sentimentality or political ideology. We know of the parishes where there is an obsession with change or and others with maintaining traditions. There are an endless variety of possibilities.

Members of an Episcopal Christian community, the Order of the Ascension, take a three-year promise "to seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things and circumstances of my life through stability, obedience and conversion of life." This is one group's way of making the traditional Benedictine promise, which establishes an orientation toward their own spirituality and in their leadership of creating a healthy parish culture. The Benedictine tradition joins these three aspects of spirituality into one promise and a mystery. The promise is a way to assess the congregation's dynamics and structures. It is also a guide in shaping the culture and climate of the congregation.

### ***Parish Culture***

The work that's been done on organizational culture can be a very useful tool in relation to Benedictine spirituality. In looking at this I'm relying on the work of Edgar Schein and other theorists and practitioners in the field. Organizational culture is a web of shared ways of being and working, stated values and deep underlying assumptions about the nature of things. Within the organization this defines "reality" for people. And as part of that reality, culture offers a sense of identity and meaning; and the ground upon which the organization can have some sense of integration among its various elements. Benedict's *Rule* and the tradition of Benedictine communities provide all essential aspects of an organizational culture.

In what follows I'll offer a variety of specific ideas about how to shape a parish culture grounded in Benedictine spirituality. Let me begin with the broad strokes. What shapes the organizational culture of a parish church? There are the more obvious things—the liturgical space, its beauty and functionality; the way the liturgy is done and the degree and form of congregational participation; the feel of and what is available in the rest of the parish property; how meeting rooms are arranged and what resources they provide; the stories that get told and retold; formal statements of belief and values; and the way the decision-making is structured. The greatest impact on shaping the parish's culture is in what leaders do. How they deal with crisis and other critical situations, how they stack the resources of the parish in one direction or another; and what they pay attention to, measure and reward. The leader's efforts at training, education and coaching are also central parts of forming the parish culture.

In the church we seem to over-rely on the more obvious things hoping that ritual and stories will have more impact than they can. When relying on these things we avoid the harder leadership work that's needed. The week-by-week process of making decisions, influencing people, and

maintaining direction and norms is difficult and demanding. The priest and lay leaders can simply get weary and wary.

From time to time we hear voices in the church suggesting that either the Episcopal Church will make radical changes in its culture or it will die. Overblown rhetoric rarely produces much lasting change and in this case it's based on a limited grasp of what it takes to change organizational culture.

Organizational culture can begin to undergo significant change when the system experiences a major crisis. That crisis needs to be experienced within the parish in a way that brings the crisis home, which is real and compelling in the experience of parish leaders. That's part of why there is little local response to all the statistics and negative forecasting by some national and diocesan leaders about the need to dramatically change our culture in order to address the membership decline. There are three primary reasons for this. 1) It doesn't feel real. Even if there is a decline in parish membership it's often gradual. 2) Changes in culture mean changes in identity, organizational integrity and integration. It's a sign of health for people to be cautious about such change. Most Episcopalians seem to value the existing culture. 3) Members don't have the competencies needed to function in the culture being proposed. They don't know how to live in that place and aren't sure they want to.

To use Edgar Schein's categories, in all organizations including the church, the learning anxiety is usually higher than the survival anxiety. Schein looks at the two anxieties this way. "... there's an inherent paradox surrounding learning: Anxiety inhibits learning, but anxiety is also necessary if learning is going to happen at all. ...There are two kinds of anxiety associated with learning: "learning anxiety" and "survival anxiety." Learning anxiety comes from being afraid to try something new for fear that it will be too difficult, that we will look stupid in the attempt, or that we will have to part from old habits that have worked for us in the past. Learning something new can cast us as the deviant in the groups we belong to. It can threaten our self-esteem and, in extreme cases, even our identity.

You can't talk people out of their learning anxieties; they're the basis for resistance to change. And given the intensity of those fears, none of us would ever try something new unless we experienced the second form of anxiety, survival anxiety—the horrible realization that in order to make it, you're going to have to change." Schein goes on using a rather dramatic image to show just how hard this is for people, "Like prisoners of war, potential learners experience so much hopelessness through survival anxiety that eventually they become open to the possibility of learning. But even this dejection is not necessarily enough. Individuals can remain in a state of despair permanently."

Having an impact on parish culture is usually a slow process requiring:

- Persistence, patience, and courage
- Dealing with the learning anxiety especially related to competencies and social connections (and avoiding trying to increase survival anxiety by scaring people).
- Rooting the changes in 1) the best of the parish's ways and vales and 2) the best of the Episcopal Church's ethos and traditions of liturgy, spirituality, and community.

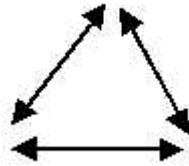
If we are interested in creating healthier congregations with an increased ability to effectively form people in Christ and to attract new people to that life then we might look to Benedictine spirituality as a resource in that work.

## The Benedictine Promise and the Dynamics of the Spiritual Life

I want to begin with looking at the elements of the Promise and the dynamics among those elements in a living community of people.

**STABILITY** To find God in the current relationships and circumstance of our life

**CONVERSION OF LIFE** To find God in a new life; in the changing relationships and circumstances



**OBEDIENCE** To find God in contemplative listening to others, self, creation, and God; to hear and respond

Each element of the Promise is rooted in recollection and has certain internal dynamics. In stability, obedience and conversion of life there comes an awareness of God's presence. Speaking of it in general usage rather than in relationship to the spiritual life Edna O'Brien, an Irish writer, said "Recollection ... is not something that I can summon up, it simply comes and I am the servant of it." It is the Spirit praying within us.

The Promise draws us into recollection of aspects of God's presence. Each also carries within it dynamics that can draw us into maturity in Christ.

	<b>Recollection</b>	<b>Inner Dynamics</b>
<b>Stability</b>	God in this community, these people, this situation	Entering into a deeper acceptance of self and others; turning away from illusions drawing us into boredom, resentment, a desire to escape. Learning about the grumbling of our hearts, about how and why we flee self, others and God.
<b>Obedience</b>	God in this "word" to me	Living in the reality of death and resurrection, of losing life to find life. Learning to live in relationship, to listen deeply, to respond.
<b>Conversion of Life</b>	God in the new community, in the new life	Being on the journey that calls us into continuous change, a life-long process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. Learning to find joy in the new life instead of weeping for the life that has passed or never was.

In the parish's life as a community these elements of the Promise will touch and press upon one another. The static parish might find a new stability out of having listened and responded to its own fears and longings; that is to say out of being obedient and open to a new life. The excessively anxious-to-please parish might experience a conversion of life if leaders establish the stability of the Prayer Book Pattern (Eucharist, Office, Personal Devotions). Living for a time in the Rule may allow the space for the Spirit to move and be noticed.

Parish development leadership involves seeing the dynamics as they exist in the parish and acting to shape parish life so the needed balance exists in its structures and processes.

### ***Benedictine Spirituality and Parish Development***

There are at least three reasons for congregational development practitioners in the Episcopal Church to gain some understanding of Benedictine Spirituality.

1. It is a significant part of our Anglican root system. It's part of our organizational DNA. If we increase our understanding of Benedictine Spirituality it may help us increase our understanding of Anglican liturgy, prayer, and the nature of community life. We may come to better understand and appreciate ourselves as Episcopalians and as parishes in that tradition.
2. It is the spirituality of particular communities that have developed a capacity, over time, to maintain their integrity while renewing themselves in adaptation to the environment. Maintaining organizational integrity and being a self-renewing organization is a central concern in organization development.
3. Benedictine communities have a defined, integrated organizational culture. We need images of such communities.

We want to develop congregations that are effective communities of Christian formation. In terms of the Benedictine Promise, the task is to shape the structures, process and climate of the parish so there is an active dynamic of stability, conversion and obedience.



## Hints for Parish Development

The way into this web of Christian stability, obedience and conversion is not through our feelings or our thinking, though they will play their part. A comment attributed to Jesse Jackson goes, "It is easier to walk your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of walking." So, let's look at how we might walk our way into real life as a parish.

