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**8 WAYS
TO BUILD
PARISH
COMMUNITY**

**A practical guide for ministers
and parish leaders**



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Contents

	Introduction	5
ONE	Embrace Servant Leadership	13
TWO	Set the Tone	20
THREE	Develop Communities within the Community	27
FOUR	Open Doors	34
FIVE	Be Attentive	40
SIX	Call Forth and Animate the Gifts of All	47
SEVEN	Develop a Strong Sense of Mission	55
EIGHT	Become a Community that Journeys in Faith Together	61



Introduction

How would you describe your parish? If someone were to say, “Fill in the blank. My parish is _____,” how would you respond?

Ask the people you know to fill in the blank. Now, ask people who are at church on Sunday but whom you do not know to fill in the blank. If you’re really interested, ask people who are at church to ask the people they know who are not at church to fill in the blank. What picture do the responses paint? Do people consider the parish a place that is rarely open except on Sundays, with an occasional social or service opportunity? Is your parish known as a warm and welcoming community? Are those who are involved in a ministry or group always on the lookout for others to invite to serve, or do they give the impression that no additional help is needed? Does the parish have a strong sense of mission, in which people are living and growing in faith? Is the parish like family for some, many, or most people? Did you hear all of these sorts of responses and more?

In the past fifteen years, I have often talked with parish leaders about their hopes, dreams, and prayers for their parish. The most common thing they tell me is that, no matter how much they feel their parish is growing as a community of faith, there is always more that can be done. They recognize the importance of the parish in their relationship with Christ, and they wish that others could see the tremendous impact the parish could have in their lives and faith. Many worry that their parish is aging and shrinking, and they wonder how they might better engage young people. Most also speak about how a small group of people bears responsibility for the parish through involvement and financial giving, while the majority of people come to Mass on Sunday but are otherwise disconnected from the parish. In fact, the sense that there is more to be done is in direct response to this: in many parishes, when leaders look around, they see fewer people at Mass or parish events, and the ones who do come are getting older. And even in parishes that are growing and have many young families, there still is that large number of disconnected people. Surely, they tell me, there must be a way to build a strong community in which more people are growing in faith together.

Why is this important? Because the parish is the place where people encounter Christ and grow in and express their faith through the celebration of the Eucharist and sacraments, with one another as members of Christ's body, and through ministry and outreach. In other words, the parish is where most people are evangelized and where they grow to evangelize others, leading them to a deep and fruitful relationship with Jesus Christ. Pope Francis points to this in *The Joy of the Gospel*: "The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life,

for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach” (EG, 28).

This is more than a theological statement about the role of the parish in leading people more deeply into Christ’s love. This is also a practical reality, borne out by numerous studies that point to the role of the faith community in bringing people to the life of discipleship. My strong suspicion is that if you are reading this book, you know this through your own experience. Belonging within the parish leads us to grow in faith and to express our faith by sharing God’s love at home, work or school, in our parish, and in the world around us.

Most of us likely experienced a similar path: coming to Mass led us to initial involvement in the parish. We may or may not have had a deep life of faith. Our involvement may have happened when we responded to an announcement at the end of Mass or in the bulletin. It is more likely that it happened when we became acquainted with someone at the parish who invited us in. It is possible that a friend invited us to participate in the parish, which led to a reigniting of faith. This early involvement connected us to other parishioners who witnessed to their faith and the satisfaction they experience in service, which led to deeper participation, resulting in increased willingness to give of ourselves and our resources. Somewhere along the way, the parish started to feel like home. And the more at home we feel in our parish—the more it becomes our family of faith—the more deeply we grow in relationship with God and commitment to

Christ, and the more we are drawn to give of ourselves and our resources to the parish and beyond it.

This leads us to an important realization. As parish leaders, we have a part to play in making our parish a true community of faith. More than this, we have a responsibility to do so. Whatever our role in the parish, as staff members or parishioner ministers, there are many ways in which we can influence how parishioners connect with one another, invite friends and family members to the parish, and lead people to become involved. Those young people your parish hopes to attract? They are more likely to come and to stay if they feel that the parish values them and wants them to belong. The many who are disconnected? The only way most will become rooted in the parish is through a warm, personal invitation carried out within a welcoming community of faith. The conviction behind the writing of this booklet is that while this may sound like an insurmountable challenge, it is actually an attainable goal.

What does it take to build community in your parish? I believe the eight ways to which this book points are a perfect beginning. This is why reading this book with other leaders will be key to reaching the goal of building the parish as a faith community.

- Start with the foundational leadership principles below.
- Read and discuss the book together, chapter by chapter. Each chapter describes one way to build community in your parish, followed by an exploration of this step of parish practice.

- Each chapter ends with practical ideas related to the step you have been exploring. These ideas are intended as a springboard for your discussions rather than an exhaustive, programmatic list.
- Make a list of current practices that align with the points in each chapter, ideas that surface for expanding on what is already working in your parish, and ways your parish might grow toward the step in the future.
- At the end of your shared reading, take time to create a plan that incorporates the ideas and strategies that emerged in your discussions.
- Explore each chapter in light of the collective experience of your group. Include others in your discussions, especially when you are thinking about an aspect of parish life in which they are involved.
- At the same time, fight the temptation to unnecessarily prolong your discussion, delaying progress either by overthinking things or avoiding change.

