



DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

CHAPTER 11 SECTION 7



HOW?

John 15: The call for pruning and the need to bear fruit that will last

The current blueprint for parish-based evangelization in the United States is the 2017 USCCB document entitled *Living as Missionary Disciples*. There, we read:

“The parish must be concerned with **bearing fruit** throughout the discipleship process. **This shift in focus** ensures that attention is directed toward pruning what is ineffective so that new life and fruit can occur. Throughout Scripture, the metaphor of fruit is used many different times and in many ways in reference to mission. Jesus commands the disciples to ‘go and bear fruit that will remain’ (John 15:16). The work of pastoral planning ought to **bear fruit** and also involve effective pruning through planning, organization, and implementation so that new life and growth can occur.”

“A planning framework focused on **fruitfulness** suggests an approach to pastoral ministry that discerns what will be **fruitful**, what needs to be pruned, and how weeds will be separated from new growth. This means, at the start of the process, identifying the overall **fruit** and outcomes that a parish or diocese desires for its ministry and aligning programs and ministries to achieve this result.”

If we expect to see renewal within our parishes we must begin to discipline ourselves with the practice of **focus**. Practically speaking, parish leaders would do well to ask specific questions in order to remain focused on the mission that has been given to us. It is important that we ask **why** we are doing something so that we can ask ourselves **what** do we expect to see in people’s lives because of what we are doing? Thinking with the mind of *Living as Missionary Disciples* requires us to know **what** we are doing and so that we are clear what type of fruit we expect to see in someone’s life.

If authentic and sustainable growth is to happen in the parish and in the lives of parishioners, it is critical that each parish take an honest look at existing ministries as well ensuring on-going assessment of any new initiatives. This assessment cannot be driven by subjective impressions or the fear of infringing upon relationships that may have existed in the parish for a number of years. There must be an honest evaluation of **“What is bearing fruit?”**

The assessments mentioned by the US bishops are objective evaluations based on fruitfulness within the discipleship process. The Bishops state, “This means, at the start of the process, **identifying the overall fruit** and outcomes that a parish or diocese desires for its ministry”.

So, what are the “outcomes that a parish or diocese desires for its ministry?” What is “good fruit” within a discipleship process? The strategic planning process in 2016 the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux articulated nine dimensions of a fully mature missionary disciple. Commonly known as “the nine”, these dimensions reveal the very fruit that is intended in one’s life because of healthy formation. The “nine” now becomes the benchmark for what we hope to see in the lives of those who engage in ministry in the parish. These are nine signs of maturity; nine dimensions of a fully mature missionary disciple.

In a sense, they are the fruits of one who is coming to know Jesus, to live with Jesus, and live like Jesus. If we see these nine dimensions visible in someone’s life, we see the “good fruit” of formation:

RELATIONSHIP	They have a personal, ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ
CONVERSION	They have taken steps, intentional steps, to remove sin and vice
GROUNDING	Their relationship with God is based on emotion or “feeling” His presence
DISCERNING	They don't ask God to bless their ideas; they regularly ask God to show them His will
HOLINESS	You see the virtues in their life: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude
SACRAMENTS	Mass every Sunday. Confession regularly.
COMMUNITY	They have people in their life who hold them accountable and support them in Christ
OTHERS	They “see” people in their human dignity; they serve willingly
EVANGELIZATION	They are unafraid to share their story with others

Of course, this doesn’t just happen. Parishes have to be intentional about partnering with God so that this happens in people’s lives. Formation ministry that expects to see this type of fruit must be intentional about focusing on bearing this type of fruit. Unfortunately, in the past, most of the ministry and parishes was simply designed to keep people busy. It was as if the “active parish” was the description of a healthy parish. Our parishioners were busy, they were active. However, we did not always see the fruit of spiritual maturity. If we are going to see the outcome change, we must see the input to change. In other words, if we expect to see fruit in people’s lives we must change our approach so that this change is intentionally facilitated. In many parishes, this begins not with new initiatives but with an honest evaluation of our current ministries.

Jesus himself gives us an image of this process in John 15. Jesus speaks of pruning in order to bear fruit. Pruning is directly connected to bearing fruit, especially in parishes. *Living as Missionary Disciples* states, “A planning framework focused on fruitfulness suggests an approach to pastoral ministry that discerns what will be fruitful, *what needs to be pruned, and how weeds will be separated from new growth.*”

The first step for many parishes is an assessment of current ministries. Again, you may find that despite a lot of activity in your parishes, there may not be much that is intentionally designed to accompany the average parishioner through a process of spiritual maturation, especially in a way that helps them flourish as a disciple of Jesus Christ (“the nine”). While this may be true, this is where the process begins.

