

Courageous Conversations

by Jim Smith

Some of you may remember the tune with the mantra “What the world needs now is love sweet love.” Who can argue? I would add to that mantra. What the world also needs are many more courageous conversations. In the good work of love, courageous conversations are a necessary ingredient. In the good work of parish planning, such conversations are also crucial. Do they happen often enough? Probably not.

First of all, a parish plan of lifelong faith formation demands vision. Without vision, attempts to implement a formation process that involves the whole parish and all ages will falter. A vision worth sustaining demands on-going commitment, risk-taking, passion, focus and not least of all, buy-in from key leaders. Trouble is, that’s a tall order, and not everyone in the leadership structure of a parish is going to instinctively, naturally rise to the occasion. So, what’s a person who alone carries a grand vision to do? Give up? Move on? No. Not yet, at least.

Instead, I advise you to hold **courageous conversations**.

You’re the pastor. You understand the power that a vision of life-long formation holds. You understand the energy it will take to realize this vision. You may be faced with resistance. One of the great obstacles to a parish becoming a vibrant, Christ-revealing community is that little beast called the ministerial rut. Parish leaders hopefully learn a rhythm to their work. Like learning to dance, to ride a bike, to play the flute, there’s a point when ministry becomes more graceful, takes less psychic gymnastics. This is a very good thing. But there’s a dark side to this grace. After a time, ministers can begin to coast, and to enjoy the sensation. Ministry becomes set patterns, unrefreshed programs, repeated practices that have lost relevance and life. The Holy Spirit becomes less and less welcome. “We’ve always done it this way.” “We tried something different and it didn’t work.” These are litanies you might hear from someone who operates from a ministerial rut. Time for courageous conversation.

Remember, it’s a conversation. Directly implied in the term is the principle of dialogue, a dimension of listening. So begin the conversation carefully. You’re the pastor. You carry very real power by your ministerial office. Respect that power by respecting your leaders. Recognize, too, that if the conversation is truly courageous, there may be things you will hear about your own style, your own leadership that presents an obstacle to the minister. Be prepared to hear such things. Promise yourself that you will receive such comments, to hold them for genuine reflection.

Perhaps begin with open-ended questions. “What is your vision for life-long formation?” “What do you want to see in this parish?” “What are your dreams for our people?” “How do you see us

moving in that direction?” The leader may need time to think about this! If so, give them time. Come back to the conversation again, but soon. Give a leader the chance to let the Spirit breathe, to play.

Courageous conversations aren't about wielding a big stick, ramming through one's ideas and opinions. They profoundly respect the principle of persuasion. Do your very best to inspire, over the course of several conversations, over a lifetime of ministry, rather than coerce.

If, over the course of several conversations, resistance remains strong, courage may take the form of difficult decisions. If the vision to bring all ages to a vibrant, mature faith is to take hold, your leaders must share the vision.

You're a lay leader in formation. You catch the passion to bring a sustained process of life-long formation to the marrow of parish life. Your pastor, however, either holds to entirely other priorities, or simply hasn't been brought well enough to the table of life-long formation. Choose to engage him in courageous conversations.

Remember, he's the pastor. Ultimately, he has to be on board. He is a crucial player to shepherd the parish to an excitement for life-long formation. So play fair. Proceed with respect.

Courageous conversations are direct, honest, respectful, civil. Perhaps open your conversations with open-ended questions. “What is your vision for this parish?” “What would you love to see for the kids, the adults in the area of faith formation?” Listen for any element of good vision he expresses, and cultivate it! Describe your vision in the most positive terms. Seek to inspire! Do not give up easily.

Courageous conversations for the whole parish. In parishes that have been successful to implement a vibrant vision of life-long formation, the entire community has been invited into the conversation. Lay parish leaders, members of formation teams, everyone is invited into the conversation. Gatherings of parish leaders often take place first, then a meeting or a series of meetings is scheduled in which everyone is invited. The vision is set forth with excitement, with focus. An entire community is directly engaged in the principle that the life of faith is a dynamic journey. We are ever-called to a continual deepening of faith, of action, of love, until we rest fully in God!

Blessings as you move forward with courageous conversations,

Elements of courageous conversations

- **Respect for the other**, not a desire to diminish the other.
- **Vulnerability**. Willing to risk. Willing to challenge. Willing to be challenged.
- **Desire for the good**, not a need to justify self.
- **Dialogue**. Genuine openness to ideas, thoughts of the other. Provision of space for the Holy Spirit.
- **Honesty**. Clarity.
- **Reason**. Includes the principle of persuasion.

Questions for reflection:

What courageous conversations have you had in your life? Recently? In the last week? With loved ones? Co-workers? The boss? Persons in your community?

What elements of good courage were present in these conversations? What missing?

Where might you be called to conversations that have yet to happen?

What keeps you from courageous conversations?

How well do you lean into God as you think about conversations that you want to happen? For trust, for wisdom, for strength, for guidance?

Is there someone you might first consult before entering a courageous conversation? Resources to review?