



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#6 - February 2011

A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging (Part 4)

In the November 2010 issue of *DeltaSky Magazine* there was an article/conversation between Deepak Chopra and Russell Simmons discussing the secret to true happiness.

Sparkling Suggestion: As you read this short excerpt from their conversation, substitute some words, imagine parish life, a welcoming community. Would there be similar ramifications?

"It's now well documented that the fastest way to be happy is to make somebody else happy, but happy in a meaningful sense - you improve their life or you give them a purpose to live for, give them meaning in their life, or you give them authentic love or affection, or appreciate what they do and focus on their strengths. ... And if you have a happy friend, your happiness goes up by 15%. If your happy friend has a happy friend, it goes up by another 10%. And if your happy friend's happy friend has a happy friend - even if you don't know him or her - your happiness will go up another 10% percent. ...

I've been working with the Gallup organization; we have looked at the experience of genuine well-being. With careers, we found that if your boss ignores you, your likelihood of getting disengaged goes up by 45%. But it's not only disengagement that affects productivity and ultimately finances. In a few months, the person who is disengaged also picks up an addictive habit, gains weight or something happens that affects their health.

If, on the other hand, your superior doesn't ignore you, but criticizes you - you know, he points out every day your negative things and what you're doing wrong - your disengagement actually only falls to 20%, because human beings would rather be criticized than ignored. You know, there's nothing like ignoring somebody who says you don't exist.

But here is the point: If you actually notice the strength of someone who works for you and you appreciate that strength and it's authentic and genuine, disengagement falls to less than 1%."

Wondering Nuggets:

- How do our parishes create an atmosphere of meaningful happiness so people's happiness goes up by 10%, by 15%
- How do our parishes genuinely appreciate and affirm people for who they are?

This conversation between Simmons and Chopra touches on some of the twelve indicators found by Gallup's research (copyrighted by Gallup) which help people become more engaged and spiritually committed to their faith and within their parishes. See *Growing an Engaged Church: How to Stop "Doing Church" and Start Being the Church Again* by Albert Winseman (Gallup Press, 2007).

With this universal recognition of the human need for belonging/welcoming, we continue this series of newsletters, this present one reflecting on various best practices of parishes of welcome – which certainly set the atmosphere for flourishing adult faith formation, as well as being formative in themselves.

Community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence.
To belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place.
To be welcome, even if we are strangers.
As if we came to the right place and are affirmed for that choice..

- Peter Block
in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*

Our Cultural Mosaic

Within our parishes, there are, of course, multiple "cultures" (male/female, generational, people from various geographic areas of a country, hearing/non-hearing, etc.) but for right now let's reflect on the rich gift of our ethnic cultural mosaic through six different lenses/approaches.

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- At times, we might say, “*There aren’t any other cultural groups within our parish,*” and then we go to our neighborhood supermarket, school, mall, etc. and look around. Who is there? Does our parish community reflect the same cultural diversity? If not, what could be done so all would feel welcome at our parish?
- The following is recounted in Fr. Bob Hater’s book, *What Can Catholics Learn from Evangelicals?* (Visual Dynamics Publishing):

“Maria, a Catholic lay minister in a predominately Hispanic area described the following scenario:

‘In the Hispanic community the exodus from Catholic parishes to evangelical, storefront churches is phenomenal. Catholics are leaving in droves.

When I asked why, she continued, “In the past the Catholic Church presumed that Hispanics would never tire of being neglected. The day is over when Mexican-Americans will automatically remain Catholics.

Poor Mexicans come here without a job and unable to speak English. The Catholic Church often seems imposing and distant. They hesitate to join the parish, feeling out of place or that their identity will be exposed. Not able to communicate, except with their own people, they stay in Hispanic neighborhoods.

There, other Hispanics come to their doors and introduce themselves. They offer help with bureaucratic red tape that often is necessary to get a job, food stamps, and such-like. They also tell them about their church, usually consisting of other poor Hispanic people. Our Lady of Guadalupe, implying a connection with their Catholic Hispanic heritage, often has a prominent place in these storefront churches. Soon, many newcomers join the evangelical church.

While this takes place, some Catholic churches wait for people to come to them and make minimal effort to get into their neighborhoods and offer invitations to the Catholic church. Having ethnic liturgies isn’t enough to draw Hispanics or other ethnic groups into the parish. They need to experience community and hospitality.’

Hospitality in evangelical churches is not limited to visiting ethnic minorities in their neighborhoods. A Catholic in an affluent town house

said, ‘Within two weeks of the day that I moved here, I received a phone call from a neighboring evangelical church. The minister invited me to visit his church and mentioned several parishioners that lived in my apartment complex. Three days later, I received literature from this church. It’s been three months, since I registered in the Catholic parish, and I never heard anything from it.’

“We usually associate hospitality with a culture, a social practice, a more personal quality to be admired. In western culture, where individualism and security seem to be priorities, we need to be more thoughtful about how to bring the welcoming of strangers into our daily way of being together.”

- Peter Block
in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*

- Many other cultures approach things differently than the dominant culture. If people from another culture come to our parishes for Baptism and are first greeted with structures that work well (and are understood) in one culture, but they have never experienced -- “*Are you registered? Do you use your envelope? You have to attend this four-week program*” -- they may never come back.
- Welcoming/hospitality begins one-on-one. There are many parishes throughout the country/world, where staff members periodically invite two families from the parish – each from a different cultural background (e.g. Hispanic/Caucasian; Vietnamese/Hispanic; Caucasian/Hmong; African American/Hispanic, etc.) to dinner at their homes. This is one way of getting to know one another in a comfortable setting.
- Another welcoming outreach extended by more and more parishes is responding to the everyday needs requested by the various cultures, such as offering ESL; help in finding physicians, etc. who

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speak their language; earphones to hear a translation of the readings and homily in one's own language. Often, people from other cultures who are medical professionals are not qualified to practice medicine/nursing in another country. They take menial jobs while their skills are not being used. Some parishes have begun tutoring to help them prepare for their licensing exams.