If it is the case that there are many activities and ministries that do not naturally evidence fruitfulness, it will be necessary to take some steps towards pruning in the parish. This will not be easy. This is not an enjoyable part of leadership. It requires a commitment to discerning well.

This is important. Without **pruning**, complexity is assured. Without pruning, we will not be **focused**. The parish must be united around a singular commitment of forming disciples. The parish must be aligned around the process of making disciples. According to our research, there is a significant relationship between church vitality and pruning.

Every parish has a limited amount of resources; people, time, and finances. At the same time, those parishes see the same people doing several things. The struggle for most parishes is that they dilute their impact by spreading parishioners too thin. Parishioners may have to choose between something that is really *good* versus something that is *better*. Far too often the “best” option of adult formation is compromised because people choose other “good” options that are on the parish calendar. If we are to be good stewards of our resources, and if we want to **focus** our efforts on that which we believe will bear good **fruit**, we must make the decision to perhaps cut some of the ministries that are not maximally bearing fruit by way of the discipleship process.

It is important to consider that these discerned decisions may go against the subjective account of parishioners. For example, an annual event, such as a Family Fun Day that has been held at the parish for many years, may be something that parishioners feel is wonderful. However, when you really assess it, while it may be a one-day social event, it may not facilitate ongoing connections or lead to anyone entering more deeply into intentional discipleship process. Furthermore, it may be found that it is taking a lot of time and resources to pull it off. A parish might discern discontinuing this event until they have established a stronger focus of adult formation.

Our next section will take us one step further. In Section 8 we will look at alignment and movement. However, let us offer a few ways you can evaluate ministries. Doing so will better equip you to discern what needs to be pruned.



DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

CHAPTER 11 SECTION 8



HOW? Movement and alignment

In 2006 Eric Geiger and Thom Rainer authored a book entitled *Simple Church*. For the past 12 years it has served as a transformative blueprint for parishes seeking to impact people's lives. Their concept of "simple" is helpful as we understand the importance of movement through the Formation Life Cycle, as well as movement through various stages of spiritual maturation.

Here's what Eric and Thom can teach us.

"Here is the definition for a simple church: A simple church is a congregation designed around a straightforward and strategic process that *moves people through the stages of spiritual growth*. This definition has some weight to it. Let's walk through the definition one phrase at a time.

"The church is *designed*. It is not carelessly thrown together. It is not haphazardly planned. The ministry does more than 'just happen.' It is thought-out. It is structured. It is designed with care. ... The design of the church is centered on something."

"The programs and ministries revolve around something. They are just not plugged into the church calendar and brochure. Everything is designed around something. And that something is not a nebulous abstract concept. The design for discipleship in a simple church revolves around the process. *A simple church is designed around a straightforward and strategic process.*"

"The process is straightforward. It is not confusing; it is easy to grasp. The leaders know it, and the people understand it. The process is intentionally kept simple. It is not lengthened. It does not change every few months. The church sticks to the simple process.

"Complexity is not welcome. More programs are not added to the process. The church rejects the multitude of new programs and models offered to it. Since the process is the how, it is also strategic. ***The process is tied to the purpose or vision of the church.*** The two are closely knitted. The process is built for execution, to impact people. ***It is designed to be sequential so that people may move through the process. The process moves people ... The simple and strategic process promotes movement.***

"The process flows logically. People are attracted to Christ and the church and then are moved to points

of attachment.”

“The programs are used as tools to promote this movement.”

“And the movement through the straightforward and strategic process has an intentional and intended end result.”

“The process moves people through the stages of spiritual growth.”

“The goal is to partner with God to move people through the stages of spiritual growth.”

“Changed lives are the bottom line, the intended end result.”

“Christ formed in people is the goal.”

“A simple church understands that people are at different places in their spiritual journey, that spiritual growth is a process. The church is designed to partner with God to move people through stages of spiritual growth.”

“Sadly, most churches miss this truth. They are not simple. They have not designed a simple process for discipleship. They have not structured their church around the process of spiritual transformation. *And they are making little impact.*”

— Excerpts from *Simple Church* by Eric Geiger, page 60-62

How do we help parishioners move from the shallow waters to the deep waters?