### *Stability*

*Well, I don't believe we go to heaven, I believe we become heaven.* Martin Sheen, when interviewed on The Actor's Studio

Create structures and processes that encourage mutual responsibility for common life by being more inclusive and participatory. A lot of what gets focused on in the incorporation of new members into a parish are the incorporation phases of inviting, greeting, orienting and incorporating. Part of creating a healthy stability in parish life involves enabling a stability of relationships. That includes facilitating the speedy incorporation of new people, having ways that allow people to develop relationships, and establishing expectations and competency for maintaining and quickly restoring relationships. There's a useful synergy between the phases of incorporation and giving special attention to nurturing stability in relationships in the parish. We usually see all this as something the parish does. There is however a third element -- the attitude and behavior of the person coming into the parish.

The person who wants to become part of the parish can take initiative in that process by joining in a stance and behaviors needed by all members. Invite everyone in the parish, clergy and lay, new and long term members, to:

- Accept this particular community, this parish; seek out and appreciate the best of it. Give yourself to it. Your alternatives are to either enter into parish life as it is or to engage in the illusion that you will make it become what you want or living a half presence in which you feed your resentment.
- Ground yourself—take responsibility for making yourself "at home" with this parish community. Deal with the paradox that this calls on you to find that rhythm of solitude and intimacy, apartness and togetherness; for stillness and centering along with engagement and action.
- Persevere—stay with it. Pray for patience and courage in the task of making this a home by negotiating your participation in it.
- Build a parish culture that is "centered" and has a pattern of prayer, especially work with those ready to go deeper in faith and practice. For people to move into a deeper spiritual life there needs to be a basic stability in worship. The community needs to trust that stability. The stability allows the mind and heart the freedom to go deeper, to not be caught up following the details of the Liturgy.
- The priest's own spirituality and leadership have an impact on all this -- personal stability, a capacity to be centered and present; acting like you are here and with the parish, as though it is for the long-term, not always seeking new and "better" calls.
- Invite a norm—"We will live in the ways of the wider church." When the church changes, we will change. When there is a new prayer book we just send in the order form. It's a decision to do things as the Episcopal Church does them, at its best, in this time. This will also mean helping people see the difference between the essential and the non-essential. This norm is also related to the other two elements of the Promise.

## **Obedience**

*Listening creates relationship ... Listening moves us closer, it helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy. Not listening creates fragmentation, and fragmentation is the root of all suffering. I love the biblical passage: "Whenever two or more are gathered, I am there." It describes for me the holiness of moments of real listening. The health, wholeness, holiness of a new relationship forming. I have a T-shirt from one conference that reads: "You can't hate someone whose story you know." You don't have to like the story, or even the person telling you their story. But listening creates a relationship. We move closer to one another. Margaret J. Wheatley*

- Become a listening parish. Teach skills for contemplation, communal discernment and interpersonal listening. Establish a pattern of opportunities to listen deeply to God, creation, others and self. Learn methods and tools that facilitate collective listening.
- Coach people in how to be open to influence in their spiritual life while also accepting responsibility for their spiritual life in a manner that fits their situation and life commitments.
- Provide opportunities in which people can reflect on and shape their spiritual discipline.
- Listening to God and each other opens onto the other elements. It is in listening that a parish can move beyond the distortion of the Promise as a struggle between change and stability.
- The Gospel mystery in which we lose life to find life is activated in the process of listening.

## **Conversion of Life**

*Nothing is more surprising than the rise of the new within ourselves. We do not foresee or observe its growth. We do not try to produce it by the strength of our will, by the power of our emotion, or by the clarity of our intellect. On the contrary, we feel that by trying to produce it we prevent its coming. By trying, we would produce the old in the power of the old, but not the new in the power of the new. The new being is born in us, just when we least believe in it. It appears in remote corners of our souls which we have neglected for a long time. It opens up deep levels of our personality which had been shut out by old decisions and old exclusions. It shows a way where there was no way before. ...Suddenly we notice it within us! The new which we sought and longed for comes to us in the moment in which we lose hope of ever finding it. That is the first thing we must say about the new: it appears when and where it chooses. We cannot force it, and we cannot calculate it. Paul Tillich, *Shaking of the Foundations**

Our life of stability and obedience will bring forth new challenges and opportunities related to the church's fully living its nature and mission and the baptized person's living his or her identity and purpose. It can happen in the normal exchanges of parish social life. People arrive at stability in their relationship with the parish as they develop friendships, establish a sound spiritual discipline, and begin to see themselves as part of the community's history. At some point we come up against ourselves. Our way of looking at or doing things is challenged or the parish has a crisis or makes what appear to be radical changes. For a time we can be in a kind of emotional and mental gridlock. Nothing is moving. We seem unable to make decisions. We may feel numb. These are moments of hard grace; invitations into new life. We may avoid the invitation by abruptly leaving the parish, by withdrawing into ourselves and limiting our involvement, or by entering into fantasies about the way things should be or use to be. We might also face into the invitation and find new life. That new life may be a renewed life within the parish or it may be one that we will need to find in another parish or tradition.

- Establish processes that develop a sense of vision and direction. This is openness to our future. We can share with Sara and Abraham the trust and surprise that God is also over the next hill, that God is in the new place. Or as Ann Richards, the late governor of Texas, put it, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got,"
- Enable practical action. The norm is to respond to God now, do mercy now, forgive now, show compassion and justice now. It is openness to God in the present, in the here and now. This is I think related to Benedict's understanding about meditating on death. In the late fall of 1961 Susan Sontag made a journal entry that read, "The fear of becoming old is born of the recognition that one is not living now the life that one wishes. It is equivalent to a sense of abusing the present."
- Build up those of apostolic faith to accept responsibility for their life and journey; to make a commitment to their own maturity in faith and practice, in emotional life, and in the competence to perform the "work we have been given to do."
- Develop the parish's own uniqueness, its own wonderful oddness. Flannery O'Conner wrote "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."
- Help the parish tell its story as one of change. John Henry Newman said, "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." We can intentionally begin to speak and write parish histories as accounts of how well the parish as adapted to changes within and around it; stories of courage, vision and persistence.

## Shaping Parish Culture in Benedictine Spirituality

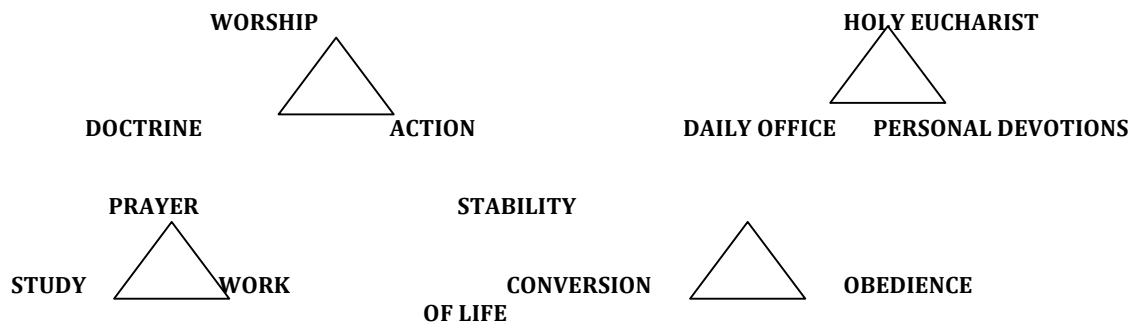
Shaping a congregational culture is done by: 1) leaders teaching, training and coaching members in competencies and practices that express and undergird the culture, 2) creating structures, processes and a climate, that incarnate the values and assumptions of the culture you are seeking, and 3) where leaders, especially the rector, focus their attention.

Creating a culture that lives in the Episcopal Church's Benedictine roots is helped by teaching ways of thinking about parish life and dynamics grounded in that spirituality. I'm going to focus on three things:

1. Teach several models with Benedictine roots
2. Leadership attention
3. Define and shape a parish culture with Benedictine characteristics (including listening, grumbling, deciding to be in community, and healthy stability)

### ***Teach Several Models with Benedictine Roots***

Train and coach people in how to use the models to see and nurture the dynamics of their corporate and individual spiritual life.



The models will be used by people in their corporate and individual spiritual life in two primary ways.

