

Engaging the Invisible People in the Pews

During many parish visits I am asked this question, “Katie, I feel like we are preaching to the choir, how does one engage people in the pews that do not contribute or show up on Sundays?” Fair question. Hard question to answer, because there is no easy answer. In our constant pursuit of vibrant and vital parishes, how could we not consider renewing all people in the pews? What about the people who are there on Sunday, but silent in word and action? How do we engage the people who might just show up on Christmas and Easter? What about the people in our hallways, you know, the school and RE families? We all know that the “books” show a very different reality than the pews on Sunday, the Bible study on Tuesday night, or the soup kitchen on Thursday.

These questions are tough to tackle, complex, and often require unique approaches at each Parish. We have a macro challenge with micro solutions. In most private businesses this would sound like a complete overhaul. An opportunity to reimagine and rebrand. An opportunity to invest back into the business in areas like marketing and product development. However, where does that leave us, in the unique organizations we operate? How do you stretch funding, human resources, and capacity to rejuvenate your audience? How can you create time where it doesn't exist, grow money on trees, and speak to people not present?

By this point, if you are still reading the blog, I am impressed. See, these are issues that are often overlooked until it is unavoidable. We often shy away from the tough questions because it is easier to keep the status quo.

In the spirit of Renew My Church, let us work together to find solutions.

What are my thoughts? Well...

[You cannot discount the impact and success of personalized invitation](#)

I have tried inviting and welcoming people in all types of ways: volunteers one-on-one, groups linked by demographics, volunteer small groups, etc. there is NO data I have seen that supports any method outside of a one-on-one invitation being more successful for engagement. Yes, one-on-one invites work. Think about the volunteers you have now, how did they become involved? I would imagine a few were proactive in getting involved, but many did so because of a personal connection and invitation. If you could find someone with an extra three to five hours of time a week, my first priority for them would be to meet with five “lapsed” or disengaged parishioners a week. Ask these disengaged people what we (Parish) can do for them, how we can better serve them in their faith, what they like/dislike about the community. Then, this person can connect their interest to Parish opportunities, personally. Why did TTWCI work for so many parishes? Because it was one-on-one.

[Consider generational/life challenges for engagement](#)

Commonly, it is hard for young families to volunteer or share financial support. On top of tuition costs at the school, monthly fundraisers, athletics, the list goes on and on, the demands on their budget are strained more than ever. Consider your average Sunday Offertory over the course of the year for one household. Then, compare that number to an average cost of a young family...it is often that the young family is “contributing” 50% more than the average Parish

household. For example, if the average Sunday Offertory gift over the course of the year is \$1,200, often the average contribution for young families is tuition+ fundraisers+ fees= \$2,500+. The financial challenge isn't to say that we should stop asking them to support the Parish, rather recognize their contributions and invite them to invest with their time and talent. Consider offering babysitting services during evening programming. How will mom and dad be at an Adult Faith Formation meeting together if no one is at home with the kids? We need to meet them where they are, share with them the programming, ministries, and Liturgies available at the Parish, personally invite them, and make the programs accessible for them to join.

[Sign-up for the Planned Offertory Program, and commit to doing it every year](#)

Stewardship cannot be an effort solely for the months of September or October. Think of it this way, do you only send the offertory basket around during those months? No, we send around the invitation to participate in stewardship of treasure 52 (at least) times a year! How often are we sending out stories of time and talent? We spend two months asking them to prayerfully consider their commitments, yet we forget to remind them the fruits of that commitment during the year. If Stewardship is a way of life, a tool kit to discipleship, let's not just talk the talk, but walk the walk.

[The Pope gave a TED talk, so who are we reaching?](#)

This was really cool. Did you see it? I listen to TED talks all the time. What do you think was his ROI of doing a TED talk? Seriously, I know it may be silly, but why did he do it? Humbly, I will make a guess to answer this question. I think because it was an audience that a current Pope has NEVER talked to BEFORE. So why not him and why not now? Who have we never talked too? Often I wonder about the parishioners on the books but not in the pews. Do we know who they are? Have we EVER reached out to them once they registered? What was their new parishioner process? Was it just a form and then we started to send you envelopes? I highly doubt this is what Jesus intended. I know we are strapped on time, but what better time than now to find out what your Renew My Church grouping is doing for this? How are they welcoming? Is there an opportunity to share a welcome ministry together? Is there an opportunity to share a marketing person together? Think like a start-up...a great place to start? Your local hang-out, grocery, neighborhood meeting, or Starbuck's bulletin board is a great place to hang a flyer. Think local, because your parishioners are too.

[Train your Ministry Leaders to be recruiters and succession planners](#)

This suggestion is where I get the most pushback. "But, our ministry leaders do a great job and have been doing it forever, Katie!" Trust me, I know and I am so appreciative for the many years of service that the ministry leaders have provided me and my family at our own Parish. However, what is the measurement of "great job." I don't mean to be overly critical, but what about these measurements:

How many new people have joined the ministry in the last year, or two years?

How many people have joined the ministry and moved into a leadership role?

How many people, year to year, have seen the ministry in action? Year to year ministry growth?

These are hard question to bring to ministries, I understand. But the church would never have grown over the last 2,000 years if the disciples didn't evangelize. Ministry leadership was never

solely an opportunity for the few outgoing parishioners, but for everyone. A succession plan encourages recruitment. A parish with a plan for leadership transitions is a parish where you see more leadership disciples in the pew. Where people invest their most valuable asset, their time, we see trends of giving increase overall.

We have to take an honest look at this, and gather data. The challenge of engaging the empty pews or those inactive in the pews is a tough one. There is no one way or right way, however taking baby steps, assessing the plan along the way, and being open to change will lead to improvement.