

PRINCIPLE I

Belonging

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Foster a sense of belonging among all who come to the parish, and develop that sense of belonging among members throughout the moments of their lives and stages of their faith. This is the first principle.

At a recent parish leadership gathering, a parishioner shared how important belonging to the faith community has been for him and his wife. Mark explained

For a long time, my wife and I came to Mass here, but we were not deeply involved in the parish community. My wife went to a Bible study at a local Christian church with her women friends from our neighborhood. We even did *Purpose Driven Life*

with the same group. It was hard coming to Mass but not really feeling a part of the community. While we appreciated what we were learning about God's word with our Protestant friends, there was nothing about the sacraments, nothing about the richness of our Catholic tradition. We were torn; we loved our friends, but we sensed we were missing something in our lives. Through God's grace my wife was moved to experience a parish retreat here, and she met a group of women whose company she really enjoyed. Slowly she became connected here. God's hand continued at work in this; she and I joined the other women and their husbands to form a small faith community and the friendships that developed in that group have changed our lives. As I look back, I think God thought I really needed intense support. Three of the strong Christian men in our group are now in formation for the diaconate (and continue to guide and inspire me)! It was, and is, belonging to this group of Catholic people that has brought me into the life of the parish and has made me a stronger Christian.

The conversation that followed Mark's sharing was deeply moving. At round tables, each parishioner told a little of his or her own story. One by one, the participants expressed gratitude that someone had taken time to invite and encourage their involvement and deepening relationship with the faith community. For each person in the room, that initial relationship with the community had resulted in a more profound relationship with Christ; God became more "real" and connected to their every day lives through the reality of parish life.

BELONGING AND BELIEF

What unfolded in this discussion illustrates findings in recent Gallup Organization studies. In most cases, belief does not lead to belonging, but rather, belonging leads to belief (Albert L. Winseman, *Growing an Engaged Church*, Gallup Press, New York, 2007, p. 44). The Christian community is the embodiment of the Body of Christ. As such, we experience Christ's presence through one another, particularly when we gather at the Eucharistic table. It stands to reason, then, that the parish community should be one that has its arms wide open at all times for every person. Fostering a sense of belonging is vital, since this



Engagement is a sense of belonging.

Engaged parishioners:

- » are loyal and have a strong psychological connection to their parish;
- » are more spiritually committed;
- » are more likely to invite friends, family members, and coworkers to a parish event;
- » give more, both financially and in commitment of their time;
- » organize their lives around their parish because through it their faith has grown and deepened;
- » have found opportunities to serve and help others in their parish;
- » have developed their most meaningful interpersonal relationships in their parish.

(*Growing an Engaged Church*, p. 67-68)



Think of your own experience. When did you move from “going to Mass” to having a sense of *belonging* in your parish? Who or what helped facilitate that movement?



is the way many will experience and deepen their faith in Christ. The most striking element of the Gallup research may be this: parishioner engagement, that sense of belonging to the parish, is primarily a result of *feeling* that we are of value to the community.

CHANGING THE WAY THE PARISH FEELS

The parishes that seem to live discipleship and stewardship most fully are ones in which people say, “when I am there, it feels different than when I am at another church.” That feeling comes from people who are spiritually committed individuals. These people know their parish as the place that supports them throughout their lives in Christ; they know that others depend on them to recognize their needs, respond to them, and acknowledge the ways in which each person contributes to the whole. That feeling comes when we are in the presence of a group of people who have fallen in love with Christ and from whom that love flows out. They seek to have the mind of Christ, to set their hearts on all that is holy, and to offer their lives in loving imitation of our self-emptying Lord. Parishes that are communities of this sort are attentive to the many ways in which we may set the stage for building a strong relationship with Christ, and in which people may become engaged in the life of the faith community.

LIVES ARE CHANGED

Engagement, true belonging, leads people to happier lives. In fact, the people who are engaged are vastly more likely to strongly agree with this statement: “I am completely satisfied with my life” (Winseman, 39). We know that people who take discipleship seriously still experience life’s challenges; if anything, disciples know the depth and breadth of all that life holds for them, both challenges and joys. Engagement in the faith community, however, helps to root us in the fullness of hope in Christ, giving our lives more meaning and purpose.