The first may be as an “overlay” used to assess and make decisions about what to nurture in their spiritual life. An individual might conclude, “I want to give more attention, at this stage in my life, to learning and experimenting with forms of personal devotions. It’s something I’ve avoided or neglected.” A vestry and rector reflecting on the parish’s corporate spirituality might decide that “We have focused most of our worship life around Sundays and the Eucharist. We need to train people for personal devotions, provide settings for the exploring spiritual discipline and developing a rule of life, and provide instruction in the use of the Daily Office that allows people to see how to adapt it to their personal style and schedule.

The second is by seeing the models in a more holistic and relational fashion. So in looking at *worship-doctrine-action*, note the dynamic that Martin Thornton suggests “Moral action only flows from doctrinal truth by grace and faith, that is through prayer.” Or we might explore it in terms of our tendency to think that if we just get our thinking correct, moral action will result. Yet our experience suggests a more complex dynamic in which what we may understand as true life, as ultimate reality, is not automatically transformed into authentic living and acting; as though we merely had to “get our head straight” to live a whole life. The connection between our thinking and

acting seems to be facilitated by our life with others in the Trinity. The community of prayer, compassion and justice is a source of integration and authenticity for doctrine and action.

Regarding *obedience-stability-conversion of life*, Esther de Waal writes about the paradox of Christian life as including our living in the tension between stability and change, action and contemplation. She also proposes that it is in the context of stability and obedience that forces arise in the common and personal life that call communities and individuals to move forward in the Christian journey. Conversion springs from lives of stability and obedience. Of course, it's also true that stability and obedience will be deepened as conversion takes hold.

The relationship among *Eucharist-Daily Office-Personal Devotions* is seen in the Sunday Eucharist when a number of people have said the Office during the week, meditated on the readings, or at the Offertory are pouring into the cup a life that has been reflected upon that week. In that parish community the daily offering of prayer and thoughtfulness are focused and completed in the Eucharist.

### ***Leadership Attention***

An essential component of the work is for the rector and other key leaders to learn how to be in-role. Leaders, especially all parish priests and deacons, and wardens and the treasurer, need to accept that the position they hold isn't about their personal preferences but about service. So effective parish leaders give themselves to the patterns of prayer, listening, and not colluding with grumbling. They do that not because it is always comfortable or because it always fits their own views, but because it helps the parish community live a better and more Christ centered life.

I want to revisit Edgar Schein's research about organizational culture. He suggests that while many things contribute to shaping a culture some are more important. For example, the focus of leadership attention is more important in shaping culture than the parish's stories and rituals. People notice what the rector acknowledges and affirms. Here's what Schein's work suggests about the elements that have the most significant impact on shaping organizational culture – what leaders pay attention to, measure and work to influence regularly; the observed criteria by which leaders allocate rewards, recruit others into positions, and allocate scarce resources; and how the leaders react to critical incidents and crisis.

Here are some of the other activities that help to shape culture—rites and rituals, stories and myths, the physical space, statements of belief and values. All these things need attention. A problem we have in many parishes is that leaders operate as though just doing these secondary things will be enough. But people notice what leaders affirm and reward. If there is a positive relationship between leaders and a critical mass of the congregation this process of attention, rewarding and allocating resources will shape the culture.

Pressures on a priest to affirm everyone and everything are often designed to weaken the culture of a parish. Leaders who fall into this trap may become overwhelmed and end up resentful. Leaders need clarity about what will have an effect and adequate boundaries to avoid being consumed by the neediest or most insistent members.

A key to shaping the culture is for leaders to work at training and coaching people in how to competently accomplish what a healthy parish culture requires. Resistance to change can have many causes but one of the most significant is that people are afraid they will look and feel foolish, that they will not know how to effectively function in the new way of doing things.

We can see the process when clergy introduce silence and stillness in liturgy. Some people are uncomfortable with silence and not use to being still. It feels unfamiliar and they are uncertain of what to do. They need instruction not only on why silence and stillness (physical silence) is part of our spiritual life but also in behaviors to do and avoid.

- Do be physically at rest.
- Do decide for yourself on an approach of either using silence as “resting in God” or as a time of reflection (on a reading or an action in the liturgy).
- Do see silence and stillness as behaviors as active as noise and restlessness.
  
- Avoid rustling paper and looking up pages in the Hymnal.
- Avoid looking at others.

Getting accustomed to a new practice takes time and encouragement. And it is the parish priest who needs to be patient and persistent, and so provide the time needed. And it is the parish priest who needs to occasionally comment on what is settling in for people and where there are still difficulties. One of the actions leaders can take is to build the critical mass needed to sustain a change in practice by offering special coaching to and explicitly asking for cooperation from sub groups in the parish like the choir, lectors, all serving at the altar, those who attend mid-week liturgies and the vestry.

### ***The Model in Action: A Case Study***

The Promise also offers leaders a way to see what they are doing in relationship to developing the spirituality of the congregation rather than as a question of whether to go along with the desires of a group within the parish. Here’s an example from an Anglo-Catholic parish that had in recent years reduced its use of incense at the Sunday Eucharist. It was now used about 2/3 of the time. There was rationale about different uses at different seasons but it was largely driven by some who didn’t like or had an allergic reaction to incense.

In an apparently unrelated process the parish profile used in the new rector search expressed division and ambivalence about the parish’s Anglo-Catholic heritage. From the perspective of organizational culture the link is obvious. You are changing the culture when you begin to alter “the ways of being and doing” that express and reinforce the culture. Reducing and being tentative about the use of incense was for this community part of weakening parish identity.

When the new rector arrived she decided to claim the progressive Anglo-Catholic legacy of the parish and proceeded to revise and restore practices that were part of that tradition, including using incense at the primary celebration every Sunday. Developing a stronger organizational culture with a clear identity and more integrated practices helped the parish in its membership growth and spiritual life; incense was just one aspect of that.

In terms of the Promise, what did the priest need to consider?

The most obvious issue was stability. Before this rector arrived the parish was static with an underlying spiritual health but an uncertain cultural identity. The uncertainty and vagueness about the Anglo-Catholic identity of the parish had left the congregation without the excitement and energy that can attract members and ground the common life. It was an excessive anxiety about the feelings of current members. It either failed to consider the impact on membership or assumed that watering down the cultural strength would be beneficial. It also didn’t understand the actual behaviors members were likely to engage in relationship to their feelings - were they really going to

leave if the Anglo Catholic heritage was affirmed? A big factor in creating the new vigor has been the claiming of the parish's identity. Making that claim real means using practices that are of that tradition, including incense every Sunday.

There has been some complaining about the incense. For some it's about a feeling that they are excluding members who have allergies. A few have even begun to complain on environmental grounds. This "building a case" is likely to continue among some people. They will find more and more reasons about why they are right. The underlying issue about this being a parish that had settled for an identity that was weak and had limited attraction may get lost in the clamor about "inclusion." Leadership is needed that stays clear about issues of culture and direction, that understands what real parish health looks like in both emotional and spiritual terms, and that can maintain a reflective and thoughtful position.

Leaders can easily lose track of the larger questions at stake when people we care about get upset. In this case it was essential that leaders hold onto having an organizational culture with power and depth that can attract people to it and transform lives; having a stability that is sustainable; and remembering the impact on the parish when that was lacking.

A somewhat hidden part of this is that the culture question isn't simply about a particular form of liturgical and spiritual expression. There is also the question of if the parish can live in a more complex and healthier process of leadership and influence.

One long term member tells a story that shows the problem. In the past there would be occasional attempts to improve how Evening Prayer was done in the parish. It was said or sung most nights at different times and in different ways depending on the officiant's preferences. When someone would suggest making it more accessible for the whole congregation they were always stopped by someone else's concern that one of the officiants would be upset. So, to have Evening Prayer at the same time every day, at a time people might be able to attend, was to take away from John's ability to "have a night" because he didn't get off work until a later time. To ask people to follow a standard format making it easier for others to grasp the flow and participate was attacked as undercutting the richness of the Office. The static stability was trumping real stability. Leaders found it difficult to set a direction that would reshape the culture around the Daily Office because they were trapped in trying to please the people present in the room more than they were motivated by the potential for more people who could become involved if the change were made.

Another dimension of the situation is in the rector's approach to obedience through listening. The priest has instituted processes and structures that help the community in its listening. There are community meetings, survey-feedback processes, and action-learning methods used. The rector makes an effort to connect with people when they are disturbed around an important issue. And around questions that are not appropriate for the larger congregation to weigh-in on, such as liturgical practice, the rector consults with a smaller group that has agreed to a disciplined method of exploring such issues.

