

## **Non-Denominational Churches and Evangelization: We've Got Some Things to Learn**

Big shiny postcards from a non-denominational church had been arriving at my home for months. Parkview Christian Church, a major player in the south suburbs, was opening its third location last Christmas. When a new postcard arrived detailing a worship service entitled "What's the difference between Parkview and the Catholic Church?" I knew I needed to go.

I'm no stranger to non-denominational Christian churches. In the 90's I served at a parish close to Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago's northwest suburbs. Willow Creek was already a big deal back then. Perhaps no church in the country has been more influential on the evangelical, non-denominational movement in the United States than Willow Creek. It certainly influenced many of the Catholic parishes in geographic proximity. The presence of Willow Creek demanded that parishes get their act together or risk hemorrhaging parishioners.

My Parkview field trip last February has left me with some personal and ministerial insights. First, I was amazed at how resistant I was to going. I was nervous, even agitated. And yet, having had the experience, I would strongly recommend that all of us in Catholic leadership roles find an evangelical or non-denominational church to visit. It would be the best way to get a sense of what these churches are all about and what makes them attractive to people we should care about: 1.) Catholics; 2.) seekers; 3.) the unchurched. And, in attending a service you will certainly glean tactics and perhaps begin to imagine strategies that you can discuss back at the parish to effectively evangelize, form and retain people.

Second, I now better understand the two simple actions that parishes can take almost immediately that can make a difference in transitioning the Catholic Church into the evangelizing powerhouse it must become:

1.) **Invitation:** Let's get our parishioners to go out and invite their neighbors, co-workers, friends, family and others to experience their Catholic parish (or *a* Catholic parish)...in some way, be it a liturgy or otherwise. (Mass may not always be the right initial portal into the Catholic parish experience.) Let's also find creative means to invite, such as postcards campaigns (to all residents in local zip codes...and/or ongoing outreach to new neighbors). Social media also seems to offer hope as an effective means for broad outreach. And let's not overlook old-fashioned means of invitation: community newspaper and radio, postings at libraries, grocery stores, hair salons, etc.

2.) **Radical Hospitality:** Let's do a great job of making people feel super-welcomed, safe and appreciated on parish grounds and in our presence. Let's make a point of looking one another in the eye and smiling and greeting and conveying an empathic spirit. *Affect (or vibe)* is so very important! *Every* parishioner should be formed (through homilies and beyond) to develop this mindset and demeanor...not just a committee or team.

Note that these two things don't cost a parish anything in terms of their budget. However, both require intentionality. Parish leadership needs to model this and give it attention and focus for an extended period...or better, as a permanent part of the parish identity. Parishioners would need to be formed for mission, for recognizing that through their baptismal identity they are on for evangelizing...along with the other aspects of discipleship, such as social justice work.

Changing a parish culture is more difficult than we tend to imagine. But it is doable. Every parish can move the needle on these two fronts. And the Catholic parish that is becoming invitational and radically hospitable has a chance to attract people in a way comparable to the non-denominationalists!

There is no reason why any parish can't take these two pages from our evangelical Christian brethren's playbook. Nothing in our theology prevents it. In fact, we should see our faith and tradition requiring it. Of course, our goal is not just to get folks in our doors. The quality of the parish, in all respects, will determine whether people stay or not.

Here is a question I often pose in presentations: Do people *believe their way into belonging* or *belong their way into believing*? I offer it here as a possible conversation starter as you explore evangelization in your parish or region or diocese.

I hope your parish (or diocese) is grappling with how to attract and retain people, what it means to be in *renewal* mode. I encourage your parish (or diocesan) staff to make that field trip to a successful Christian church in the area. It will be illuminating. And it may well fuel your missionary zeal to bring people to Jesus Christ and the richness of Catholic faith.

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