

Evangelization from *Fill All Things*

The principal evangelical tools of the church are (1) mature individuals grounded in the spiritual life of the church; and (2) parish churches exhibiting a joyful stability in their common life and liturgy. These are the things that touch the more adult and faithful elements of people's personalities. It's an organic form of evangelization. The "real life" of the faithful can attract people to faith. The spiritual health of individuals and the parish community can set loose a "buzz" from within the parish that carries over into the routine conversations of members with others.

The baptized man or woman who lives the apostolic spirituality of the church has an impact on others. For some it is an attraction, for others it puts them off. There's an influence that comes not by argument but by being. The faith is not a debate but a life. The faith is caught much like a cold. There's a contagious spreading from one to another. Of course, at some point each needs to find an adult, intelligent way to understand and own faith but the starting place is often seeing the fruits in another person.

There is also a thoughtful and intentional element to this. The apostolic Christian will not only draw people to Christ by their being but will also find in themselves a sensitivity about when there is and isn't an openness in the people with whom they work and live. The conversation will come when the time is right. Because we know Christ, we can introduce Christ to another at the right moment.

The parish's corporate work of evangelization is about attending to the whole process of a person's formation, from doing what you can to draw people to the parish's life and worship, to nurturing them as Apostolic Christians. The parish needs to know how it is approaching all the various needs around inviting, greeting, orienting, incorporating, and sending. That doesn't mean having a massive planning document; it means knowing what you are trying to accomplish and how you intend to go about it.

In that aspect of evangelization that is about membership growth there are a few things most parishes need to focus on:

Develop a Healthy Parish

Set aside the life of grumbling and loneliness and seek the life of community and solitude. Let go of anxiety about making members happy and serving their needs and turn instead toward making members holy and being a community of compassion and justice.

Some parishes have a climate that is grumpy or angry or whiny. If you project that climate, you will bring in people drawn to that. So, your parish may grow numerically but it's not really set up for success in the formation of people. I had a parish client that spent a lot of its energy being unhappy with the diocese and with the Episcopal Church as a whole. I ended up telling them that they had to agree to knock it off if I was to be of any use to them as a consultant. I told them that such behavior just made the parish unattractive and would impact its growth and health. So far, they seem to be making progress.

In other situations I have noticed that a rector's preaching has a frustrated and judgmental tone. In one case, it was a conservative priest complaining about American culture, keeping

Christ in Christmas, and so on; in another case, it was a liberal priest complaining about how the parish didn't do enough for the homeless and poor. I doubt either approach did much for the listeners.

If the Episcopal Church wants to survive and grow the starting place is for parish churches to live in the best of the tradition. We need to focus on what is already healthy and sound in the parish; expand that and build upon it. The parish also needs to draw on the best of the Episcopal Church's tradition. Find and live what has health and hope. Attend to those things and the parts that are unworthy and distorted will weaken and fall away. This isn't about aggressive and audacious planning or action. It is about the courage, patience and wisdom needed to see what is health, to trust that it is the Spirit's work, and to live it.

Here are a few things you can do to create a healthier parish.

1. Ground the parish's life in prayer
2. Stay focused on the primary task of a parish; serve people in the renewal of their baptismal life.
3. Build the capacity of the parish by training leaders in congregational development and decision-making as part of a team.
4. Give attention to strategic issues like building relationships and knowing three things that need to be done in the next two years to increase health. These matters are usually not urgent, even if they are important. Accordingly, there is a tendency to put off strategic issues.
5. Nurture a climate that is mature and enjoyable. Work at trust development. Teach leaders how to deal with triangulation and cope with their own and others' tendencies to play "cynic, victim or bystander." Laugh, dance, eat and drink together. Openly share the times of tears and pain.

Do Sunday Well

The primary Eucharist and the coffee hour need to be well done. In many places we need to improve the Sunday morning experience. That requires attention to the liturgy, preaching and the social connections being made. In liturgy attend to beauty and flow in music and the liturgical movement of those around the altar. Build the liturgical competence of the congregation so they can participate without prompting. That allows people looking for a church to experience the best of us. Figure out a way to get people to the coffee hour for great coffee and tea and an opportunity to meet a few people who show an interest in them. In both worship and coffee hour we need a form of hospitality that doesn't destroy the liturgy or connection among members with excessive concerns about "comfort" and "user friendliness." You are seeking to create an experience in which visitors who are ready for spiritual growth find themselves a home. One visitor to such a parish said, "the experience caught me up in something beyond myself; it blew me away."

