

## Commitment, Community, and Motivating Members

In the last edition of *Beyond the Plateau* we looked at parish membership and involvement as a series of concentric rings, noting the desirability of moving people from the outer, less committed and involved rings to the inner, more involved and committed core. We need to now turn our attention to exactly how this can be done.

Imagine this: the new parish strategic planning session is completed. The attendees have been impressed and motivated by the material presented and are ready to go out and begin the new work of outreach and ministry necessary to move beyond the plateau, or reverse the decline, which they observe that the parish is facing. With boundless enthusiasm they begin to approach their fellow parishioners, especially those who weren't in attendance at the planning session, looking for and asking for a commitment to the new work that lies ahead. Unfortunately, the familiar biblical story begins to unfold right before their eyes: "*And one by one, they all began to excuse themselves, saying...*" They are surprised and even hurt that their fellow parishioners are not able or willing to commit themselves to the exciting and challenging work that lies ahead. Frustrated, they may question whether it is even worth it to undertake the new outreach effort without the entire parish being committed to it. "What's wrong with them?" they ask.

Perhaps nothing is wrong. Perhaps there are more helpful motivators than mere commitment. People who are involved in parish life are involved at different levels and respond to different forms of encouragement and motivation.

Some will wonder, "What's so wrong with asking for commitment?" Isn't that the key ingredient to a healthy and growing parish? If we're committed to Christ, doesn't that mean we have to be committed to His Church, to our local parish community? After all, isn't commitment what's needed in our parishes, and lots more of it to boot? Isn't the lack of commitment what's hurting parish life because not enough people have it? Don't the challenges we face demand it?

People have many different motivating factors for getting "involved" in church work and ministry. These different motivating factors appeal to people in different ways, appeal to basic instincts as well as to deeply held and deeply felt beliefs and values. I find it helpful to consider the four categories of motivation described in the box on the right: **compassion, community, challenge and commitment.**

In dying and declining parishes, and those struggling with issues of growth and health, the leaders (clergy and laity alike) and members who form the **Core**, along with some in the **Committee**, are most often those who are *committed* to the *challenge* of keeping the flame of hope alive.

However, others among the **Committed** as well as many in the **Congregation** are dissatisfied with these constant appeals to commitment and challenge. They're unhappy with parish life because they originally joined the parish for other reasons: those of *compassion* and *community*. The parish was full of people who cared about each other, not just about a building;

### 4 Motivational Resources:

#### 1. **Commitment**

*Characteristics:* dedication, loyalty, duty, obligation, vows  
*Appeals to:* the Core, some of the Committed

#### 2. **Challenge**

*Characteristics:* achievement, accomplishment, goals, objectives  
*Appeals to:* the Core, some of the Committed

#### 3. **Compassion**

*Characteristics:* sharing, caring, loving, giving, serving, supporting  
*Appeals to:* Some of the Committed, the Congregation

#### 4. **Community**

*Characteristics:* good fun, good times, fellowship, affiliation, belonging, family, home  
*Appeals to:* Some of the Committed, the Congregation

about the salvation of the world and the well-being of the society around them, not only about budgets, assessments and the color of the new carpet; it was about potluck dinners, dances and other avenues for social interaction where you could meet and greet your friends and neighbors, your brothers and sisters in the Lord, even your future spouse. Even if the ethnic aspects of parish life seemed more prevalent than theological teaching and learning, still, they contributed heavily to the experience of *community*.

Similarly, the lapsed, the unchurched and the dechurched (not to mention the growing number of actual pagans within North American society) are not going to respond to a gospel message that asks them for commitment before it asks them to encounter the message of and the reality of the Risen Lord in and through the local worshipping community. They need to know **Who** God is before they can respond to the calls to honor and obey Him. And they will meet God incarnated within the community of the local parish through the compassion it sincerely displays to outsiders and newcomers.

Commitment is something that grows over time. It is something that develops over ten, fifteen and twenty years, as one lives in, grows in, and matures in the Christian life. It is also seen and expressed by some as a form of discipline, much like some would approach, say, fasting. Commitment is therefore not an effective motivator with new and especially unchurched people, those who have come to church looking for compassion and community.

### **What Does Scripture Say?**

We should note what the Scriptures say as well as what they do not say:

**The Scriptures do not say** “We are committed to God because God was first committed to us” **but rather** “*We love Him because He first loved us.*”

**The Scriptures do not say** “For God was so committed to the world...” **but rather** “*For God so loved the world...*”

**It was not said of the early Christians:** “Look how they are committed to one another” **but rather** “*Look how they love one another.*”

Has any man ever convinced a woman to marry him by challenging her to do it, or by demanding a commitment after the first date? Commitment only comes after she learns how much he cares about her – how much he loves her and wants to spend time building a family with her! The same is true for parishes, but the lesson seems harder for us to learn in that context. Often, we are inclined to value committees more than compassion, challenges more than community. Committees don’t grow churches, and challenges based on human endeavor alone can lead to frustration.

Unfortunately, as churches start to decline, the motivational factors of compassion and community are replaced by those of commitment and challenge. Church leaders, and everyone affiliated with the parish, must always understand that motivation is something that is internal, not external. Motivation itself is something that people draw upon from within themselves (as noted also by its synonyms, inspiration and enthusiasm). The old adage here is extremely applicable: “People don’t care what you know until they know you care.” Jesus always reached out to people’s felt needs as He presented the Gospel to them. He showed them that He cared for them, loved them, and was ready, willing and able to minister to them, even as He was revealing to them the

Mysteries of the Kingdom.

If we are to truly involve our people in helpful, healthy and fruitful ministry, we must come to understand that there are many ways to motivate people to do the Lord’s work. People will willingly give of their time, talent and resources to grow their church. Finding the right motivating factor can make all the difference.

*Questions:*

1. *What factors mentioned here do our members respond to most enthusiastically?*
2. *How do we spend parish time and resources identifying and training members for ministry?*
3. *How well do we recognize and thank our members for the good work they do?*

*Fr. Jonathan Ivanoff is rector of St. John the Theologian Church in Shirley, New York and the director of the diocesan Commission on Mission and Evangelism. He can be reached at frjonathan@hotmail.com.*