

Catholic

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Creative Ideas for Building Up your Parish

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A pastor greets a dog and her owner, during the parish's blessing of the animals. The service was celebrated in observance of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, patron of animals.

CNS PHOTO/GREGORY A. SHEMITZ

Everything in parish life must build and strengthen healthy and reciprocal relationships among the members. The Holy Spirit helps us generously welcome newcomers to our parishes, yet pews are emptier than ever. A 2018 Gallup poll says fewer than four of ten Catholics attend church in any given week and that overall Catholic attendance is down 60 percent. Plus, about 2,200 American parishes have closed in the last twenty years, says the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

But some parishes are growing. Ideas for growing parishes are discussed in this issue. Each case includes a list of things to consider in implementing your own version of change.

HOSPITALITY MATTERS

Near destruction by an earthquake caused one parish to commit to welcoming everyone in a special way. Saint Monica Church in Santa Monica, CA, makes an extraordinary effort to greet both newcomers and longtime parishioners at every Mass every Sunday. “We want to be known as a hospitable parish, a place where everyone is truly welcome,” says the parish’s hospitality minister.

Hospitality has resulted in benefits for the parish community. Mass attendance, programs, and ministries have grown. Parish collections are up, enabling the community to add outreach programs and give more assistance to service organizations in the greater community.

Saint Monica’s hospitality also extends to ministers. The parish offers training sessions using scriptural and theological content, resulting in a time of reflection for seasoned ministers and new volunteers.

Attendees get to ask themselves: *Why are we ministers? What does hospitality mean? What can we learn from Abraham and Sarah, who welcomed three strangers to their home? (Genesis 18:1–15) What message did Jesus send when he washed the feet of his disciples? (John 13:1–15)*



Hospitality Ideas

- 1 Assess your current efforts. Do you welcome people at every door at every Mass? Do greeters see their work as a ministry?
- 2 After meeting with the parish staff and appropriate parish ministries, seek volunteers for a hospitality Ministry. Describe the new effort in the parish bulletin. Have sign-up sheets at each Mass.
- 3 Schedule training for hospitality ministers. Prepare carefully, allow time for prayer, reflection, and for discussion. Resist the impulse to concentrate solely on who will do what, when, and where.
- 4 Consider a welcome table in your gathering space. Begin slowly, if necessary. You may want to start by having the table open only during parish coffee times.
- 5 Encourage celebrants to welcome newcomers and to invite everyone to stop at the welcome table.
- 6 Commit to a hospitality ministry for the long term.



EXPRESS GRATITUDE

One parish gets newcomers involved in the life of the church by hosting a relaxed event three times a year that includes a buffet supper and an informative short program on parish activities and ministries. All new members are invited.

The event typically lasts about three hours and enlists all parish groups—teens, young adults, families, and the elderly. Donna White and her husband, Jim, have volunteered as part of this ministry. Donna feels as if she is representing something unique and relishes the chance to welcome new parishioners into her church, for which she has a “great love.”

What Gratitude Looks Like

- 1 Discuss gratitude with the pastoral team.
- 2 Find out how many newcomers sign up annually, then determine the kind of event your community can arrange. You may prefer a brunch or a picnic.
- 3 Gather volunteers. If a welcome ministry does not yet exist, start one and begin to build for the future.
- 4 Plan your event carefully. Have ample volunteers to cover all aspects of the event—food preparation, set-up, serving, welcoming, speaking, and clean-up.
- 5 Decide on an enriching, informative program.
- 6 Create a resource for future engagement by asking attendees to sign a book. Remember name tags and take care in wording prayers. See Christ in all guests.

A GRAND HOMECOMING

A large banner on a church says, “Catholics Can Always Come Home.” Saint Joseph’s Church in Bridgton, ME, makes a special effort to welcome inactive Catholics back to church. “God is fiercely happy to have these people back,” says the coordinator of the parish’s program to encourage inactive Catholics to return to church. The program offers returning Catholics a chance to meet with one another and the team of ministers for informal, open-ended discussions. The group meets every other Thursday for ninety minutes. After a song and prayer, time is devoted to conversation about whatever issue people want to discuss.

“A real void in my life has been filled,” said a returning member. The church began the program on the first Sunday of Lent when the pastor asked parishioners to offer prayers and Lenten sacrifices for the spiritual benefit of those who might be thinking of “coming home.”

The team often points out that in the Prodigal Son story, the father prepared a feast when the son returned. The team tells participants that Christ is running to them now. The meetings close with a prayer and petitions.

Are Your Parish’s Arms Open Wide?

- 1 Ask your diocesan office to find out which programs they have investigated and what they recommend or may have already established in your diocese.
- 2 Discuss programs with the pastoral staff and lay ministers in the parish who might become members of the core welcome team. Assess the goals of the programs, the time and financial commitments required, and the personnel and training needed.
- 3 Purchase necessary materials. Visit Renewintl.org.
- 4 Plan. Allow time for training, for organizational meetings, for sharing the program with active parishioners, and then allow time for a strong advertising campaign to reach inactive Catholics.
- 5 Pay attention to details that create a sense of spiritual welcome. Saint Joseph’s selects prayers and music for the discussion times and also puts copies of the Bible and rosaries on the table around which they gather.
- 6 Reassess the welcoming atmosphere at all Masses and parish functions. What can you do better?