All in all, there's more listening happening in the parish than ever and the impact has mostly been to increase acceptance of change. But under the surface there's a growing unhappiness among a few and a mild concern for a larger group. You hear the old familiar refrain, "The rector doesn't listen to us!" As leaders in any parish know, in many cases this might more properly be expressed as, "The rector isn't doing what I want her to do!" That's certainly part of what's happening.

In this particular situation it also may be driven by a personality difference between the rector and many core members. They are more introverted, the rector is more extroverted; they are caught up in their feelings about the happiness of existing members, the rector is more focused on the

decisions needed if the parish is to grow. The rector is likely exactly the person needed to bring balance to the parish's decision making but will also in that process tend to generate resistance. A successful lasting outcome may hang on the rector's ability to demonstrate empathy for others and to retain humility concerning her judgments and decisions, while also maintaining a direction that serves the parish's long-term purposes.

So, a rector may care deeply that a few people are made uncomfortable by the incense while continuing the practice because it serves important corporate purposes. For some people when they have empathy for others they automatically move to find a way to end the discomfort of the other person. In some cases what is happening is that the leader may have empathy but not be effective in expressing it to others while maintaining a direction. Or the empathy may be introverted and therefore not seen. Or the leader may be incapable of holding to a course of action while openly sharing empathetic feelings and thoughts.

Sometimes leaders can address the tension by finding creative solutions. In the case of the incense an option in some parishes is a third liturgy with music and ceremony but without incense. Such alternatives can be very useful but they also may represent ways of avoiding the work that develops a healthier culture around leadership and participation. At times leaders do need to find these third-way options allowing the parish to accomplish goals while maintaining harmony. But if a parish is to have a mature health we also need occasions when hard choices must be made, when some will be left unhappy.



## Define and Shape a Parish Culture with Benedictine Characteristics

What we are trying to do is help the community understand itself in terms of certain characteristics. So that when parish leaders say “This is how we do things at St. E’s”, what we hope to hear is a self-definition that is rooted in the characteristics of Christian community rather than the habits of a religious club.

I’m going to discuss four such characteristics: listening, not grumbling, deciding to be in community, and healthy stability.

### *Listening*

Benedict writes of listening carefully with “the ear of your heart” and wants what is received in the listening to be “put into practice” or accepted “willingly and carried out vigorously.” It is about translating what we have heard into action. This process of listening and responding is obedience.

An assumption in organization development (OD) is that information that is engaged will create pressures and expectations in systems, that information has a catalytic effect in organizational change. OD consultants have all heard the advice to “let the data speak.”

If we are to hear God, the society we live in, one another, and ourselves the parish needs structures, processes and a climate for listening. If the data is to “speak” the parish needs to be a listening community that nurtures listening people.

We need concrete ways to do that listening and responding. There are several ways parishes might “listening to the world.”

Each year use a different method to engage in a disciplined contextual analysis. One year do a broad analysis that identifies the forces and trends that impact the parish. What is happening in the wider society (global, national), in the region, in the wider church? As part of this process invite your city/town planner to come to the part of the process related to regional trends. Another year look at a way of segmenting the population by values orientation or generational groupings. How does this show itself in the congregation? What groupings will be most drawn to this particular parish?

Many parishes have study groups that explore issues present or emerging in the society or church. That’s a way to help the parish stay sensitive to trends. Or we might ask members with experience in various sectors of society to share their view of the trends. Listen to people from health care, government, education, and business. Expect them to do some research so that what they share is based in its own listening process.

Another form of study group would be to have leaders read a book that relates to some issue the parish needs to address. It might be around spiritual life, the parish as an emotional system or membership growth. The process would need to include some reflection about the parish’s related patterns and an attempt to apply the ideas in the book to the parish. As a consultant I was asked to lead such a session in two parishes using Peter Steinke’s *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*. The one parish had an acknowledged pattern of reactivity when people disagreed with a direction. The other had an unacknowledged pattern of overloading life with too many good things to do and ending up burdened and frustrated because they had a hard time saying “no.”

There are forms of prayer and worship that play a role. Train and coach the congregation to include in their prayer life the concerns of the workplace and civic life along with those of the family and

self. For example, help people learn how to imaginatively engage the offertory of the Eucharist with the whole of their life. Or, teach and have people practice a form of contemplation and intercession that attends to the broader society. Relate this to the Prayers of the People in the Eucharist. Work with the congregation on offering thanks for the signs of God's movement in society. Beware of the tendency for prayers related to the world to be focused on what people see as the "negative" part of their life.

Another way of using prayer to listen to the context is to conduct a contemplative walk around the town or neighborhoods the parish serves. Walk in silence. Invite participants to simply listen, see, and feel. Return to a meeting place to share what you have experienced, any surprises, places of pain or joy and to celebrate the Eucharist or say an Office.

There are also structures, processes and a climate involved in learning to listen to the parish community. When leaders talk about "communication issues" in the parish they usually mean - "How can we communicate from the top, or center, to the rest of the parish?" While we do want to do that well it's the wrong starting place. The first issue is how the parish community can better listen to itself. Leaders have a responsibility to help the community communicate with itself and to take what is explored into account as they make decisions in vestries and committees. The leadership will want to establish listening processes within the vestry and other groups. Not all issues belong in front of the whole parish community. Here are a few ideas.

### ***Leadership Conference or Retreat***

Each year have a leadership conference. The idea is for leaders to take the time to get their "heads above water" and to see the parish in broader and deeper ways. This can be at a retreat center or at the parish. It might just be the rector and vestry or could be open to anyone who was willing to participate and help with follow-up work in the three months after. It helps to use an external consultant at least every two or three years. I've recently been working with one diocese and several parishes to do this with three parish vestries. All three vestries attend the same weekend. Working with all three at the same time allows them to afford the services of a more experienced consultant. It's a three year contact which both allows us to build on what was done the previous year and gives me the opportunity to understand and get perspective on each. I take the vestries through an agreed process of some work together and a lot of time in for each vestry to work on its own.

A leadership conference needs to include time in prayer and activities that build connections among those present. It's a time to explore parish dynamics, strengths, and opportunities in relationship to the primary task and core processes. Use tools such as the core frameworks -- Renewal-Apostolate Cycle, Christian Life Model, Benedictine Promise, and Shape of the Parish. Consider using one or two models each year. These processes can include ways of looking at dynamics such as trust and inclusion. There can also be a long-range assessment of the parish's institutional life including finances and property. All this can be the base for identifying strategic issues and goals. My own bias is to avoid creating elaborate plans. Focus on developing a sense of direction and a deeper appreciation for the community's life.

In one parish I was the consultant for their leadership conference for fifteen years. That helped me and them gain a sense of the broad dynamics present in the parish. That parish required the vestry to attend and invited any members to participate as long as they would attend all the sessions and help with the follow up work. By being that open about participation they did three things. First, it expanded the amount of listening and response. More people contributed to and owned the direction. Second, it helped build a sense of community by creating stronger relationships among

people. Third, it allowed them to identify people with the gifts for leadership. The rector and wardens could see who had the gifts and would tap them later to be on the vestry or take on projects.

### ***Channeling Process***

Parishes require more ways to identify and focus on needed conversations and issues than just yearly leadership gatherings. Some have established a “channeling process” that allows the parish to gather people’s concerns, new ideas, and insights about emerging issues and put them in a channel, a pathway, toward decisions and action. One way of doing that is at every third vestry meeting, and at most meetings of the parish community, set aside time to have small groups record on newsprint “concerns” and “wish we would do” lists. Share the lists and have the whole group prioritize items. If the group is small and/or has good group discipline and skills, this could be done as a whole group. The process can be done about the totality of parish life or a segment. The key is for the community and its leaders to carefully listen and respond. We don’t want to miss opportunities or to allow issues to fester or become centers of anxiety.

### ***Testing Process***

Another practice that can be used regularly is a “testing process.” This is used in setting boundaries on how emerging issues will be engaged.

The process in too many parishes is one of listening and responding to the most anxious, cynical and passive people in the community. The clergy, wardens, the vestry, or even a whole parish community can get so caught up in trying to please or pacify a few people that disproportionate time, energy and resources get tied up in issues that are not really in the parish’s best interest. This misdirection also usually leaves a resentful undercurrent in the community while not really addressing the anxiety of those who raised the initial concern.