Those who are engaged are also much more likely to *invite* others to join them at a parish function (worship, social, service, or catechetical); they *serve* more in their community, and *give* more of their financial resources to the parish. While in the past, most parishes have spent much energy and attention on developing the actions noted above, the studies show clearly that inviting, serving, giving, and life satisfaction are *outcomes*, and are the result of engagement and spiritual commitment. This information is vital for us as we shape parish practice. We should be attentive to the many ways in which we can build engagement in our parishes, with the assurance that the important outcomes will follow (Winseman, 39–43).

Engagement is key to drawing people toward powerful expressions of faith. In short, true belonging leads to living discipleship and stewardship. There is a caveat here,

Indicators of a Parish’s Spiritual Health

Four Important Outcomes

- » Inviting
 - » Giving
 - » Serving
 - » Life Satisfaction
-

however. Gallup survey (2001–2005) information indicates that only sixteen percent of Catholics are fully engaged in their parishes; forty-nine percent are not engaged (and just waiting to be drawn more deeply into the faith community, and through the community to Christ); thirty-five percent are actively disengaged (diminishing the community through apathy or negativity).



Two Other Types of Parishioners

The “Not Engaged”:

- » may attend regularly, but do not have a strong emotional connection to the parish;
- » are connected socially more than spiritually;
- » give moderately but not sacrificially;
- » do a minimal amount of service in the community;
- » are less likely to invite others and are more likely to leave;
- » are not negative, and are just waiting for an opportunity to become engaged.

The Actively Disengaged Fall into Two Groups:

- » Apathetic:
 - come only once or twice a year if at all;
 - can tell someone which parish they belong to, but often by location rather than by name;
- » Physically present but psychologically hostile:
 - are almost always present,
 - are unhappy with their parish and insist on sharing their misery with just about everyone.

(*Growing an Engaged Church*, p. 68-70)



THE REAL POSSIBILITIES

This is an area of great concern and of great potential! Think for a moment of all that could happen in the lives of people and in the life of your parish community, not to mention the world, if only a small portion of the currently “not engaged” were to experience true belonging. Rather than exhausting ourselves in trying to meet the demands of the actively disengaged, those who interpret the data suggest strengthening the engaged and focusing our outreach on the “not engaged.” A parishioner leader recently commented on this insight.

This makes sense to me, to concentrate on the “not engaged.” I spent ten years of my life teaching and practicing the concept of total quality management, and at the end of it, realized I had spent ten years beating my head against the wall, trying to make everyone happy, rather than focusing my energy and attention on the areas in which I had the greatest possibility of success. We should learn from experiences like that and adjust our practices, in business and in the Church, accordingly.

Keeping the importance of engagement in mind, you can begin to examine your current practices and make subtle shifts, reaching out to those who are with you every week but who do not feel they truly belong. If belonging is as vital as the Gallup research and conversations such as the one with Mark described above demonstrate, there must be things your parish can do to create an atmosphere in which people sense that they truly belong to the community.

BELONGING LEADS TO COMMITMENT

What will you really be trying to do as you foster a sense of belonging in the parish community? That sense of belonging is important because people who have a deep relationship with their faith community are more likely to be spiritually committed. That's the crux of the Gallup Organization's understanding of engagement. Spiritually committed people, people whose faith shapes the way they live, are more likely to exhibit those outcomes we spoke of earlier, of inviting, serving, giving, and life satisfaction. The spiritually committed person has a sense that his or her faith community will support and demonstrate God's love in every moment of life. That is a pretty astounding thing when you think about it! Fostering a sense of belonging helps us to create a place in which people feel at home, a place where we know there is a deep connection between our faith and our life.

