

Moving into the Future through a Parish Synod

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In an issue of *Today's Parish*, pastoral planner Fr. Robert Howes wrote forcefully about our urgent need to develop an ever WIDER WE in our parishes and dioceses ("Shared Responsibility: How are we Doing?" *Today's Parish*, January 1991, page 5). In this article, Fr. Howes encourages us to remember that "people do best what they have decided together."

As part of his recommendations, Fr. Howes urges parishes to remember that good parish pastoral councils and parish staffs should never be the exclusive vehicle for shared responsibility and pastoral planning. He calls for pastoral leaders to survey parishioners often, to institute parish pastoral assemblies, and together, as a people, to dare to think new thoughts and enact new dramas.

While Fr. Howes has extensive pastoral experience behind his suggestions, his article did not mention any specific examples of parishes where these kinds of things have been done successfully. Without such examples, some might be tempted to believe that all this talk about a WIDER WE is a nice theory with little application in the real world.

Here is one example of a parish which attempted one endeavor that certainly followed his exhortations in planning a parish synod.

THE INSPIRATION

The seeds of our parish synod were planted many years ago in our archdiocesan Synod '69. Synod '69 was a vibrant and exciting experience for the church of Detroit. Because of John Cardinal Dearden's vision and encouragement, people studied and listened, shared ideas and hopes, and influenced the future vision of their archdiocese. This opportunity for small groups to dream and recommend future directions for the archdiocesan church validated people's experience and solidified their desire to be church.

It has been said that Vatican I helped us to discover the universal church. In the same way, Vatican II brought attention to the local church (the diocese). We are only beginning to understand the influence of the parish (and we have miles to go to realize and support the domestic church – the family). Realizing that the time had come to strengthen and become church at the parish level, and recognizing the power of our archdiocesan Synod '69, our parish designed, shared, and celebrated Parish Synod '99.

PREPARATION

On the threshold of the new millennium, the pastoral staff thought that a parish synod would be an opportune time for people to talk, to share, to dream, to complain, and to heal. The fruits of this synod could give direction to the parish pastoral council, the commissions, and pastoral staff for years to come.

The staff went to the parish pastoral council, commissions, and other active groups in the parish with this dream and asked if they agreed that a synod was needed. We also thought a lot about rewards and risks. We hoped that some of the rewards would be a more

informed parish community, a better sense of identity, new friendships, more involvement, a surfacing of needs, and an increased sense of mission.

But we also knew that the risks of the synod included: hearing from people who usually always viewed things negatively, having the same people as always participating, burnout because of the extensive time commitment, and disappointing people if the parish didn't follow through on all their suggestions. These risks seemed daunting, but as more and more people talked about the synod, the enthusiasm for the rewards mounted and the parish council made the decision to proceed.

A Steering Committee formulated the following goals for the Synod:

1. To increase the sense of belonging among parishioners;
2. To invite participation of those who only come to church on Sunday;
3. To provide a vehicle for people to explore and express their feelings about what it means to be a parish;
4. To enrich understanding of what a parish is, could be, and should be;
5. To receive suggestions from the home discussion groups that could be implemented in the parish.

Three subcommittees were formed with representatives from all aspects of parish life:

1. Publicity: This committee kept the upcoming synod before the parish through mailings, posters, articles, announcements, balloons, T-shirts, etc.
2. Logistics: Home group hosts/hostesses and facilitators were recruited and trained. Parishioners were assigned home groups according to time availability and location.
3. Program: This committee designed the "agendas" for each week's home group meetings, which included:
 - articles to read
 - videos to watch (made by our parish video team about the philosophy and programs of our parish)
 - questions for discussion
 - ideas for prayer

THE GATHERING

On a Sunday evening, all participants gathered for a kick-off gathering that included memories of the past, a three-screen video and slide presentation with music and narration (illustrating our parish as people living life together faithfully), an overview of all the workings of the synod, questions, prayer, and socializing. Our prayer together included a commissioning of all participants during which the hosts/hostesses were called forth according to the location of their group meeting – the north, south, east, and west. They each received a candle to use at each home group session.

