

## An Exit Interview

Wondering what an exit interview has to do with outreach? Some would think it a waste to reach out to people who have already left. And in one way that is correct, but at closer look perhaps not. One in ten Americans has left the Catholic Church. 71% of those who have leave do so before 30 years of age. *Former Catholics* as a demographic grouping constitute the second largest religious group in this country (at least 25 million). A parish that wants to know what needs improving may find this to be a particularly qualified group with whom to consult.

An exit interview provides a parish with feedback on ways to improve how it operates and relates to people. It can be a mutually beneficial experience because it affirms the value of the person who has left, just as it invites an examination of conscience on the part of a parish and its leaders. Responses to an exit interview can reveal little known aspects of a parish that undermine its best efforts and intentions. An exit interview invites healing for persons who feel wounded by the Church. Most of all, the exit interview is a valuable tool if a parish is considering substantive change.

Before conducting an exit interview, be clear about the goal of such a conversation. What do we hope to accomplish? What are we open to learning? This isn't a "come-back" ploy in disguise. Any manipulation of the conversation in this way will be easy to sniff out, and it could cause considerable harm. Because the mission of the church is bigger than any one congregation, our purpose must be to unbind hearts and invite people to the liberation that is uniquely found in Christ, no matter in which parish the person finds it. A sincere gesture of concern can ultimately enable people to return to the Church in God's time (though it may not be ours).

**PREPARATIONS** - Consider these suggestions for preparing and conducting an exit interview:

1. Carefully select interviewers - The interviewer needs to be a good listener with a tough skin since they are likely to hear things that are unpleasant and even untrue about the parish.
2. Provide the interviewer with the purpose and equip the interviewer with techniques for attentive listening. Discuss with them how the identity of the interviewer can affect the responses. Some people may feel intimidated about speaking directly to the pastor. On the other hand, if the interviewer is a parishioner, the person being interviewed may not believe that their concerns will be given serious consideration. It can be an asset to have a young person interview another young person. A parishioner who is a therapist, counselor or social worker can be very helpful in providing orientation and training for this task.
3. Carefully consider the questions and the order of questions - open-ended questions encourage sharing. The reason may be innocent, irrelevant or impossible to address. Do not push but do not be shy if the person musters the courage to name a tender subject. Invite the

person to share examples if they are comfortable. Consider how to ask the questions with different audiences. Consider the suggested questions below.

### **INTERVIEW INSTRUCTIONS:**

1. Arrange an appointment with the respondent. This communicates the importance of the conversation. Arrange to meet in a comfortable place – deli, café, home, or a park.
2. Establish trust first - Express gratitude for the time allowed. Work from commonalities. Advise the person being interviewed of the intent of the questions. The opening question is key but the flow of the conversation may be more important than covering questions in lock-step. Let feelings guide the conversation - If the person seems reluctant or uncomfortable at any point acknowledge their discomfort and inquire about it. Those experienced with pastoral visits will tell you that the reason for a person's discomfort is more important than the answers to any prepared questions.
3. Take notes - Assure the respondent that the conversation will remain confidential and anonymous. Some interviewers prefer to use only a small notepad so that they do not forget an important phrase. Others wait until after the conversation to avoid distracting the person. Some parishes use a pre-printed question form to insure continuity of the questions from one interview to the next. It is not advisable to record the conversation unless absolutely necessary. Always notify someone before recording them.
4. Avoid reacting to comments - Simply receive it. For example, a person may cite the pastor's preaching as a cause for leaving the church. You do not need to defend the pastor or react defensively if you disagree with any comment. This does not mean that your pastor is incompetent. It may only mean that his style does not match that person's particular expectation. By the same token, many congregations consider themselves warm and welcoming until they are confronted by feedback from exit interviews that challenges that self perception.

**SCRIPT:** *"The parish is looking to improve how we respond to people who come to our church. Your remarks will be kept completely confidential. We found out that you left from another parishioner. I am grateful for twenty minutes of your time today.*

*What did you find most appealing about this church when you joined?*

*What has changed since then?*

*If there was a particular trigger event, can you tell me about it? Would you say that you left in reaction to a particular person, event or attitude?*

*Did anyone in the church speak to you about it before you left?*

*Did you have an opportunity to do what you do best here?*

*What two changes would you make in the parish if you were the next pastor?*

*What is one thing that you would keep the same if you were the pastor?"*

Conclude the interview:

1. Express gratitude for taking time to help the church in its efforts to improve
2. Provide your contact information in case you can ever be of help to them
3. Assure them that the parish leaders will receive this feedback
4. Consider concluding by sharing a brief prayer. This would be most appropriate if the respondent has volunteered that they are a member of a Christian church.

*Dear God, we are your people. And you love us with a tenderness that we can scarcely imagine. We thank you for all those who have loved us in your name. We lift up all those we love to your care especially those who need you most (momentary pause). Guide our steps from here forward that we love you, love your people, do your will and lead others to you. Good Shepherd, we place our trust in You. Amen.*

5. Take your leave with a warm smile and a handshake. Hug only if the respondent initiates the gesture.

Once the interview is complete take a moment to jot down the most significant observations so that you do not overlook the nuances and non-verbal impressions left by the respondent. Avoid editorializing. Be sure to report your results promptly to whoever the parish designates for gathering and reporting findings.

For more information about who is leaving, what they are looking for and how to invite them to return contact Dennis Mahaney at [dmahaney@buffalodiocese.org](mailto:dmahaney@buffalodiocese.org) or call 716-847-8393 at the Office of Parish Life.