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Parish Newsletter

A Service of the Parish Evaluation Project
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Parish Exit Interviews

The number of people attending Mass has been in steady decline for a number of years and the rate has been increasing recently. William J. Byron, SJ wrote an article entitled, "On Their Way Out" (*America* magazine, Jan. 3-17, 2011, pp. 16-18.) He suggested, as happens in businesses that are losing customers, that Catholic parishes need to find out from those who no longer attend Mass what are the reasons. "An exit interview, if used creatively, could help church leaders discover ways of welcoming back those who have left, even as it helps leaders find ways to strengthen the current worshipping community." (p. 16)

Connecting With Those Who Have Left

Locating parishioners who no longer attend church is not an impossible task, but it does take desire, time and a bit of organization. There are two sources for obtaining names; one is the parish membership lists, the second is the congregation itself. During a given month put out a simple card in the pews and ask every family to provide the basic information of names, address, phone, cell phone and email. It takes four weekends to pick up those who come often but not every week. This information is matched with the parish census as a way of identifying those who have not been attending. A small sample of names is chosen as the target group for an exit interview. The second resource is to ask people, on the same card in the pews, for the names of those they know who have stopped coming to church, be it a relative, friend, or neighbor. They are asked to include phone numbers, addresses or emails if they know them. From these two sources a list of some 100 names, picked at random, is chosen as people to contact for the exit interview.

What To Ask

The tone is important. As with any interview, the intention is not to cast blame or make judgments but to express gratitude for providing information that will be helpful to the leadership in ministering to the people. Either through a personal interview, or by phone, letter or email, the following questions could provide insight into why people have gone elsewhere. And remember, keep it simple!

1. We have missed seeing you. If it is true that you have stopped attending, what are the reasons? Was it something that we at the parish or the larger Church did, failed to do, could have done better? Your honest response will help us do a better job ministering to others who have had the same experience as you.
2. If you were in our shoes, what would you do differently, where would you put your energies, what groups or ministries would you emphasize?

It Needs A Response

It is not enough to ask people's opinions about what the parish could do to stem the tide. There must also be a commitment to take people's responses seriously and make amends. Once key issues are identified, a summary of the results needs to be communicated to both those who responded and to the parishioners as a whole. Use the information in homilies, hold meetings so people can discuss in small groups what was uncovered. The second step is to begin addressing people's concerns, whether it involves the weekend liturgies, the welcoming atmosphere, Catholic teachings, a lack of transparency in decision making, questions about how contributions are being spent. Discovering why people are losing interest in the Church and the parish is critical for making relevant plans for the future. As Fr. Byron suggests, "Leaders must try to discern the presence of the Spirit in what the laypeople are saying and find the pastoral courage it will take to implement necessary change." (p. 18)

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