Even when leaders know who is raising an issue, without a broader listening process they usually do not know whether it is an interest of just those people or of a wider segment of the community.

A “testing” process helps a community cope with situations in which a few persistent voices press a concern or idea that would have an effect on the community’s life. What they are saying may represent a widely shared view or it may simply be their view. Those expressing the issue may not really know how many they represent. Imagine the informal one-on-one coffee hour discussion. Someone is making the rounds, letting others know about an important problem in the parish. People are listening and even nodding. Is it agreement or politeness?

The use of a “testing process” requires leaders to use sound judgment in deciding when the process is likely to produce valid and useful information as well as help the community manage its anxiety. Overuse may result in an increase in the community’s anxiety, less listening, and ineffective action. However the danger in most parishes is not overuse but the absence of any way for the community to define itself in relationship to emerging issues. A rule of thumb might be to use a “testing process” about four times/year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry.

The “testing process” can be done for a few minutes at the community’s coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered rather than in a paper survey. Face to face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response.

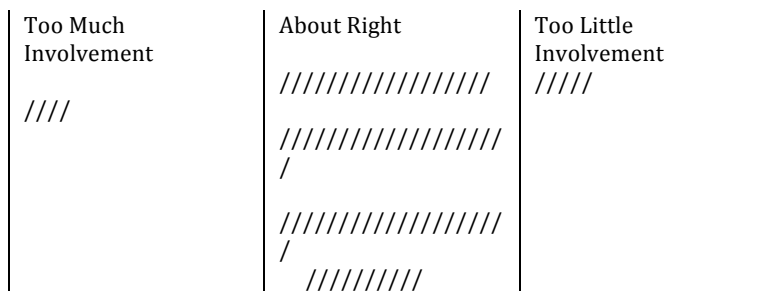
A possible process is to identify the issue, and put it on a spectrum of some sort. Have people indicate where they are on the spectrum, and summarize the result, along with what the next step will be, if any.

For example, in a parish where several people had been complaining about the extent of the parish’s involvement in the arts.

A spectrum was created regarding the parish’s involvement with the city’s art community:



The 80 parishioners at the meeting came forward to register their opinion. The result was:



There was no judgment that those who had raised the issue were “wrong,” only that most people in the community had a different opinion. Those who had raised the issue saw that their position was not widely shared.

It was not just the pet project of the rector and a few members. This involvement had wide ownership. The process allowed the community to know its own mind. The anxiety in the community about “people being upset” was put into perspective. No next steps were needed.

***Community Meetings***

Some parishes have started having community meetings three times a year. These are opportunities to have all those willing to gather focus on one significant issue. I’ve seen parishes do it around things such as hospitality, membership growth, and finances. The meetings are usually about 1 ½ hours long. They may include “channeling” (gathering prioritized lists of issues to address and moving them into a channel for action) and “testing” processes or some other way to gather information related to the topic.

***Training in Skills and Methods***

A listening climate can be encouraged by training people in how to use processes of faith sharing, circle discussions, and discernment that require respectful and careful listening. It helps to provide training in one-to-one communication skills, methods for teams to gather information and make decisions, and basic facilitation and group participation skills. Nurture the community’s competence for being together in silence and stillness is part of establishing a listening community.

Encourage the practice of people speaking only for themselves. Teach people how to use “I” messages. Discourage “manipulative confidentiality” norms that allow people “to poison the community well” without being accountable for what they say. Leaders need to develop the practice

that when someone comes carrying an invisible group's message they ask, "Who is saying this. Will you join me in meeting with them?"

### ***Gathering Information Rather than Making Assumptions***

Parish's can get stuck in a pattern of operating off of assumptions about what people want or why they are doing what they are doing. Four members resign from the vestry with a few months of one another. Is it coincidence or is a reaction to the rector or a difficult person on the vestry? The parish averages ten visitors per month and retains only a few each year. Is it that the liturgy and preaching is poor or is it that members overwhelm or ignore visitors?

We can get closer to finding out what is really happening if we can find an appropriate way to gather information. For example, the parish could seek information from people who visited the parish but did not return. Interview them to find out what went into their decision. Explore what you hear in terms of:

- Was it a matter of "fit"? The culture of the parish just didn't match what was being looked for. The parish was being its "best self," but it wasn't what this person wanted.
- The parish wasn't being its "best self." We were not showing our values and vision. For example, there was a lack of hospitality by either a lack of attention or overwhelming attention.
- The parish doesn't have a "best self."

### ***Obedience to One Another***

Obedience to one another is another thread that can make up a Benedictine fabric to strengthen parish life. This is part of developing a "listening parish."

The Latin word "oboedientia" comes from a root concerning hearing. Obedience is about hearing and responding to what we hear. In the people, circumstances and things of community life we are able to listen for God, for God's will, God's rhythm, God's spirit.

Obedience is about caring for those with who we are in community. Joan Chittister's translation of the Rule states, "Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the prioress and abbot but also to one another ...."(Chapter 71) and later, "try to be first to show respect to the other (Romans 12:10) supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and competing in obedience to one another"(Chapter 72).

"Obedience to one another" is a process of listening and responding to what we hear. That calling, if heard by a literalist spirit and an unskilled community, can become a pattern of communal dysfunction. Training people in skills for contemplation, discernment, intercession are part of the competency base needed. A related understanding is of how organizations develop and express unhealthy cultures in patterns of dependency and counter dependency, over involvement and under involvement, enmeshment and distancing and can improve by moving into patterns of interdependence, self-differentiation, and engaged-detachment.

### ***Face-to-face, Two-way Communication***

One method that might be especially useful for leaders to hold in mind is the power of communication as a face-to-face, two-way process.

Earlier I mentioned how in many parishes when there is talk about “communication” what is meant is communication from the leaders to the members, e.g., newsletters and sections of the web site. When leaders receive complaints about “communication” in the parish the discussion frequently moves to how the leadership can increase the methods and amount of information being shared with parishioners. We need a broader view of what is happening if we are to improve communication in the parish. To what extent does the leadership need to change how it offers information and what is offered? To what extent do the members need to be directly challenged to pay attention to the information already available? Even more important may be exploring how the communication takes place. Try expanding the occasions of face-to-face, two-way communication, e.g., “testing processes” at coffee hour, regular parish town meetings that include a “channeling process” and a process for the community to focus its attention on some matter of common interest.

To increase the amount of face-to-face, two-way communication:

- Use survey-feedback processes rather than a survey-closed discussion processes. Four rules of thumb: 1) If you survey people, report the results back to them—don’t gather information that only a leadership group then explores; 2) Report back in a face-to-face manner, such as in an open meeting; 3) Don’t ask for data you are not really open to hearing and acting on; and 4) Increase the relationship between data gathering, analysis, setting direction, and taking action by doing it all at the same time.
- Develop your ability to decide when it is appropriate to just receptively listen and when there is a need for conversation
- Use the methods, e.g., “testing processes,” “channeling processes,” parish town meetings, external consultants from time to time.

The more immediate the data collection and feedback, the more likely you are to increase the community’s energy for follow through. For example, if you hold one meeting in which you survey, report back, and also begin initial thoughts about planning, you are both more likely to engage those who have expressed an interest and to be able to use that energy to get something accomplished. Delays between data gathering and feedback are not necessarily deadly but they will create an energy drain as people have to be brought back up to speed.

Also avoid the compulsion to survey everyone, thereby focusing on inclusion rather than action and energy. The people who show up for the open meetings are the ones more likely to be involved and participate in subsequent actions. Focusing on making sure everyone was surveyed usually results in leaders feeling a need to accommodate all those opinions. It’s healthier and more likely to lead to effective action if those filling out survey forms are the same people gathered in a face-to-face setting that allows exploration and the possibility of being influenced by others. Survey-feedback processes do require small group follow up activities. Working groups begun at an open meeting can stay with the project for a few months and leaders will need to monitor movement and make adjustments.

### ***Grumbling or Murmuring***

A second theme that has a strong connection to the listening climate is how leaders and members deal with the grumbling in our hearts.

