

Assimilating and Connecting Newcomers, or... “What should we do with new people?”

**In new missions
and century-old parishes alike,
joy breeds joy,
enthusiasm breeds enthusiasm,
and business-as-usual
breeds business-as-usual.**

Indeed, the business “as usual” in many parishes focuses on exactly that, “business” and routine maintenance. Your visitors and new members will be looking for much more!

The priest (or the priest and the deacon) cannot, alone, assimilate new people into parish life and find them active ministry involvements. New people, even before they become members in the sacramental sense, have to become involved in the *life* of the parish. The level of involvement of your people in the life of the parish will be the deciding factor in terms of the “staying power” of new converts or transfer members.

The key to getting people involved in your church is just that: truly *getting them involved*, assimilated and incorporated into the parish cycle of worship and ministry, moving people deeper into the life of the parish and keeping them there.

This is not about making large numbers of converts; it is entirely about making members of the Body of Christ who understand that “membership” is more than dues and attendance, it’s about **active faith**.

“Assimilate: to become alike, or to make alike.”

Whether you call it assimilation, integration, orientation or some other term, new members have already joined the life of the parish long before they’re chrismated or “officially” welcomed as new parishioners.

Baptism and Chrismation (or, for that matter, confirming a letter of transfer) are not the last steps in bringing people into the life of the parish and therefore the Church – yet, too often we think it is “Mission Accomplished!” Chrismation is the beginning of a life in Christ, but a life in Christ means direct and frequent interaction with the *other members* of His Body as well as those who are not members of that Body.

Connecting new people within the life of the Church is critical to keeping them active in that life and helping them to grow and mature in their faith.

People can get more assimilated and connected to parish life in two ways:

1. By working with others in a parish ministry or committee/team

The Holy Scriptures teach us that it is the Church herself which “equips the saints for the work of ministry”. Even a quick perusal of the life of the Church as shown in Acts and the Epistles clearly demonstrates that “the work of ministry” was not merely important but *central* to the Body of Christ, along with participation in the liturgical and sacramental life. One does not merely *attend* church, but participates in the Church’s services, Sacraments,

and fellowship, so that he can be taught, prepared, and equipped to “depart in peace” and engage the world for Christ and in service to Him.

So the parish leadership, beginning with the priest, needs to then prayerfully discern where people can both serve and lead. And this is not hard to do: just ask people what their heart is telling them and where they believe the Lord is leading them (very few will deny that they have this feeling or have sensed this calling). But this also presumes that those currently in parish ministry will welcome newcomers into “their” ministry. Since nothing we do in parish life is “ours”, especially ministry, parish ministry leaders must clearly understand that the work they do is done in the name of the Lord Himself; therefore, as Christ welcomed others, so, too, must parish ministry leaders welcome “new” and “more” co-laborers in parish ministry work.

2. By performing a specific task, no matter how small, preferably a task that no one else has been doing.

There are no “church elves”! Rare (and precious!) are the people who will come when needed, without being asked, and do all the work that needs to be done. The quantity and diversity of tasks necessary to support the life of the parish, both spiritually and materially, can be daunting. That means having people identified, trained as needed, and supported by parish leadership in their work. This is not limited to actual ministry work itself, like outreach and hospital visits, but encompasses jobs like polishing the wood and brass in the temple, attending to landscaping outside, clearing snow, cutting grass, or ordering candles, oil, charcoal, incense and other supplies for the altar and then keeping them neat and orderly in the sacristies.

This work is rarely “glamorous” and is often thankless (and if you never want someone to volunteer to do something again, simply don’t thank them!), but it is crucial to the good order of parish life. Let the grass go uncut or the snow go un-shoveled, and **then** see how quickly people notice!

There may seem to be no limit to the things that need to be done – and the Lord, knowing this, may actually be bringing you people who He is preparing for that very purpose. So, create an opportunity for them to talk with your priest and with laypersons engaged in similar work (if there are any), get to know what they like about parish life, ask them where they think they have something to contribute in terms of time and skills, and then...

Equip them and encourage them to do it!

For Discussion:

- 1. What processes do we have in place to identify appropriate ministries for our new members?*
- 2. In that same vein, how well do we understand spiritual giftedness?*
- 3. Do existing members and ministry leaders actively welcome and involve new people?*

For Discussion:

- 1. What things need to get done around the parish that are often not done?*
- 2. How many of these things are being done by the priest, when a layman could do them instead?*
- 3. How many of these things are being done by lay people who are already engaged in too many other things?*