DEVELOPING A VISION

“Teacher,” he said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

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This gospel passage was chosen for the beginning of this chapter not because it is the greatest commandment but because of what follows in Luke's account, the parable of

the Good Samaritan. This commonly-known parable is often cited as why we should take care of those in need, but we sometimes miss the beginning of the parable in which the lawyer (who had answered correctly, with love of neighbor) continues to question Jesus, saying, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus didn’t simply answer, but instead told the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate the concept of neighbor. The *Oxford Bible Commentary* helps us better understand: “Neighborliness knows no bounds and must proceed from an attitude of spontaneity and self-forgetfulness....The parable in its setting calls for an abandonment of all status, privilege, and exclusiveness” (Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 942). When we expand our boundaries and allow for spontaneity, we do abandon our views of who is in or out of the parish and help create that sense of belonging that is vital for engagement. How does your parish answer the question, “who is my neighbor?”

WHAT THE DOCUMENTS SAY

Our Church’s guiding documents highlight this need to facilitate belonging. Often, while specifically written for a particular segment of our population, these documents give us a clear understanding of the life we should share with all members. For example, *Renewing the Vision*, the bishops’ pastoral letter on youth ministry, provides great insight into creating this sense of belonging. Ministry with youth, it states:

- ✦ “*reaches* out to young people by meeting them in their various life situations, building relationships, providing healing care and concern, offering a genuine response

- to their hungers and needs, and inviting them into a relationship with Jesus and the Christian community;
- ✦ *invites* young people personally into the life and mission of the Catholic community so that they may experience the support, nurture, and care necessary to live as Christians;
 - ✦ *calls* young people to grow in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, to make his message their own, and to join us in the continuing process of conversion to which the gospel calls us;
 - ✦ *challenges* young people to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship—shaping their lives in the vision, values, and teachings of Jesus and living his mission in their daily lives through witness and service;
 - ✦ *calls young people to be evangelizers* of other young people, their families, and the community” (USCCB, 1997, p. 37).

This development of a sense of belonging is echoed in *Sons and Daughters of the Light in Goal Two: Connecting Young Adults with the Church*. There our bishops invite us “to make contact with young adults and to invite and welcome them to participate in the life and mission of the Christian community, which proclaims Jesus Christ by preaching the gospel.” The document illustrates this welcome in its first objective: “Evangelizing Outreach: To identify places where young adults gather and to connect them personally with the Church by listening to their concerns, hopes, and dreams, and by welcoming them into a community of faith” (USCCB, 1996, p. 33).

Covering all ages, stages, and ethnicities, *Go and Make Disciples* encourages us with its three goals, particularly the

second goal: “To invite all people in the United States, whatever their social or cultural background, to hear the message of salvation in Jesus Christ so they may come to join us in the fullness of the Catholic faith” (p. 57).

EXPLORING SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE

Practice One: Extend a Bigger Welcome

Creating a sense of welcome is not only vital for those who are guests or newcomers, but for every person, at every moment of their lives. Talk with people who have been away for a while and have returned. Often, they speak of leaving and wondering if anyone would notice their disappearance, or of being warmly welcomed at another church, and knowing somewhere in their heart that they had found a place where people cared. On their return, if the parish has changed (or they have come back to Catholicism through a different parish), returning Catholics will speak of the importance of being offered a genuine welcome.

When it is genuine (and people will intuitively sense its authenticity), this open-armed and open-hearted welcome is a living manifestation of the Spirit of Christ. Think of the many stories we have of Jesus welcoming people, often those whom the established folks of the time were not thrilled to have in their company: the poor, the widows, children,

What vision of a belonging parish emerges for you from these documents?

If you were asked to describe this vision in one sentence, what would you say?



people who weren't the brightest or the best. Jesus sought out plain people who would become trusted and faithful disciples.

As people come into relationship with Christ through the community, they naturally want to share their love with others, and their welcome is a powerful living extension of the love of God. That is what Mark was describing the night of the parish leaders' meeting. He had a powerful experience of Christ's presence through the people who drew him into the community of believers, just as those who encountered Jesus did when he drew them into the company of those who followed him.