Benedict’s passion for listening and mutual self-giving in community is made clearer and tougher by his objection to “grumbling” or “murmuring.” Parish leaders know all about this way of complaining. New ideas and problem solving will not create, in themselves, a healthy community that stays healthy. The parish must attend to its spirit. Grumbling is the manifestation of communal

cynicism and passivity, of a victim stance. In individuals it can become an addictive behavior that eats away at the person's integrity.

Our listening and responding builds community when freely given to one another and to the whole community. In the Rule our obedience is only "acceptable to God and agreeable to people" if it "is not cringing or sluggish or halfhearted, but free from any grumbling ...." The Rule also speaks of responding gladly because if people respond only "grudgingly and grumble, not only aloud but in their hearts, then even though the order is carried out, their actions will not be accepted with favor by God, who sees that they are grumbling in their hearts." (Chapter Five of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*)

Addressing the issue of grumbling might include at least six elements.

1. Develop those listening and problem-solving processes mentioned above. There needs to be a healthy process for people to cope with the feelings, frustrations and ideas they have; a process that is an alternative to the grumbling. This is a way of doing what Benedict did in taking counsel with others in the community around truly significant matters.
2. Establish a "no grumbling" norm. We need to ask people to honor each other and the well being of the community. If the community has ways to listen and to work together in improving its common life, members need to be asked to use that process. There needs to be an explicit invitation to exercise self-discipline over what and how we speak in addressing issues and especially when things don't go our way.
3. Actively nurture emotional and spiritual maturity. There are a couple of very conservative women I have frequently talked with during the years of fighting in the Episcopal Church. They are in a minority in the church and in their own parishes. One is a priest, the other a lay woman. Here's what I have heard from them about what allows them to remain in a church that they disagree with over several very important issues. In reference to our friendship, "I would not want to be part of a church that would not include you." (We have different opinions.) "I don't want to do anything to harm the unity of the church." And, "I have changed my mind before, so I don't want to be so arrogant as to assume that I might not change my mind about these things." They each exhibit humility and self awareness. The parish's work of formation needs to include shaping this kind of maturity. We need to be clear about what we are doing in formation. It is about the virtues and Christian character. It is not about getting people to agree with our view on current issues in the church or society.
4. Train and support leaders in their ministry with chronic grumblers as well as those who are especially insistent around a particular issue. Train leaders in how to: listen to upset or anxious members, explain the parish's position, and invite people to participate without trying to take responsibility for convincing people. Have leaders learn to be firm in inviting members to offer their concerns and ideas in the community's normal processes for channeling and testing rather than having the leader accept responsibility for the member's issue. Make sure that leaders know that polling members behind the back of the rector is a big "no-no." The destructiveness of such behavior lingers in a parish community and poisons relationships.
5. Accept that grumbling will take place. Even in parishes that have done all the above there will be times of grumbling, times when the pressures within the community will erupt. Responding with a legalistic "we have a no grumbling norm," or a moralistic, "This is very harmful behavior," is likely to only make the situation worse. Even the most mature communities will have difficult emotional and spiritual periods. We are all "grumblers" sometimes.
6. Confront the chronic grumblers. Every parish seems to have a few people who live under a cloud of unhappiness with the clergy and/or the parish. At some clergy gatherings there is

occasional joking about trading grumblers or asking the diocese to establish a special parish to transfer all these people into. In one parish the leadership identified two people fitting the category. Each had an idealized parish they carried in their head. For the one it was an innovative parish that attracted “funky” people, for the other it was several Anglo Catholic “flagship” parishes. Each had their complaint about “inclusion.” The one wanted an approach to communion allowing the non-baptized to receive, the other felt “conservatives” were not welcome enough. Each had particular issues they would name when engaged. If an issue was addressed the complaining would shift to a new topic. The parish leaders noticed two constants. The first was that there was a history to the behavior. Years could pass, leaders could change, but the grumbling stance was maintained. The second was that each was unable to cope with the authority of the wider community. Neither could graciously live in something real that was larger than themselves and their own imagination.

A healthy parish confronts the constant grumblers. It’s a process of challenge and invitation. A challenge to change the stance they have taken, to put on kindness and patience. In John Gardner’s terms it’s to become loving-critics, rather than unloving-critics, toward the parish and its leaders. The invitation is to a fuller and more real life, to experience the embrace of the Blessed Trinity from within the parish’s life. This work is in the best sense “pastoral.” It is pastoral care for the individual, and pastoral oversight of the parish’s life. It’s also pastoral self-care for the clergy and lay leaders. Few things wear on a priest more than parish habits that enable and reward the constant grumblers.

We also need to take note that Benedict has a bias. He’s a leader of a community and he writes from that perspective. Parish rectors get it—how nice to eliminate the constant noise of people complaining and suggesting all their new ideas. For a no-grumbling norm to have integrity Benedict’s call to consult with others needs to be effectively implemented. There are at least three things needed.

1. **Availability.** This is accomplished by a pattern or routine of listening processes. People need to experience survey-feedback, testing processes and community meetings as things that happen regularly. When I know the time to say my piece will come I can hold my peace. When the issue has urgency and importance, or there is possible harm to a person or community, that calls for a more timely response.
2. **Appropriate to the issue and circumstances.** Some issues are best dealt with by the routine listening processes. Ideas about how to improve parish life or add some new element may be managed by asking people to bring them to the next community meeting when we will collect all such thinking. A person enraged about something the rector did to them requires a more personal and immediate response. At times we need a face-to-face conversation. Other cases call for a third party to mediate or facilitate.
3. **Genuineness.** Listening and its benefits are not just accomplished by using the right methods and skills. The listening needs authenticity. It must be real. People can tell when the leadership has no “in-box.” Some rectors function in a strongly narcissistic manner. In *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, Peter Steinke points to a pathological narcissism. He defines that by quoting Alexander Lowen, “excessive investment in self at the expenses of others.” Then he notes seventeen characteristics, a few of which are reproduced below.
  - “The person is capable of seeing only her own perspective, is intolerant of disagreement, doesn’t discuss ideas but imposes them, is single-minded, believes in her own superior wisdom, and doesn’t need help from others.”



- “The person is ruthless toward those who do not reflect back his projected image of specialness. He is vindictive, vengeful, devaluing, and abrasive. He publicly humiliates other and wants others to be wholehearted supporters.”
- “The person is prone to lying and an expert at disguise.”
- “The person presents herself impressively. She is clever, charming, seductive, persuasive, self-assured.”
- “The person is more interested in being admired than loved.”

If the vestry avoids availability, appropriateness, and genuineness in what it does then the priest can be the balancer. More often it will be the wardens who need to help the priest get perspective and engage what needs to be engaged. This doesn't need to be a confrontation with the priest but an empathetic intervention when the stress of the work and life get overwhelming.

In general wardens function best when they see themselves as the rector's collaborators and supporters. They can help the priest be his best self. At other times they need to ask hard questions, challenge and occasionally insist on alternatives with a strong rector. That can require wisdom, courage and a high degree of social intelligence. We've seen wardens who want to micro-manage the priest and those who side step any confrontation with her. When the priest cuts off listening and communication it may be up to the wardens to intervene and help the priest move toward a more open and listening stance.

When lay or clergy leaders cut off two-way communication for any reason they risk more conflict in the parish. Not being receptive in spirit, lack of empathy, or refusing to meet with someone, may set off troubles that could have been avoided.

Speed Lees has a model of conflict levels that assumes that if we fail to skillfully address conflict at one level it is likely to press onto a higher level. For example, we can take what he defines as a level two disagreement, in which the energy is about solving the problem, or a level three “contest” in which the parties want their way but don't want to hurt others, and push it to a level four of five. Level four is “fight/flight” in which people are willing to hurt others, and level five is an “intractable situation” in which significant damage can be done to the someone's reputation, position, and well being. If leaders fail to listen when a person or a group connected to the parish requests it, they become responsible for what happens when those people seem to go crazy.

It's easy to blame the “crazies” because their behavior seems so over-the-top or “emotional.” But what choices have we left them with? They need to submit to a situation that seems mistaken or even unjust or they need to press their case at the risk of damaging themselves or the parish. Leaders need to work at keeping level two and three conflicts at those more manageable stages by empathetic listening, a collaborative spirit, and an attempt at mutual problem solving.