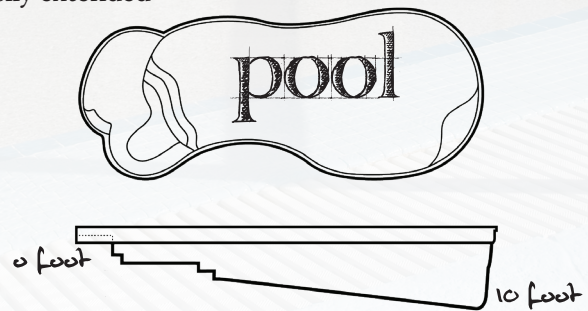
ENTRY POINTS

The shallow end of the pool

- Entry points are easy points of entrance
- We are casting the net wide and attempting to build bridges of trust so that they will take the next step
- Provides a connection to the larger community, provides a safe sense of belonging as the first step
- Is often an entrance into a more committed journey
- These events are designed so that invitations are easily extended

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

1. Advent and Lent mission
2. Mission trips and pilgrimages
3. Baptismal prep, marriage prep, funerals
4. Bereavement topic night
For example, "Dealing with grief during the holidays"
5. Couples night, couples retreat
6. Men's retreat, women's retreat, etc.
7. Alpha



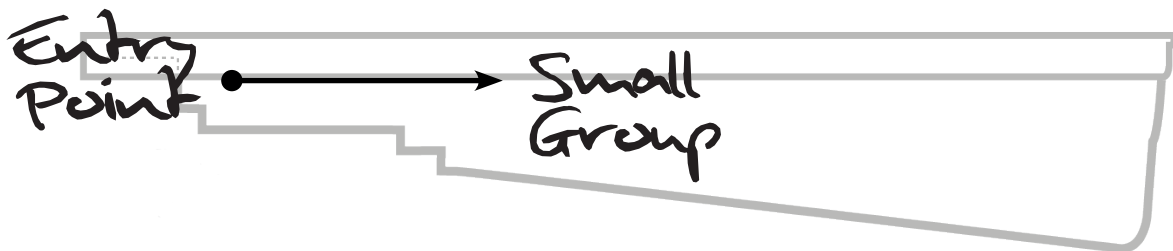
NOT AN END IN ITSELF

- Entry points are designed to move people from the shallow end of the pool to the gradually deeper, but not deepest, water

HOW MIGHT THE FORMATION LIFE CYCLE LOOK IN THESE OPPORTUNITIES?

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| • CONNECT | Often an invitation |
| • ENCOUNTER | Often initial encounter with God's love |
| • CONVERSION | An opportunity to take the next step in commitment |
| • GROW | Often growing in initial interior awareness of Christ and personal relationship |
| • MISSION | A basic level sharing about their experience |

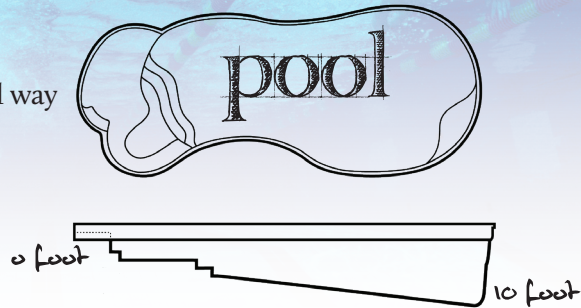
WHAT'S NEXT? WHERE DO WE WANT PEOPLE TO "MOVE" AFTER THE ENTRY POINT?



SMALL GROUPS

Moving towards depth

- Journeying with a few others in a more intentional way
- Space for more substantial discussion
- Integration to real life circumstances
- “How does this apply to my life?”
- Provides accountability
- Prime environment for healing and growth
- Cultivating an authentic community of communities



SETTING THEM UP FOR SUCCESS

- The greatest chance for people to experience real and substantial spiritual growth often begins with getting involved in a small group.
- The parish is meant to be a place where we have a sense of community.
- We cannot possibly know and journey deeply with all parishioners that come to Mass on Sunday.
- However, we can know and journey deeply with seven or eight people.
- Small groups provide an opportunity for that to happen.
- The aim of intentional discipleship in a parish often begins with helping parishioners connect with a small group.

HOW MIGHT THE FORMATION LIFE CYCLE LOOK IN THESE OPPORTUNITIES?