Practice Two: Make Hospitality Your First Rule

Walk into your parish on a Sunday and approach the church as though you were an outsider. Or, visit a parish in which you know no one. What is your first impression? Do you feel that you are valued, that the community that is gathering will be richer for your participation? It seems that many of us spend much time in preparation of the liturgy, which is a necessary and proper thing to do, but we forget that the act of gathering, of coming together for the celebration, begins a long while before the song, Penitential Rite, and opening prayer. The "gathering" really begins in people's hearts, as they gather their thoughts and prepare themselves to pray with the community. The "gathering" begins as parents get young children ready, and as singles, divorced adults, and widows reflect on the week that has passed and ask our Lord to nourish and strengthen them for the week ahead. The "gathering" continues as people park their cars and walk side by side with others with whom they will offer prayers this day. The "gathering" includes

the ways in which people are greeted as they arrive in the church building, are assisted if needed as they find a place inside, and look to the people around them for a sign of hospitality.

There are things we can do at church before and after the Mass, too, that will increase the sense of hospitality that people feel upon their arrival. These things could appear to be insignificant, but these small things add up to something much greater. They work together to create an atmosphere of hospitality and warm welcome, as though the Lord himself were standing in our midst (and Christ does stand in our midst, after all!).

Expect Resistance, Invite Inclusion, Multiply Ministry. Sometimes when parish leaders first begin discussing ways to become more hospitable, they encounter unexpected resistance from long-standing members. Much of the resistance has to do with change, and with the uncertainty of what might happen if newcomers offered to become involved. Those who have been stalwart members for years are secure in the knowledge that the parish needs them; what would be the result of welcoming the many new families who arrived for Mass each week?

For example, most parishes already have ushers who faithfully serve each Sunday. Perhaps suggest that the ushers continue to take care of the details inside the worship space. The ushers know how to seat people efficiently, how to take up the collection, assist those with physical disabilities, and help visitors find their family members. The ushers know how to take care of people inside the church, and they are busy with their tasks.

Ministers of hospitality can be recruited for the gathering space and may stand outside, if possible, at least

on nice days. These individuals watch for people who need assistance getting into church, warmly greet everyone as they arrive, especially anyone who seems uneasy or unfamiliar, and they distribute the bulletins at the end of Mass. Hospitality ministers outside of the worship space, ushers within. You can double the number of people making certain everyone is taken care of, find new ways for people with the gift of hospitality to serve, and the result will be a new sense of welcome for all who come to be with you for the celebration of the Eucharist. Those who earlier resisted may come to appreciate the increased welcome for liturgies. When that happens, invite them to recruit others to join them. The ministers of hospitality may help with other events at which there will be many visitors, spreading the welcome beyond the Sunday Mass. The solution to the need for better hospitality at Sunday liturgy ripples into other areas of parish life, as long-standing members begin to see the value of the parish they love. They will find that the inclusion of others in ministry enhances the service offered to parishioners, guests, and to those in need in the world.

What about the “person in the pew”? How does the welcome spread beyond those who are designated as ministers of hospitality? Just before Christmas or Easter, many pastors invite their members to extend a special welcome to visitors, “even if they sit in your pew.” This always gets a giggle, as many of us find ourselves sitting in the same place week after week. Such a reminder helps not just with the big feasts; once people become aware of the difference a welcome can make, they will find themselves regularly welcoming people, even seeking out guests and newcomers.

Practice Three: Widen the Circles

The situation of already-involved members holding tightly to the ways in which they offer service often extends beyond the celebration of the liturgy. In many parishes, people speak of the 20-80 rule: twenty percent of the people do all the work, while eighty percent attend, benefit from the service of others, and leave. (Remember the principle of engagement: those who are not engaged will not give to the extent of those who are engaged.) The 20-80 rule also applies where financial giving is concerned. In many cases, the same twenty percent who give their time to the parish also give their financial support, while the remaining eighty percent give little if any of their resources. “There’s plenty to do around here,” you’ll hear the twenty percent say, “if others would just step up and offer their help.” And yet, many who have offered will point out the ways in which it has been made clear to them that their help is not needed. “I’ve tried time and again,” they’ll remark, “but the insiders have it all under control.” This inside-outside dynamic is difficult to break through, but it can be done.

A colleague who provides pastoral staff training days encourages people to “*widen the circles*.” Picture yourself in church at Mass on Sunday, he’ll ask people. Now, look around yourself. Chances are, you know almost everyone who surrounds you, at least by face. You’ve probably spoken to most of them, and have ministered with many in the last few months. Now, look beyond you. Can you see the faces of the people in the two or three rows just beyond your circle of friends or colleagues? *Widen your circles!* Think about how you might help those people to know their value and to belong. Then, act on what you are thinking about right now. You might be amazed at the result!