This is about the well-being of the whole parish community and about each individual's growth. The community needs to not have its attention and energies constantly taken away from its common life and work by having to deal with the complainers. The single most important thing a parish does to manage this is to have reliable listening processes and genuineness in the listening. It is these processes and that stance that sorts the healthy challenges from the chronic grumbling.

The individuals most given to complaining need to be in an environment in which they might come to terms with themselves and life in community. For that to happen leaders need to help the parish learn to tolerate discomfort at those times when there is tension and conflict. It is at those times that a community can develop its ability to persevere and live in stability of life. And it is the stability of the leaders and the parish community that offers its most troubled members a chance to find a new life.

## ***Decide to be in Community***

The parish will be a healthier place if members can own that they have decided to be in community and that they have decided to be in *this particular* parish community. Benedict's position about grumbling is in chapter five where he reminds members that they have chosen to live in community. The Rule seems to assume that some things come along with a person's decision to join, things like no grumbling, balance, worship, silence, and humility. In deciding to join a community we also decide to live within the particular ways of that community. How do we help people accept responsibility for the decision they have made?

Be explicit with potential members of the parish that to join is to decide to be part of a living community, to open oneself to the process of being influenced and shaped by others, and to participate in the mystery by which you will influence and shape others. It is to enter into the rhythms of the community's life that will, in time, work their way into your mind and heart. We lose life to gain life, die to rise, become empty so we might be filled. The central mystery of Christian life is lived in the context of community, community with others and with God.

The Rule's assumption is that the community is the setting within which conversion takes place. That conversion is shaped by the give and take of life together; in the example of others; by giving oneself to habits of listening, balance and humility; and by the occasional confrontations and upheavals that life with others always brings. That conversion is a gradual process; that holiness comes bit by bit, and it is best when not noticed. Parishes need to tell new members about how it works. New members often need a picture of what is possible in a parish and guidance in how to engage those possibilities.

The Rule's approach toward new members may seem strange, even wrong, to parish leaders who have been encouraged to go all out in bringing people to Christ and the Church. Benedict writes, "Do not grant newcomers to the life an easy entry..." (Chapter 58) The process of admission includes: knocking at the door for four or five days to test patience and desire, a few days in the guest house, then time with those in training. The Rule is read to the person after two, six and ten months. The person reflects on the Rule (you need to think about what you are getting yourself into). Only after all this comes the commitment of the person and the community.

What the Rule is getting at is the need to, "Test the spirits to see if they are from God" (1 John 4:1 and the Rule, Chapter 58). The community has an interest in maintaining its capacity to be a place of formation. That means it can't constantly be struggling with new members over the central culture of the community. There needs to be an adequate degree of stability.

The potential new member needs to be a wise steward of her or his time and energy. Is this a place (a climate, a culture, a people) in which the person's spirituality will grow and mature? Or should another community be considered that would be more of a fit with the person's needs?

For example, the Order of the Ascension is a Benedictine community of Christians in the Episcopal tradition that I've been part of for 25 years. Its members take a three-year Promise "to seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things and circumstances of my life through stability, obedience and conversion of life." The Order has a shared commitment to parish revitalization and the struggle for justice. Its members gather yearly for five days of retreat, education and social time. All its members have received a significant amount of training in congregational development.

In its Rule, the Order lays out a process of entry that includes: a five month discernment period of reflection on the Rule, developing an understanding of the relationship between the Promise and the person's daily life, and a series of questions for both the applicant and the community, including the following:

- Is there obvious common ground between the person's and the Order's orientation to parish life and the spiritual life?
- Does the person have an adequately disciplined spiritual life, and sufficient self-esteem and support from colleagues, family and friends, so as to be able to benefit from what the Order does offer in vocational support without holding to unreasonable expectations of the support such a life will provide?
- Is membership in the Order likely to have beneficial effects on the person's work, family, friendships?
- What does the person bring to the Order?
- To what extent is the person making an act of free commitment, choosing to devote energy in this way and pattern? To what extent is the commitment "clouded" and "divided"?

A parish church is not a monastic community. It may be a dispersed community in the same way as the Order of the Ascension, but it doesn't have the same purposes and therefore doesn't require that level of training and commitment for membership.

However, parish leaders do need to explore the same underlying and interdependent issues, such as:

- The parish is an instrument of God's mission of Holy Unity and its purposes emerge out of God's purposes. The life that glorifies God and forms women and men in the divine image is shaped in the rhythm of what I've called the Renewal-Apostolate Cycle.
- Given the purpose and task of a parish community, what is needed from new members so they are in relationship to the community in a manner that advances the community's purpose, as well as the person's growth?
- What does the community need to communicate to potential members so they can make an informed decision about membership? What does the community need to ask of the potential member? What training and education needs to be provided to incorporate the person into the way this community lives its life and forms people in the Christian life?

Dealing openly with these issues may help a parish create an entry and incorporation process that has integrity, is effective and efficient.

The need is to develop an invitation process that communicates the nature of the parish community to people before they come to visit, and that helps people make an informed choice about whether it even makes sense for them to visit. Good marketing is done in a manner that allows people to make informed and free decisions about the use of a product, a service or membership in an organization. Good marketing helps people focus their energy and make more lasting commitments.

There is also a need to have a process of greeting, orienting and incorporating people in a way that is consistent with what they will experience as a member and begins to equip them for full participation in this particular community.

So, if the parish is striving for a culture in which people are both accepted and challenged, people need to see this early in their relationship with the community. It should not be all acceptance with the challenge appearing after you're "hooked." If the parish is serious about its task of Christian formation, then visitors and people considering membership need to experience opportunities for faith sharing, exploration of questions and doubts, and for training in Eucharistic worship and

living. They need these experiences early on in the relationship rather than the all-too-frequent experience of being recruited into parish groups and jobs, and given a sense that the focus is on the institutional life of the parish rather than on its purpose. If the parish is really a place of deep prayer, then the environment of the space, the community's competence for worship, and offerings to train and coach people in prayer life need to strike new people early in their time with the parish.

The reason most people leave places of work is a lack of "fit" with the organizational culture. The person may be seeking a work environment that is more participatory and empowering while the company's management style is more controlling. The same thing happens in parishes. Cultural issues (e.g., the style of spirituality and worship, the range of leadership styles commonly used, the degree of acceptance vs. challenge as part of the climate, openness to differences, the way in which the dynamics of closeness and separation are managed, and expectations about participation and giving) are matters over which people commit themselves or withdraw.

The entry and incorporation process needs to assist potential members and the parish community in making educated choices about a particular person's membership. The issue is not one of creating artificial or high standards. A parish church is by its nature a relatively open system. For the most part people make a decision to join and we accept them. The point here, and what the Benedictine tradition is getting at, is that we want people to make a right discernment, a wise choice, about the parish they join. Parishes are not interchangeable.

# Stability

## *Healthy Stability*

Most organizational life cycle models suggest a development that moves from creation through formation to a place of maturity or stability. The model I frequently use differentiates between healthy stability and static stability. Healthy stability is maintained by addressing the tasks of parish formation in a spirit of, and with the behaviors of, obedience and conversion of life. The parish's stability doesn't come about by pursuing stability in itself but by being a listening community and engaging the issues and people that invite us consider when we need to let go of loved ways and secure places.

In times of healthy maturity, some people will yearn for those times of institutional formation with the adventure of dreams and significant work to accomplish. Some will so miss the excitement of institution and community creation that they will avoid the work needed during the healthy stability phase. Others simply get anxious during this phase because they don't know how to live in it and may lack the associated competencies. They may be tempted to focus on institutional and administrative goals. The work of membership growth, building projects, special attention to financial management, and great service ministries all need to be addressed at some points in a parish's life. At other times these projects substitute busyness and a desire for institutional success for the ongoing and primary work of Christian formation.

The primary task is the formation of the People of God at all stages of their life. It is *always* a needed ministry but it is all too often done as though it were simply one program among other programs. There is a kind of half-life that is generated in churches that stay caught up in some institutional scheme. There are clergy and parishes that find themselves always seeking a new challenge in a new project, a project defined by a sense of numerical or physical accomplishment. Instead, choose to make the liturgy an experience of delight and enchantment; choose to create an adult foundations program that equips people with a capacity for spiritual discipline and ways of thinking that rise from what is eternal. Choose to have many opportunities in which those who are Christ's own come to know themselves and each other as people of curiosity and discernment, of courage and perseverance, of joy and wonder, and lovers of God.