HOME GROUPS

Each home group met at least six times. The first week they explored the topic, “What is Parish?” The second week they explored “Celebrating Who We are” (Worship). The topic of week three was “Learning Who We are” (Education), and “Living who We Are” (Christian Service) was the topic of week four.

During weeks five and six each group decided how they wanted to continue. For example, the groups could return to a topic that they hadn’t had a chance to finish in the first four weeks; they could address another topic on parish life in which they were interested (if they needed materials, the Program Committee was available to help), or they could examine one of the following topics for which the Program Committee had prepared materials):

- We Belong Together (Social)
- Catholic Identity - Parish Identity
- We are Called to Mission - to Reach Out
- We Celebrate with Music

At the end of each session, each group submitted the recommendations and suggestions for future approaches and programs within the parish that had surfaced during their discussions.

THE CLOSING CEREMONIES

On a Sunday evening two weeks after the last home session, all participants gathered again at the parish. The entire evening was in the context of prayer. As each direction (north, south, east, west) was mentioned, the hosts/hostesses from that area lit their candles. In response to the readings (from Cardinal Dearden and John 15: 9-17) each participant jotted down their thoughts and feelings about their synod experience. These were collected as a sign of offering ourselves, our experiences, our dreams, and our hopes.

The chairpersons of each parish council commission gave brief overviews of the main themes running through the recommendations that came from the home groups.

We then journeyed outside, the way lit by luminarias, to plant a tree – a constant reminder of the growth that occurred and hopefully will continue to occur because of the synod. The dirt that was used to plant the tree had been gathered at the last home sessions when each participant brought a little dirt from around his/her home. This dirt came from holy ground – because God is there. As the participants had given their dirt to their group leaders, they also told the group of a time when they were conscious of God’s presence in their homes.

As we returned from the tree planting for our final blessing, booklets for group members, containing all the submitted recommendations, were distributed by the facilitators. We blessed these booklets, our work, and then ourselves by praying a prayer of blessing from the six directions (north, south, east, west, the heavens, the earth). The evening concluded with a spirited party.

FOLLOW-UP

Each submitted recommendation was given to the appropriate commission or group within the parish. There were wonderful ideas – enough for goals and programs for the next

several years. A committee from the parish council coordinated all the efforts so that the parish was kept informed of how each recommendation was implemented.

RESULTS

In addition to the recommended ideas for the future, it seems that there were many other intangible results. These are some of the thoughts and feelings that were jotted down at the closing ceremonies:

- “Synod for me was an opportunity to grow and see Christ in others and to share myself with them. I saw the quiet, lonely Christ, the Christ who was hurt by an oversight. I saw the Christ who was happy and eager to share with others; the mature Christ who shared reflections of past times.”
- “In all participants and events I saw the Christ who cares deeply and never stops trying – who sees gifts in everyone and knows they can be used for everyone’s benefit.”
- What I found to be most meaningful was a greater realization of our interdependence.”
- “I became impressed with how human we all are ... and yet for all our weaknesses and human pettiness we are still trying to rise above ourselves to be one with the Lord. There were flashes of saintliness among us.”
- “Something that struck me as peculiar was that a change in the church that I perceived as very positive could be negative for someone else. We had a real different group of people but all had a common warmth.”
- “I experienced a desire to grow in my faith. Also a wonderful sense of love with a caring group.”
- “I was able to speak of my own thoughts and what I was feeling at that moment to a small group of people who listened but didn’t always agree with what I had to say. I liked that, because we all shared our own thoughts openly. We all learned a lot.”
- “Synod was an opportunity to pretend that anything could happen – a time of Christmas when Santa would bring what we asked for, a time for prayers answered. We dreamed of a parish where love abounds – where each person’s wishes were heard – where everyone respected and listened and heard.”
- “The gathering as a small community was intimate and conducive to sharing feelings about my faith in a very special way, unlike any other. Everyone wanted to be there.”
- “The feeling throughout all of our meetings was camaraderie – no matter what age, belief, or walk of life – I came to realize lasting friendships above all else.”

And many of the home groups continue to meet!