Practice Four: Invite People

People in church circles often speak of invitation as being something not very “Catholic,” or at the very least something many Catholics are not comfortable with. Even those who want to be inviting often feel inadequate to the task; “I was just never taught to invite people to come to church with me the way my evangelical brothers and sisters were,” many will comment. Even when it’s a parishioner who could be the object of the invitation, and the invite is simply to a parish event, we may still feel tongue-tied. “What if the person says no?” people wonder. “What if the person agrees, then what?” Yet most of us realize, when we stop to reflect as the parishioner leaders did in our opening story, that an invitation made a remarkable difference in our lives. Most of us become involved, or come to belong more deeply, as the result of an invitation.

So, how to get over invitation-hesitation? This may sound silly, but the first step is to practice! Consider holding an intergenerational catechesis gathering called “How to share your faith with others.” The gathering includes time for people to share part of their experience of Christ in their lives, strengthening their own sense of God’s presence, and becoming more comfortable in sharing their faith with neighbors, coworkers, or family members. Begin with everyone together, and then invite high school youth to take younger children (with adult leaders) to a separate place for a while. The youth can help the children practice talking with friends and classmates, giving the youth an opportunity to witness as well. Some parishes hold a dry-run practice before phone campaigns to invite members to a special event. No matter how you do it, practicing can be a good step toward becoming more inviting.

Equip people with a card or letter that can be shared

with neighbors and friends. Sometimes it is easier to invite someone by giving the person a card that has been prepared by a parishioner team, with the details of the event, including time, location, and a phone number or web address where people can get more details. A pull-out or cut-out section of the bulletin works for this type of invitation as well.

When you focus on “invitation,” remember what the outcome is supposed to be: a deep sense of belonging through which people become more deeply conformed to Christ, and in that conformity seek to be more Christ-like.

Practice Five: Focus on New Parishioners

There is no time like the moment when people register in a parish to insure that they are warmly welcomed and invited to become immersed in parish life. Sometimes parish leaders take a new parishioner’s desire to join them for granted, or assume that new members will figure out ways to become connected on their own. Yet, the parishes that go out of their way to welcome and provide orientation to new parishioners find that these newest members are often ready and willing to become involved, and will offer meaningful contributions. People who register in our parishes do so because they have sensed that the parish could be a place for them, a place in which they may grow as disciples. These are people who are ready to be drawn deeply into relationship with the community and with Christ. How can you let them know that you are happy that they are coming to be one with you?

While many parishes have some sort of new parishioner welcome ministry, few seem to evaluate what is being done to welcome new members or to think creatively about

new possibilities for this ministry. If you're thinking about the importance of belonging and of evangelization as you structure greetings for new parishioners, the ministry that results will be more than one or two moments just after registration. It will more likely be a series of greetings over a period of time that are designed to bring new members fully into the life of the parish.

Many parishes have a team of people who visit the homes of new parishioners, often bringing a small gift or house blessing kit with them. Some have a Bread Ministry, in which the new members are welcomed with a loaf of home-baked bread, along with a note that welcomes them. Following this brief visit with an invitation to a gathering in a parishioner's home or at the parish, many new-parishioner-welcome teams take time to think about ways to invite the new members into a group or ministry that seems particularly appropriate. For example, the mother of an infant might receive a phone call from a member of the Moms' group, or a young adult might be invited to the next parish retreat; a teen might get a phone call from a parish youth who attends the same high school, and an older member who has just moved in with his adult child might be visited by a member of the Knights of Columbus. Becoming acquainted with new members enough to pair them with a person or group with whom they have something in common makes the invitation even more special. What a sign of the way in which the parish values them as a person!