- CONNECT Relationships on a deeper, more consistent level, commitment to one another
- ENCOUNTER Opportunity for deeper levels of encounter;
now on a day to day basis, I learn to find Him in everyday life
- CONVERSION Conversion takes root by way of accountability and commitment
- GROW I learn more, grounding my experience of God in something beyond feelings
- MISSION Small group discussion teaches me to share my experience of God on a deeper level

WHAT'S NEXT? WHERE DO WE WANT PEOPLE TO “MOVE” AFTER THE ENTRY POINT?



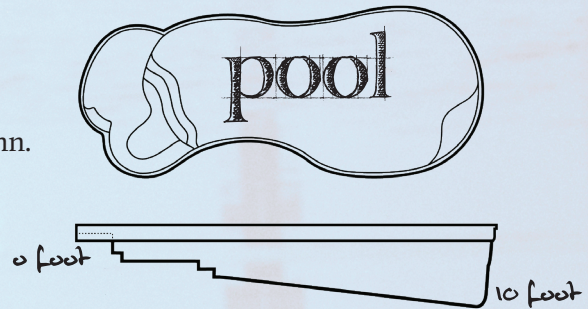
1:1 OR 1:3 MENTORING

The deep end of the pool

- Natural next step for those in a small group who hungry for more
- Ideal next step for someone ready to start learning how to disciple others
- Deepest level of accountability and support in the journey of faith
- Will have the greatest impact on a parish

IT'S WHAT JESUS DID

- Jesus chose the Twelve.
But, He also often called aside Peter, James and John.
They had more personalized formation.
- Jesus was forming and equipping them in a very particular way.
- 1:3 or 1:1 mentoring is essentially the same thing, realizing that investing time deeply into a few will yield much fruit.
- Ultimately, discipleship is able to be sustained when there are some who are equipped to disciple others in a more intentional way.
- Parishioners who are open to and ready for this level of formation are being equipped to be a “disciple maker”

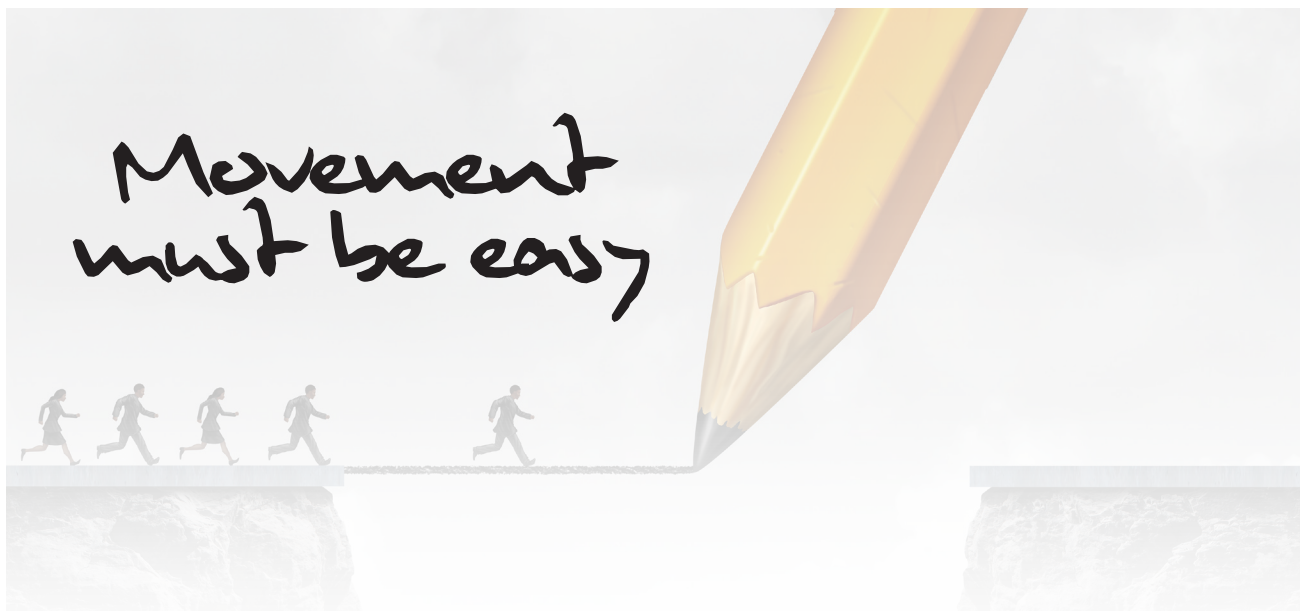


HOW MIGHT THE FORMATION LIFE CYCLE LOOK IN THESE OPPORTUNITIES?