CNS PHOTO/JAMES RAMOS, TEXAS CATHOLIC

FAITH WITH FORMATION

Religious education is a special package at Old St. Patrick’s Church in Chicago that can be opened by parents and children at the same time. One year the theme of the family ministry program was “The Great Treasure Hunt,” which incorporated monthly themes built around “Unexpected Clues” (the Beatitudes) and “The Ultimate Travel Guide” (Jesus). Each class studied the topic. The program includes children from prekindergarten to eighth grade and typically runs during the school year. Monthly packets of materials relate to the theme and incorporate secular and liturgical days of recognition. It includes monthly birthdays and parish events. Family activities and discussion ideas enhance and deepen what children and parents learn on Sundays.

The sessions take place twice a month. The children meet with their peers; the parents gather with one another. One session the parents hear a speaker address the same topic their children are studying that month. During the other session, they may join a discussion, use the library, or socialize. Once a month, there is a family liturgy that connects children and adults. The director says the program gets parents to commit wholeheartedly to their faith. It becomes more than a Sunday activity.



How Your Parish Can Connect Faith and Family

- 1 The pastoral team and the religious education team could do an assessment of the religious education programs at your parish. Look at the materials used, the number of children and adults involved, the results. You may wish to conduct a survey among parents to determine their satisfaction with programs.
- 2 Does your community have the necessary skills and time to develop a curriculum around themes, to produce the monthly packets, to schedule speakers?
- 3 Determine if you will need to charge a fee for the program and materials. Meet with the religious education teachers, too.
- 4 If you proceed, gather a team with skills. Select speakers for the parents’ programs. Ask your diocesan offices to help with materials and speakers. Speak to the liturgy committee about assisting in planning monthly family liturgies.
- 5 Set a timeline for developing themes and collecting materials. Enlist students and parents by publicizing the new program in the bulletin and by flyers through current religious education classes.
- 6 Send a letter to parents of enrolled students. Describe the program, include important information, such as dates and fees, and ask for volunteers!

REACHING BEYOND THE CHURCH WALLS

Notre Dame Parish in North Caldwell, NJ, is one of several in the area that participate in a ministry to imprisoned women. This ecumenical movement began more than two decades ago and has continued to grow. “In the beginning I was depressed knowing that these women were locked in jail for some time. But now, I’ve come to look at them as people,” says longtime participant Rose Capazzoli.

She and other women from her suburban parish have remained faithful, visiting women inmates at a county jail once a month. The group has been dubbed the “Friendly People” by the inmates. But friendship is just one gift they bring to the imprisoned. Their visits include a worship service with hymns, reading from Scripture, a short reflection, and shared prayer. There is always time for conversation and snacks. Material for further contemplation/study is also shared with the women. It could be a flyer filled with Scripture verses, prayers, poems, or short real-life stories. At Easter and Christmas, the “Friendly People” bring the inmates small gifts—a washcloth, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a prayer card, or a bookmark. What’s most important, however, is the commitment of the visitors’ time.

The ministry team—typically twelve women—operates with cooperation from the prison authorities and visits between thirty to forty-five inmates each month. “We feel like we are really making a difference in the lives of these inmates; they don’t imagine anyone remembers them,” says participant Marjorie Lucas.



CNS PHOTO/BOB ROLLER

A Daily Prayer for *Justice and Mercy*

Jesus, united with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
give us your compassion for those in prison.

Mend in mercy the broken in mind and memory.

Soften the hard of heart, the captives of anger.

Free the innocent; parole the trustworthy.

Awaken the repentance that restores hope.

May prisoners’ families persevere in their love.

Jesus, heal the victims of crime.

They live with the scars.

Lift to eternal peace those who die.

Grant victims’ families the forgiveness that heals.

Give wisdom to lawmakers and to those who judge.

Instill prudence and patience in those who guard.

Make those in prison ministry bearers of your light,
for all of us are in need of your mercy! Amen.

SOURCE: PNCEA.ORG

Can Your Parish Touch the Imprisoned?

- 1 Research prison ministry. Contact diocesan offices and Catholic Charities to see what materials are available through them and which programs may help you. A source for information is the Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association: pncea.org.
- 2 Discuss the idea with the parish leadership.
- 3 Contact local facilities to determine what their needs are and who else may be visiting inmates. You might want to join an existing volunteer program rather than create a new one. Don’t duplicate services unless specifically asked to do so and don’t attempt to provide services that are not welcome.
- 4 Don’t overcommit. This relates to the frequency of visits as well as services offered.
- 5 Determine how your prison ministry will operate by posing the following questions: What are your goals? How are these related to the needs? How many volunteers will you need? What commitment will you ask of them? Is that reasonable? Who will schedule, provide materials, and so on? Contact other churches and places of worship in your community to create an ecumenical or interfaith prison ministry.
- 6 Invite parishioners to come to a planning meeting. Begin with a prayer to open your meeting. Explain the new ministry. Be clear about the goals and the commitment required. Be prepared to answer all questions fully, understanding that confusion and fear and reluctance are all possible early reactions. Have a sign-up sheet ready for volunteers.

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