## *Static Stability*

Static stability is characterized by an inability to effectively address being on a plateau in membership or spiritual life; seeing planning methods as a way to control the future; fussing over small things; not responding to new opportunities; losing a sense of vision and purpose; and an identity that is increasingly focused on the past and can seem bland.

If that condition isn't turned around the parish will usually slide into decline characterized by denying that we are really in trouble; avoiding the needed conversations and resources to help have the conversation; increased levels of stress; a nostalgic climate; low or fragmented energy; and a "fear-blame" cycle in which people begin to search for someone to blame (the priest, the diocese, the people who left for another parish, the change in the neighborhood's demographics). Leaders may step away from accepting responsibility. Or new leaders may emerge with a narcissistic orientation in which they are all too ready to take control and "save" the parish.

The ministry of parish development frequently involves helping churches move out of static and declining lives and engage the tasks of formation in a manner that fits the here and now life of the

parish. But it also is about how to serve the many parishes in a state of health stability. How do we help them stay healthy and faithful?

The work of formation whether from a place of decline or of health includes shaping a new vision or sense of direction and managing the polarity of maintaining parish identity and integrity while making adaptations that serve survival and mission. Parish formation embraces the task of grounding the parish in its organic reality as a microcosm of the Holy Catholic Church, attracting new members, developing new leaders, and nurturing a deeper inner life among individuals and the whole parish community. This work is always with us.

### ***Change Within Stability***

A stable and healthy parish can find itself no longer hoping for a new and better life. It can stop being attentive to the movement of the Spirit. The fact of its health and faithfulness can undermine its continued health and faithfulness. We can lose touch with Newman's, "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." How does the healthy, mature parish do just that? How do we change often and be stable?

In most cases the starting place is among the current members. Leaders and consultants can provide an environment and processes that help members identify and give voice to their deeper hopes and longings. This work takes some care. It's easy for traditional exercises to generate either an image of the new that is really just the current way repackaged or a radical and utopian dream that brings more judgment than hope. As useful as mutual ministry reviews and leadership retreats can be they are rarely tools that bring a parish closer to its depth and uniqueness. The longings and energy of the People of God need a gentle space in which they can emerge. We might try more of these kinds of things:

- Interviewing processes with individuals and then shared in small groups. Use ways that invite people to come at the parish's life indirectly and through their own experience. So, don't begin with "What are your hopes for the parish?" but with "What is God doing with you that is making you more human?" or "What has happen in your life this year that caused you to want to run away from people or things that you need to face into?" or "What has died in your life that you need to bury?"
- Increase the times and places of silence and stillness in parish life.
- Allow more space for mystery and awe in liturgy. Increase the gracefulness and beauty both in what happens around the altar and among the congregation. Pay attention to movement, music, silence.
- Help families make space for wonder and awe, especially with children. For example, it is critical that young children participate in late-night or pre-dawn liturgies at Christmas and Easter. The experience of this being something very special, something that is part of the adult world that they get to participate in, can provide needed experiences and memories of mystery. Children may, even more than many adults, "get" the power of rhythms in darkness—light, movement—stillness, silence—sounds.
- Create a parish history that is a narrative of how this local expression of God's people has experienced the presence of Christ in stability, obedience and conversion of life. Tell the true story with kindness but honesty. Step away from the history being about the buildings and rectors. Tell the story of how we have faced occasions of defeat and decline and persevered into new life, of how we have been estranged and in conflict and brought to new trust and life in community. If the parish has some real saints in its history, tell their stories, speak of how these fragile beings were used as instruments of God's love.
- Pay attention to times of receptivity and fear. There are moments in parish life that are like the period between darkness and dawn, sleep and awakening, in which something new might

be seen. This can be especially true in times of transition, including before and after the departure and arrival of priests, the death or departure of parish saints, a noticeable trend in the membership of the parish (up, down, plateaued, demographics), significant conflict, the destruction of parish property, and major financial threat.

- When holding leadership retreats and ministry reviews, seek out a third-party facilitator with significant skills in congregational development and consultation work—someone with an awareness of the hidden parish dynamics and a vision of what is possible in the Body of Christ.

If we have the eyes to see, a new energy will break into parish life during times of health and stability. The first expression may come from the chronic complainers or those driven to fix everything around them. They may not have the emotional intelligence or political smarts to make much happen on their own that is truly fruitful. But if you listen closely to what may be mostly an expression of anxiety you may also hear a yearning that comes from a deeper place within the parish system.

Pay attention to the moments of confusion and trouble, to the accidents and missteps, to the parish fools, strangers and enchanterers, especially those who have been with the parish for some years. Notice times of loss, death and grief. Listen to those who see life as an adventure.

Take in the way in which the polarities present themselves in times of maturity. Believe that the people of the parish carry within themselves those polarities. They long for the journey and for home, seek intimacy and solitude, and want change and stability. If you believe this you will see it and you will stir up those forces within the community. By allowing, affirming and pointing to the polarities leaders can create within the parish a climate that provides the freedom for individuals to be where they need to be and to move when ready to move.

Within what may appear to be the carefully controlled life of maturity can surface the new security of a transformed home, of new love, new friends, and new work.

## **Other Models**

### ***Poverty - Chastity - Obedience***

The Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Scranton, Pennsylvania, offered the following as a way of understanding the traditional vows. I can imagine a parish developing itself around these vows.

“The vows are meant to be a public witness to Gospel values. They are not meant to be restrictions on our lives, but rather attitudes toward life and signs of hope. While our understanding of the vows grows and develops, we generally see the vows in this way:

Poverty—a call to live for the sake of the poor, to act for justice, to advocate against oppressive policies, to embrace a simple lifestyle.

Chastity—a call to love well and non-exclusively, to care deeply for and about others, to love totally for the sake of others.

Obedience—a call to listen to the voice of the Spirit in all of life, to search for truth.

### ***Change and Stability***

Many organization development practitioners approach their work as one of managing the dynamic between change and stability in an organization. Organizational culture change efforts are cast as increasing the possibility of the organization’s success by managing the needs for adaptability on the one hand and system integration and integrity on the other.

In *Organization Development and Change*, Cummings and Worley write about “contingencies related to the change situation...and the target of change” as including:

1. Readiness for change – For example, is there adequate dissatisfaction with the status quo and are the needed resources available?
2. Capacity to change – For example, is there the ability to motivate and lead change?
3. Cultural context – This is the need to take into account the cultural values and assumptions of people in the organization.
4. Capacities of the change agent – They write about the many failures of change efforts “when change agents apply interventions beyond their competence.” For leaders, managers and consultants this is partly a matter of self-awareness and partly one of ethics.
5. Organizational issues and levels – This involves assessing and selecting the parts of an organization in which to intervene.

Dealing with these contingencies is in Benedictine terms a matter of obedience; there is listening to self and others, and there is a kind of submitting to the claims of professional and ethical standards.





Robert Gallagher, OA brings 40 years of experience in leadership training and parish development. Bob offers exceptional skills in facilitating shifts and changes in people and organizations. He provides practical methods and vision for a transformed parish. Bob has a masters degree in Organization Development from Goddard College. Bob lives in Seattle. The head of the Search Committee in one diocese in asking Bob to work with them wrote: " We have a great need for a facilitator with your skills, strength, toughness, insight and grace, in keeping people accountable and creating a setting in which we will all let the data speak."

He's been a consultant and trainer in religious systems, non-profit organizations and small businesses since 1970. Bob has been a parish priest; on the staff of and/or consultant to ecumenical training organizations, an industrial mission and metropolitan and state councils of churches. He served as the congregational development officer for the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut from 1981 - 88. He has consulted with hundreds of congregations. He has served as adjunct faculty in congregational development at Hartford Seminary and Seabury-Western Theological Seminary. He was Director of the Church Development Institute at the General Theological Seminary from 1985 - 2000 and continued as the Director of the Church Development Institute - Seattle until in 2011 when that changed to Shaping the Parish. For a number of years Bob served as the Associate Priest for Ascetical and Practical Theology at Trinity Church, Seattle. He attends and serves as a priest associate at the Parish of St. Clements of Rome.

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