- CONNECT Aware of what's needed for me to connect and on my own sustain those connections
Helping other people find connections, sharing deeper interior experience with a few (*spiritual director, Confessor, mentor*)
- ENCOUNTER Experiencing daily encounter through daily prayer life and interior awareness
- CONVERSION Exercising the discipline of daily examen and examination
- GROW Refining docility and cooperation with the Holy Spirit within charisms, and the normal practice of ongoing learning and formation
- MISSION Growing in way of life with Jesus in my vocation, occupation, and relational areas of life

WHAT'S NEXT? WHERE DO WE WANT PEOPLE TO “MOVE” AFTER THE ENTRY POINT?

I begin to make other disciples



“In a relay race the most important part of the race are the **handoffs**. Four runners are on the same team, and each runner’s speed is crucial but not nearly as crucial as the handoffs. **Relay races are won or lost at the handoffs**. Sometimes the teams with the best runners lose, and teams with the best handoffs win. You have seen it. A team is out in the lead, and then someone drops the baton during a handoff. And the team loses. The handoffs are that important. **Movement is about the handoffs.**”

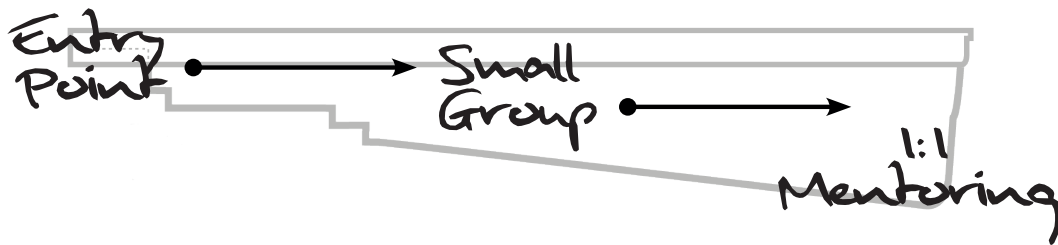
“*Movement is what happens in between the programs. Movement is how someone is handed off from one level of commitment to a greater level of commitment.* How a church moves someone from (an entry point) to a small group is movement. How a church is designed to move a person from being an observer to being a contributor is movement.”

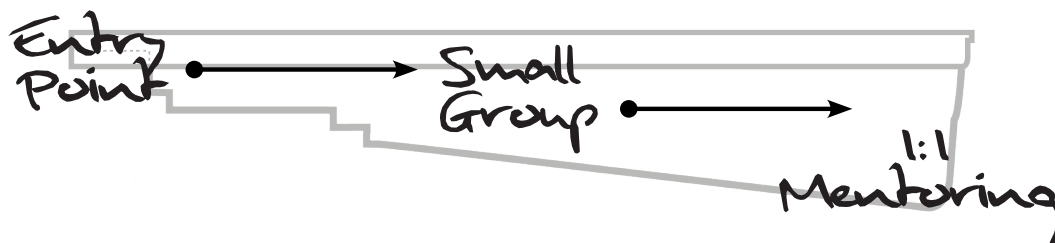
“Sadly, most churches are like poor relay teams. Instead of caring about the handoffs, they are preoccupied with the programs. They pay little attention to how people are moved to greater levels of commitment. They ignore what happens *between the programs*. Simple churches pay attention to the handoffs. They have grasped the truth that assimilation effectiveness is more important than programmatic effectiveness.”

“The vibrant churches we studied have a simple process that produces movement, a process that facilitates the hand-offs. The programs in these churches are tools used to **promote movement**. *The leaders focus on what happens in between the programs as much as they do the programs.* Our research confirms that movement is an essential design element in a simple church. According to the data, vibrant and growing churches have already recognized the importance of movement.”

“Winning teams excel in the handoffs, and so do simple churches. They are experts in designing a simple process that produces movement. To implement the movement element, church leaders must take a fresh look at the weekly church calendar and the regularly scheduled programs. All programs must be placed in sequential order along the ministry process. This is what creates movement in a ministry process.”

— Excerpts from *Simple Church* by Eric Geiger, page 74





EXAMPLE 3 ALPHA

THE ENTRY EXPERIENCE IS ...

They hear about ALPHA from the pulpit, or they receive a personal invitation. They feel comfortable and are open.

EXAMPLE 3 ALPHA

"MOVING" DEEPER ...