- St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is a predominantly Caucasian parish, and blessed to have parishioners from about forty different countries. During the Advent/Christmas season, the various cultural groups are invited to display the crèche scenes from their countries at the parish. At various times throughout the year, food from their countries is featured on "Coffee and Donut" Sunday.

Socialize and Celebrate

People from all over the world reinforced what we've always known: "that the church-place could be a place of fun! ... remember the wine and feasting at Cana to start his ministry? It was his first recorded miracle and he did it precisely so that the people could enjoy themselves." (*The 7 Principles of Effective Youth Ministry* by Mark Springer and Cheryl Smith, Resource Publications)

- *"Each year on our feast day we celebrate liturgy and then enjoy a multicultural fiesta. We have parishioners born in about 20 different countries. They are encouraged to bring a dish from their country of birth; we have entertainment from various countries."* (Kathy Nix, St. Matthew Parish, Cornubia, Queensland, Australia)
- *"After being linked, then clustered, we have brainstormed ways to keep interest up, to create welcoming, to build community. One of them has been social gatherings, euchre nights..."* (Susan Dazey, St. Patrick Parish, Dubuque, Iowa)
- *"Our yearly parish picnic includes all generations, ministries and parishioners. We also hold a parish game-night and potluck during the winter, where all gather in one large room to eat and play games. It's rewarding to see older people playing 'Chutes and Ladders' with young children they didn't know before."* (Marianne Slattery, St. Noel Parish, Willoughby, Ohio)

Following from the pattern of life Jesus has shown us the central place of hospitality in Gospel ministry suggests that food and drink should be the largest single budget item for any parish community.

-Michael L. Papesch
in *Good News Parish Leadership*

Perhaps a unique story/best practice comes from a parish which will remain unnamed. A new pastor was assigned, following someone who had alienated many, caused much hurt, many divisions, provided poor leadership, etc. both in the parish and the surrounding community.

One of the first things the new pastor scheduled was a pig roast (something this community enjoyed) at his own out-of-pocket expense. He purchased and cooked the pigs, inviting the whole town (not just the members of the parish). Many people brought dishes to pass and there was more than enough food and drink for all.

Many people renewed friendships. The healing of hurts had begun. Some folks with negative ideas of Catholics are now seeking out ways to have better relationships with their neighbors.

Support for Sacramental Candidates

The celebration of sacraments affects the entire parish, not only the candidates celebrating the sacrament. Many parishes today have creative pastoral approaches to involve members of the parish:

- Parishioners purchase the Bibles for individual Confirmation candidates. The candidates not only feel the community support, but also gain in a parishioner/a new friend almost a second "sponsor."
- The list of children being baptized each month is read at each Mass, so parishioners can pray for them and their future as Christians. Having the names read individually, instead of praying for all baptized children generally, creates powerful connections to the children and their parents.

Welcoming those not among us

What about those who live in our midst, but are not with us each weekend? Do we have a welcoming process in which they can join either as new Christians or being welcomed back if they have not been active in a while?

Do we help all parishioners realize that nearly all research continually says that most people who do come back do so because someone has invited them to return, and accompanied them in their “coming back.”

If inactive Christians do return, do we have welcoming strategies that say to them: “We’re glad you’re here; this is your home”?

Do we continually challenge ourselves to growth, to becoming an ever-developing community of faith and belonging by asking: “What are we inviting them back to?”

To build your approaches of outreach to those not with you, try a strategy such as this, adapted from the February 2009 PEP (Parish Evaluation Project) Newsletter by Tom Sweetser, SJ and Peg Bishop, OSF:

Once a month set up about 12-15 card tables that seat four people each. A telephoning committee calls parishioners at random which will automatically include both active and inactive members

- Invite them to attend this “select” gathering to talk about how the parish could be more welcoming to people of various ages, old and young alike.
- The inviting continues until you have about 50-60 people.
- Twelve – fifteen people are trained to be “hosts/hostesses” for the table-groupings.
- When participants arrive, they choose a table and are asked to respond to: “What is one thing that would make this parish more inviting to someone who doesn’t attend church very often?”
- After about 15 minutes of sharing, the host/hostess asks for a summary of the discussion and then all but that person gets up and finds another table of four, no one going to the same table.
- A second question is asked: “What is one thing I could do to make this parish more welcoming or inviting?”

- The same process takes place and when time is called, all but the host/hostess move to a third table for the final 15-minute conversation.
- This third question, at this table, is: “What is one action we could do to connect with our inactive parishioners?”
- Ideas are shared with the whole group at the end.

Another outreach approach to those not with us comes from Susan Francesconi at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Naperville, Illinois. In her role as Coordinator of Communications and Welcoming, Susan writes and designs a monthly newsletter that is mailed specifically to those who are presently inactive. The newsletter, however, Susan says, “doesn’t look like it is designed for any one group, but it is targeted to that group in the hopes that its welcoming tone will encourage some to stop by now and then, and perhaps become engaged in the community once again.

Mining More Gems: Have these approaches/suggestions/best practices (here and in issues #3, 4 and 5 sparked your **OWN GEMS**? What are you doing? Have you done? Planning to do?

Please share them (send them to me at jansch@juno.com) so that we can share them in future issues of **GEMS** with everyone. Through **GEMS** we together are a learning community.



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com.

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Best Practices can be found at www.pastoralplanning.com. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.