Avoid falling off the ends of polarities that are inherent in the Sunday experience. You must *manage* the polarities and pay attention to elements from both ends.

Worship that has the structure, climate and rhythm of Apostolic faith. It needs to require some competence. It needs to have the potential to catch people up in something beyond themselves; to feed wonder and awe. Avoid

Attention to the experience of visitors. The need is for them to feel welcomed (e.g., at the door, in the bulletin, in an announcement, etc.). Acknowledge that the experience will be different for some of them; invite them to rest

worship that is oriented to the most tentative among visitors. Attempts at “user friendly” or “seeker” worship almost always undermine the parish’s primary task.

in the liturgy, to allow the congregation to carry them along for a few weeks.

A coffee hour that is primarily about the community’s need for connection. A mostly informal time allowing people to wander the room and talk with a variety of people. Consider having most of the parish’s spoken announcements here rather than in the Eucharist. It helps the flow of the worship, connects members and visitors to the common life, and puts announcements in the more informal gathering of the parish community.

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Attention to visitors, and newer attendees, by making sure that they are not abandoned. Having lots of nametags available for members and visitors to put on (never just on the new person!). Some training of people in hospitality and listening. Encourage parishioners to go directly to coffee hour and not get in a line to greet the rector. Allow the line to the rector to be primarily visitors or people not going to coffee hour; the rector can directly invite the person to come to coffee hour. That will also get the rector to coffee hour a lot sooner.

Invite People

In most places you will need to market the parish if you are to grow. Four steps to take are:

1. Have a great web site. A person should be able to look at it and make a decision that the parish may be a “fit” for them or that it is definitely not a “fit”. Orient the site toward potential visitors. Consider having one link that takes existing members to a page that deals with internal concerns and administration. Think of the rest of it in terms of what a visitor will see and how a visitor may respond.
2. Have a way to drive people to your web site. Advertise! Consider an ad on Google and in the phone book that will stand out. Have paid ads in the local paper, especially at Christmas, Easter and in the early fall. Become newsworthy! Have news releases from time to time on activities that are likely to be seen as interesting by reporters. For example, while your regular Sunday Mass isn’t going to get coverage, beginning a jazz vespers or jazz mass series may catch the attention of the arts and leisure pages. Clergy might learn how to become sources for reporters looking for a comment about events in the news (need to come off as intelligent and clear, not angry or whiny). Mention your web address in everything.
3. Work through your new members. New members are more likely to bring other new members. Your long-term members are really not going to have new people to bring from among their friends. So, don’t try to make them feel guilty about it!
4. Look to groupings of people who are most likely to be attracted to what we can offer. Parishes need to do that in terms of the context they are in. My hunch is that in the larger society we will look at groups such as: 1) People in their 20s (and all age groups) who have an “ancient – modern” orientation; 2) Lapsed Roman Catholics looking for good liturgy and openness; and 3) Evangelicals on the Canterbury trail seeking "God-centered worship" and tradition, along with more inclusiveness.

All this needs to emerge from the existing life and competencies of the parish and not be some experiment disconnected from the parish’s identity.

Nurture a Spirituality of Hospitality

Increasing parish membership has a twist in it. If your primary way of thinking about it is in terms of “membership growth,” you may find yourself struggling with your own demons about measuring success in terms of numbers or seeing new people as solutions to an institutional need such as money or volunteer time. But if you turn it around so the issue is about your spirituality, you may find yourself struggling with things such as your openness to the stranger, your clarity about why this Episcopal expression of Christian faith is worth sharing with others, and the power arrangements in the parish that make it difficult for newer members to be included in a timely manner.

We know that many Episcopalians are offended by the ways some Christians approach those without a church. That sense of offense may result in a resistance to “evangelism.” That leaves parish leaders a choice between fussing about words and their meaning or getting on with attracting new members. Thinking about evangelization as a process of the spiritual life in which humanity is being drawn into the heart of God helps some people. Thinking of evangelization in terms of hospitality helps others.

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