They agree to serve the next ALPHA group. It's easy, behind the scenes stuff. They *stay connected* to people they trust.

EXAMPLE 3 ALPHA

"MOVING" DEEPER ...

They serve another ALPHA group, this time with a bigger role. They now trust the Church, the parish.

EXAMPLE 3 ALPHA

ONGOING SMALL GROUP FORMATION

They are growing in confidence. The SMALL GROUP anchors them. They feel connected to the parish. *Perhaps*, one of them is ready for more.

EXAMPLE 3 ALPHA

1 ON 1 DISCIPLESHIP MENTORING

They begin meeting weekly with a trained "disciple maker" so that they can be a "disciple maker".

EXAMPLE 4 ADVENT MISSION

THE ENTRY EXPERIENCE IS ...

They attend the parish ADVENT MISSION. The ADVENT MISSION is designed to get them using REJOICE! through Advent.

EXAMPLE 4 ADVENT MISSION

"MOVING" DEEPER ...

The pastor encourages REJOICE! small groups for Advent: Families? Men's? Women's? Couples?

EXAMPLE 4 ADVENT MISSION

"MOVING" DEEPER ...

The pastor encourages the same small groups during Lent, using JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM.

EXAMPLE 4 ADVENT MISSION

ONGOING SMALL GROUP FORMATION

Some groups commit to meeting more. The SMALL GROUP anchors them. They are growing. *Perhaps*, one of them is ready for more.

EXAMPLE 4 ADVENT MISSION

1 ON 1 DISCIPLESHIP MENTORING

They begin meeting weekly with a trained "disciple maker" so that they can be a "disciple maker".

DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

CHAPTER 11
SECTION 9



HOW?

Small groups: Why are they the heart of the process?



Excerpts from Fr. James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Missional Parish*

All following text are excerpts from Fr. Mallon, even if not in quotations.

Universally, churches that are healthy, growing and making disciples embrace a model of the local church as a “community of communities.” These smaller communities gather together as one community for Sunday Eucharist. Many distinguish between small groups of eight to twelve people and mid-size groups containing 25 to 35 people. For healthy churches, involvement in a small or mid-size group is not considered optional, but is an integral part of the life of that local church.

We have already examined how post-moderns experience conversion and transformation primarily through their experience of belonging. That it is not easy for us as Catholics to reach the unchurched and the fallen away through creating experiences of belonging is no surprise. This creates a challenge for those who have been brought to a personal life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, whether they were a part of the Church or outside of her. At the point of conversion or awakening, they became aware of their need for meaningful community, a place where they will be known, loved, challenged and supported.

This community must be a safe place within which the good work that has begun in them can be brought to completion. (Philippians 1:6) These kinds of relationships are key to a healthy Church. Six of Gallup’s twelve “me” statements, which measure engagement, speak of this experience of community:

- In the last month, I have received recognition or praise from someone in my parish.
- The spiritual leaders in my parish seem to care about me as a person.
- There is someone in my parish who encourages my spiritual development.
- The other members of my parish are committed to spiritual growth.
- Aside from family members, I have a best friend in my parish.
- In the last six months, someone in my parish has talked to me about my spiritual growth.

How can an experience like this be possible in an average Catholic parish? Traditionally, it was the parish priest who would give people praise and recognition, care about parishioners and encourage and ask about spiritual growth. This may still work in a small parish where there is a very small priest-to-people ratio, but this is not the case in most parishes today. The bigger a parish is, the smaller it must become. Providing opportunities to experience authentic community must be a priority.

The culture that dominates most parishes presents a challenge in making this a reality. Many Catholics place value only on ministry done by the priest, and consider themselves to have meaningful connection with the parish only if they have a strong personal connection to the pastor. If the priest is unable to be at all the gatherings of a committee, team or group, at least he should drop in once in a while. The problem is that if we remain bound to this value, then the number of meaningful communities in a parish will always be limited. This would work in a small parish, but only in a parish that was not healthy. A small parish, if healthy, will grow. If it grows and continues to grow, sooner or later it will be large, and the model will have to change.

In a large parish, healthy or unhealthy, this model is already profoundly limiting. This is a question that haunts me at night when I am trying to sleep. For me, it is not an abstract question, but one that has faces and names attached to it. Sometimes I will think of someone I have not seen in a while, and think, “What happened to her? Where is he? Who is looking out for that person?” It is just so easy for our people to get lost in the crowd and to fall through the cracks, even those who have had authentic experiences of the Lord.