As you prepare to read what follows, consider a few foundational leadership principles.

Keep the vision in mind. We have established why creating a strong community is important. As leaders, your next step is to develop a vision of your parish as a community of disciples. Make this personal. What would happen if more parishioners

were involved; turned to each other in times of joy, grief, and need; readily invited others to come, serve, and lead; and accompanied one another on the journey of faith? Paint the picture in your mind's eye. Talk with others about this. Develop a compelling vision toward which you will aim as you take steps to make the vision reality.

Explore potential steps toward the vision. The steps included in this booklet are drawn from research as well as learning from parishes of all sizes, demographics, and expressions of parish life. As you read this book together, explore what already exists in your parish that contributes to life as a faith community. Identify possible ways that you can build on or learn from what is positively contributing. Consider asking parishioners for their input as you explore, offer a few focus groups, include a brief questionnaire in your bulletin or website, and speak with parishioners informally. Try not to be defensive when people offer ideas or criticism. Remember that they speak from their experience and perspective, and that their opinions may or may not be shared by others. If you regularly hear of an area that needs attention, keep this in mind as you discern your next steps. Even if there are good reasons for practices as they currently exist, it is important to acknowledge the perceptions of parishioners and, when possible, to address the needs they share.

Shape parish culture and practice. With the vision and potential steps firmly in mind, you can begin to shape the life of your parish for the future. Keep in mind that there are many small things you can do, even as you are reading and discussing this together. It will be helpful to not make too many changes all

at once but rather to focus on one or two aspects of parish life, meet with the leaders in those areas, and work together to shape parish practice toward a more welcoming community of faith. Much of what follows points to the need to shape the culture of the parish as much as specific parish practices. Such culture change is a process that takes place over time. The conversations you have now, and the parish practices that emerge from those discussions, will contribute to the establishment of a culture of community in which people live as members of Christ's body together.

The sum is greater than the individual parts. Keep this always in your heart and mind. The things that you will do to build community have the potential to change someone's life, and the life of your parish. There is a cumulative nature to this: the sum of the changes you make and the new initiatives you begin will be much greater than the individual elements that are touched by your efforts. Just as the many parts of the body of Christ all contribute and are important in sharing and living the gospel, so too the many aspects of parish life that you have the opportunity to influence through your discussions, planning, and implementation.

Call forth and animate the gifts of all. This leads to the final foundational leadership principle, which is that your role as a leader is to call forth and animate the gifts of all in the parish. This is sometimes challenging for leaders who feel responsible for the many aspects of parish ministry that take place through parishioner involvement. What happens if someone doesn't follow through or has different ideas about how to proceed? We

will explore this in much greater detail in the chapter of this book devoted to this topic. For now, be attentive to parishioners who may be ready to be involved or to deepen their involvement. Ask current ministry leaders to be on the lookout for others who may be ready to serve. Establish a shared expectation that all who are leaders will draw others to serve alongside them, so that there are no lone rangers in ministry. This will ensure that what happens at the parish is not limited by one person's reticence to share but rather expands as a result of the commitment of many.

While building community in the parish requires many people to work together, each of us has something special to contribute to the process. This book is your guide to eight things you can do, individually and with others, to shape the life of your parish and help it grow as a community of faith.



ONE

Embrace Servant Leadership

Do you recognize yourself as a leader? I often ask this question during parish leadership workshops and retreats and am struck by how many people who are parish staff members, or parishioners who are members of the parish council, committees, or coordinate ministries, do not consider themselves leaders. In their minds, the pastor is the one and only leader. All others carry out things the way the pastor directs. No doubt, the pastor is the leader of the parish. Yet anyone who in some way helps to shape or implement parish life is leading. Together, we influence the way in which our parish carries out Christ's mission of love and mercy. In this way, all of us are leaders who are responsible for actively participating in the parish

by virtue of our baptism and who lead others to Christ through our words and witness.

Regardless of our role in the parish, leadership in the faith community is unlike leadership in any other organization. We are servants first, emulating the example and fulfilling the command given to us by Christ. Accepting a role of leadership in our parish amplifies and focuses our commitment to Christ as disciples. This servant leadership requires of us a different sort of sensibility in the ways in which we interact with others, particularly those with whom we minister and serve. Let us explore servant leadership and its implications in building the parish as a community of faith.

Servant leaders pray.

Our service and ministry, within our parish and beyond it, is an expression of our faith in God and commitment to follow Jesus. Understanding ourselves as servant leaders is a deepening of this commitment, often developing gradually over time. As servant leaders, we recognize with true humility that the ministry is not ours but Christ's. We invite Christ to work through us, and we rely on the Holy Spirit as we do so.