"It's a very exciting time in your life," Debbie remarked on the phone not too long ago. "Let's find a time when we can meet, and I'll walk you through all the steps that will be part of your life in the coming months. You'll see, it will

be wonderful!” Debbie is a parishioner who meets with all the couples who are preparing for marriage. She explains the steps of the marriage preparation process, checks in with the couples occasionally to assure them of the parish’s prayers and support, and arranges for a parishioner wedding coordinator to facilitate the rehearsal and the wedding celebration. In short, Debbie is a representative of the parish community who warmly welcomes the couple and their family and friends, giving them a gift that cannot be measured. Debbie and the other members of the marriage preparation team let the couples know that the parish is committed to them. The couples come to understand that the parish values them and the sacrament of marriage, and the community rejoices with them in this important moment of their lives.

Sometimes it seems the ways in which our parishes view special moments in people’s lives can be a version of “the glass is half-empty,” or “the glass is half-full” kind of thinking. Some will say, “I don’t know why we bother with so much emphasis on sacramental preparation. People really just want to get it over with, and they don’t stick around long afterward. Just give them what they have to have, and move on.” Others see sacramental preparation and similar transition moments as opportunities for evangelization, for welcoming people to deepen their relationship with Christ through the community. Sure, there is information to be given to couples preparing for marriage, or for new parents preparing for the baptism of their child. Children need to prepare for their first reception of the sacraments of penance or Holy Communion, and often their parents need to refresh their understanding of these sacraments. Those moments, however, also have much evangelization

potential. A healthy balance between information-giving and relationship-building can do much to help people feel that the parish values them and desires their continued presence within and for the community.

Practice Six: Keep the Door Open

When people have been away from the Church for a while or have been considering Catholicism and are ready to inquire about the catechumenate, it is often tough to make the first phone call or to approach a priest or pastoral staff person. A simple way to invite and facilitate those early conversations is an Open Door session. Open Door typically takes place three times a year, once in the fall, once a couple of weeks after Christmas, and once just after Easter. Have announcements in the bulletin and at the end of Mass. Place posters in the vestibule if possible, or on an outdoor sign. The announcement can read, “There’s always an open door here. If you have been away from the church for some time, or would like more information about Catholicism, or if you simply have questions you’d like to ask, a team of caring people will be waiting for you.” (Then list the time and location of the meeting.) The gathering is simple, too: a few nice refreshments and the opportunity for each person to introduce himself or herself and explain what brings them there; a few listening people who are familiar with the catechumenate and returning Catholic processes; and time for each person to talk individually with one of the team members. Each person leaves with a good sense of what could come next: updating for someone who has been away for a while; the inquiry for a person who is ready; a meeting with a member of the annulment team for another.

A year ago, a parish held an Open Door session in

the midst of the Easter season, and it happened that the announcements were made at Sunday Masses at which First Communion was being celebrated. The following week, a woman called the parish office. “I heard the announcement,” she said, “and I felt that Father was talking to me. I have been away from the Church for so long, and was only there on Sunday for my granddaughter’s First Communion. I didn’t expect to be receiving a gift myself! What a great sign of the way your parish cares for people, no matter who they are or where they are in life.”

Fostering a sense of belonging in our parish communities is really about helping people to know the love of Christ through the flesh and blood of real people.

Practice Seven: Do Great Things with Great Care

Be mindful of doing great things with great care, especially the celebration of the liturgy. There is no better way to help people feel they belong than to take the time to gather well, pray well, reflect well, and be sent out with a sense that what we are about when we are together is of great value. What we welcome and invite people into is the life of the Christian disciple, nourished and shaped by our celebrations of the paschal mystery of God’s love for us in Christ. In the midst of all that we will discuss, it is important to keep our priorities straight: our primary and central action is the celebration of the Eucharist and our sacramental life. While there are many elements that work together to shape the community of faith, we must not lose sight of what is most fundamental.

Practice Eight: Play Together!

“The parish that plays together stays together,” one pastor is fond of saying. Offer people the opportunity to get to know each other through socials, game nights, parents night out events, potluck dinners, picnics, and movie nights. The possibilities are only limited by the imagination of those who plan such events. Draw together a group of hospitality-gifted members and set them loose!



- » What is your experience within your parish?
- » What practices contribute to feelings of belonging in your parish?
- » What ideas do you have for ways to build upon what is already taking place, or for developing new practices to enhance a sense of belonging within your community?