I think of the many participants who have come through RCIA in my different parishes, and of the high number of newly baptized and confirmed who have gone AWOL. We bring people to the Sacraments of Initiation through a small- or mid-size group experience. It is transformative and supportive. Participants experience exactly the kind of community reflected in the statements used in the Gallup “me” survey, but then the Easter Vigil happens. The culmination of a lengthy process results in most participants being released into the general population with a slap on the back, a “welcome to full membership in the Church” and a “good luck.” Is it any wonder that we have huge casualty rates? The solution is staring us in the face.

The very process that brings candidates to faith and to the sacraments is the process that is essential to nourishing the ongoing life of the Church. Meaningful community cannot be part of a program – it must become a normative part of the life of the Church, and the life of the Church must become the program.

“But what are they among so many people?” (John 6:9) I am also haunted by the question of how the people of my parish can be sufficiently cared for. With so many tasks and responsibilities, with so many staff to lead and guide so that some meaningful degree of ministry can happen in proportion to the number of people in the parish, how can I ensure that parishioners are cared for? If we wish to move beyond the therapeutic model of pastoral care that dominates most parishes, we will need not only alternate structures, but alternate values. If a parish priest with just 2,000 families in his parish were to spend ten hours a week visiting families for one hour each, it would take about four years before he could return to continue the conversation. This kind of situation is an unacceptable standard of care.

In reality, short of a major catastrophe hitting a family, in most parishes the priest is unable to appear at the door of his parishioners. Caring therefore needs to become the job of all, not just of the pastor. Only then will a Church become healthy. Only then will parish priests be freed from an impossible burden and be able to see it happen.

A kind of surrender needs to take place for this to happen, and it is a painful one. I have struggled so much with feeling like a “bad priest.” Often on weekends, by the end of the third weekend Mass, I have seen 1,700 people in church and have greeted hundreds, and still have one more Mass. Dozens of parishioners will ask for prayers for loved ones, and many, on their way out, will say things like, “I know you’re busy, Father, but just in case, my husband is in the hospital, on the 7th floor, Room 46.” Parishioners give me updates on their health, and their loved one’s health, and often communicate out of a presumption that I know exactly who they are and remember every detail of what they told me three weeks ago. Listening and responding is part of my job as a Father of the parish, but how can I respond to all of it? By 1:00 p.m. on Sunday, I feel like my brains are oozing out of my ears, and the people keep coming and coming and coming. A very real part of me wants to cry out and say, “Stop! Please stop! I cannot carry this burden. I cannot bear the burden of fearing that a moment’s inattention or fatigue may hurt even one fragile person.” Too often, I feel that I have been sucked dry, with nothing else to give.

One day, after a weekday Mass, I came home and wrote this in my journal:

From the back of the church today to the vestry, grabbed a dozen times to hear about nephews’ dying dogs and brothers with cancer, illness, sickness. People need to be heard, but is it my role to do so? I didn’t become a priest to comfort little old ladies, but to lead people into mission to win the world for Jesus, so that every little old lady can have someone to comfort her in the name of Jesus.

I hope I don’t offend anyone by these words, which were written in anguish. It is not my intent. The truth is that if we are to become a Church where everyone is cared for as they should be, we must acknowledge that this is not the job of the priest. Priests must have the courage to communicate this to their people, and the people must have the courage to communicate this to their priests. It is my conviction that the formation of small and mid-size groups can provide the answer to this dilemma. The good news is that there are many examples of how such a system in a church can operate, even if these examples are not always found in a Catholic context.

At Saint Benedict Parish, we are trying to implement a system of mid-size groups called connect groups. The model we use comes from Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), the Anglican Church in London that created *Alpha*. When *Alpha* is done right, usually at least 50% of the participants desire to continue in some experience of community. HTB originally attempted to meet this need for community by establishing a network of small groups. *Alpha* small groups would become church small groups. Over the years, however, they found that small groups would ultimately get smaller and smaller. People would move away or fall away, and the intense and intimate nature of a small group makes it impenetrable to new members that allow it to be repopulated and to continue. Furthermore, when a small group was not working for a new believer, they would often be so embarrassed and self-conscious about dropping out of the group that they would drop out of the church as well.

The solution was to create broader mid-size groups of 25 to 35 people that were both small enough and big enough. They were small enough for people to be known, cared for, loved and called forth. They were big enough for people to sit at the back and not be put under the kind of pressure that might exist in a group of eight. They would be big enough to admit new members and grow. This model, used by HTB and many other churches, allows the movement of parishioners and non-churchgoers from the experience of *Alpha* into an ongoing community where they will continue their faith development, and, most importantly, not be lost and not fall through the cracks.