Our spiritual life, and certainly our ministry, is dependent upon and flows from a deep interior life in God. While any disciple might struggle with moments in which prayer takes a back seat, we who serve and lead in our parish must be especially mindful to remain rooted in prayer. One of the great challenges of parish ministry is that, while we help to foster spiritual growth for parishioners and provide opportunities for them to live and share their faith, doing so often results in a struggle to

make time for prayer ourselves. A quote attributed to St. Francis de Sales illustrates this aptly: “Every one of us needs a half an hour of prayer each day, except when we are busy—then we need an hour.” No matter how busy we find ourselves at home, in the workplace, in the local community, and in our parish, we cannot become too busy for God!

Through prayer, we discern the ways God is calling us to live, grow, and lead. In this prayerful discernment, we perceive the mission to which we are called and find the strength to live that mission in our daily lives, at our parish, and in the world. As Pope Francis says in *Rejoice and Be Glad*, “You too need to see the entirety of your life as a mission. Try to do so by listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs that he gives you. Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make, so as to discern its place in the mission you have received. Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today’s world” (GE, 23). Our mission is not divided into “personal” portions, or “parish” elements. We cannot be one sort of person at home and a very different sort at the parish. Rather, our personal spiritual lives, and our life at home, the parish, and in the world are all integrally connected—one mission in Christ Jesus.

All of the aspects of our lives are rooted in our relationship with God and nurtured in personal and communal prayer, particularly in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist most especially forms us as Christ’s people. Through our participation in the Mass, we are drawn into communion with Christ and with one another. And we are shaped as a particular, local community, the body of Christ in this time and this place, together.

Servant leaders look to Jesus.

Parish ministry is an outgrowth of our relationship with Jesus. The longer we serve alongside others, the more we realize that we cannot invite people into a life we do not share with them. While we encourage all in our parish to follow Jesus with their lives, it is particularly crucial that we who lead look to Christ as our Savior and brother, and also as our teacher and model.

From the beginning of his public ministry, through his passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus teaches us what it is to be a servant leader. Jesus was always attentive to the other—people who would otherwise have been ignored, marginalized, or made scapegoats for the actions of those who were on the inside of the religious life of his time. Even when he was tired or wanted to pull away and have time with his disciples, Jesus ministered to those who needed him—the hungry, sick, grieving, and those who sought his teaching. Jesus drew people to himself—and to other people. He created a community of people who came to believe in him and sent them out as witnesses to his saving mercy. Jesus gave himself completely, and he found resurrection beyond the cross.

As servant leaders, we take to heart Jesus' example and grow in willingness to lay down our lives for the sake of others.

Servant leaders serve.

It might seem to go without saying that servant leaders serve. We offer our time, share our talents, and give of ourselves in ministry. Yet there is a quality to this service that shapes us over time. We grow as people who recognize Christ in the stranger, the outcast, the poor, and the alien, and who find joy in laying aside what

we want in order to contribute to alleviating the needs of others. The service in which we share makes it possible for people to worship God, be shaped and fed by the Eucharist, learn about and grow in faith, and come together as Christ's people.

We do not do take the call to serve lightly, but rather, we embrace it out of a deep sense of responsibility. This is a sacred duty, borne of our baptism into Christ's body. In fact, we are co-responsible for the life of the parish. We fulfill this responsibility by collaborating with one another, drawing on one another's talents, and inviting others to serve with us. To collaborate is to co-labor, to work side-by-side. This form of leadership is about serving with, not standing apart from, others, as challenging, invigorating, and at times frustrating as that might be.

Servant leaders lead.

As in our own spiritual lives, leading a parish or a parish ministry is a process of discernment, through which we continually consider the ways we may witness to the astounding good news of Christ's love and share it with others through our parish groups, processes, and ministries. Reflect on your role in the parish and how you carry it out. In what ways do you serve? How do you lead? How might you be called to grow as a servant leader? What opportunities exist for you to draw others into leadership with you, to co-labor in order to shape your parish as a vibrant, living community of faith?

Servant leaders include others.

One of the greatest challenges of parish leadership is widening our view beyond the circle of people we know to include others in ministry and service. We naturally go to the people we know, with whom we are comfortable, and whom we know will get things done. Accepting responsibility as a servant leader involves widening our circles and taking a risk by inviting new people to serve with us. Be especially mindful to draw young people, teens and young adults, into leadership with you. They will bring fresh perspective, new ideas, and their peers, who will enliven your community with their enthusiasm.

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Practical Ideas for Growing as a Servant Leader

Pray for your parish. Include your parish in your prayers, as you do family members and close friends.

Begin all meetings with prayer. Take time together to reflect on the Sunday readings. Allow this prayer and reflection to direct your ministry. Trust that the Holy Spirit will inspire and strengthen you as you build community within your parish.

Convene groups of leaders to discern direction together. It seems obvious, and yet often the obvious things must be stated clearly. We cannot discern direction for our parish just by ourselves! Bring groups of leaders together. Talk with one another about the vision of the parish as a community of believers and what it will take to build community within your parish.