These connect groups are led by lay people. Groups meet twice a month in the homes of church members. Each evening consists of a shared meal, a time of singing and praying, a talk by a member and a time of praying for and with one another. The group does not gather as students around a few teachers; instead, all members take a turn to present on a topic or to share their testimony. For many, it is a safe place to give their first talk or to lead prayer for the first time. In this way, members are encouraged, equipped and called forth to exercise their gifts.

The members of the leadership at HTB meet regularly with the lay leaders of the groups and invest primarily in them, equipping them to lead each group so that everybody receives the care they need. HTB has a weekly attendance of over 5,000 people (the average age is 27 years), and has hundreds of connect groups up and running in the homes of their parishioners. In the HTB model, connect groups are also the locus of missional outreach – either evangelistic outreach or work with the poor and marginalized. On the weeks when the connect group does not meet, members meet in small groups that have a specifically catechetical focus, as opposed to the caring and calling forth focus of the connect groups.

At Saint Benedict Parish, we introduced connect groups shortly after our second season of *Alpha*. After we had finished our first courses, many people had come to faith in Christ for the first time, many had come into personal relationship with Jesus for the first time, and many had had an experience of the Holy Spirit for the first time. But no matter where people had been spiritually before they took the course, those whose lives were touched all experienced a new form of Christian community, and once they tasted it, they wanted more. I had tried to introduce connect groups at my previous parish, but it had not been successful. This time I was determined to make it happen. We have made our share of mistakes, and are still far from getting it right, but less than four years later we now have over 300 parishioners in ten different connect groups.

We started with four connect groups and slowly added to them as we brought more people through an experience of *Alpha*. We ask that all who seek to belong to a connect group go through the experience of *Alpha* first. This is the only way that members can have a frame of reference for the degree of support and connection that we seek to establish. It was not and is not the only option for people who come through *Alpha* at Saint Benedict. We encourage the continuation of catechetical formation through a wide variety of adult faith formation programs. These programs, however, are terminal. The groups disband. Parishioners often move from one program to another, but are still left without an essential caring community at the end of the day.

It is obvious that we need to care for people by providing temporary community-based faith formation and permanent groups where people truly belong and are cared for. Once one of our connect groups grew beyond 35 people, our task was to identify, call forth and equip new leaders and split the group into two. Some of the current ten groups are based on age, some are mixed generations, and some are “family friendly,” with children and parents gathering together. The best thing about this is that it all happens in the homes of parishioners. People often ask us how we fit everyone in, and the truth is that it is organized chaos, but a load of fun. It is no different than having a party at your house. People do it all the time. The beauty of the model is that it works. I do not have to be there. Over the last three years, I have visited only two connect groups, but every week I meet parishioners I do not know who tell me they are in a connect group and last week gave their first talk. I love it when I have no clue about what God is doing in my parish. This is the way it should be!

How can I even pretend to control the working of the Holy Spirit in a parish of this size? The Spirit blows where he wills, and the job of the pastor is to get out of the way. At the same time, however, there is a line of accountability to me as the pastor. There has to be. Several of our parish staff meet regularly with the connect group leaders (each group is led by two couples) to coach them and care for them. They report to our parish Director of Evangelization who, in turn, reports to me. All names for potential connect group leaders are vetted by me. Is there a risk that something may happen that may not be totally right? Of course there is, but this is infinitely more desirable than nothing happening at all. As I once heard Pastor Rick Warren say, “Leaders of a Church will either be risk takers, care takers or undertakers.”

There is always risk in giving up control. It may not be done properly, or, the more common fear, it may not be done as “properly” as I would do it! But low control is a necessity if the act of caring for one another will become an embodied value and not just be the task of a few ministering to a few more. It is necessary, but it is not enough. The counterpoint is high accountability. (I will be saying more about this principle in Chapter 7, when I speak about leadership.) With regard to connect groups, however, the key is to choose the right people to lead, to trust them with real responsibility, to set them up for success and to constantly be in communication with them. I am amazed and thrilled to see that more than 15% of my parishioners are well protected from falling through the cracks. Our goal is that by 2018, five years after we started, 75% of our parishioners will belong in a connect group, and that such an experience of community will be so normal that no one will think twice about it.