

The Year of Faith: What a Parish Can Do

What can a parish do? Consider our Lord. Having accepted His mission (Lk. 4: 16-20), Jesus did not wait around for people to find Him. Jesus reached out to them. He connected with people. He welcomed them with an open heart. And He engaged people in a God-sized purpose for life.

Connect, Welcome and Engage! We continue the mission of Jesus today. We connect with people. We welcome people into our community, our mission and our ministries. We engage people in a God-sized purpose. And we equip people to share the hope that we share in Christ Jesus. Consider these ways that your parish can connect, welcome and engage in the Year of Faith:



Connect

Many people are disconnected from church for a variety of reasons, but most have just drifted away. Most of those who are inactive have profound spiritual hungers. And most of those are willing to give the church another try. The first step is to connect. Consider these ways:

- Welcome all newcomers to the area with a welcome packet (plate of cookies, discount coupon book, parish pictorial directory and a parish brochure).
- Reach out to occasional Catholics living in the neighborhood. Leave a “door-hanger” invitation if they are not home. Ask them to contact someone to reconnect or talk. Note the free spirituality resources on the parish website.
- Organize young neighbors and friends to conduct a scavenger hunt at the parish website and solicit feedback about information that stands out, difficult to find, or missing entirely.
- Add conspicuous links to the parish website with words of welcome and introduction to the parish (e.g. “Just Checking Us Out?...”, “Ready to Get Connected?...”, “Make faith work for You”, “See What God Has in Store for You”, “Join us for...”).
- Enhance the parish social network (e.g. Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest).
- Conduct a digital census among parishioners. Find out where they hangout online.
- No parish website? Then put up welcoming signage around the parish campus. Provide an easy to read map of the facility that can be colored by children with entrances, bathrooms, activity centers and offices marked. Include directions in the languages spoken in the vicinity of the church. On the back of the map list the major events and services for families, children and seniors. Include important dates and steps for no-hassle registration. Post this online also.
- Form a “New Evangelization” team dedicated to the task of asking the question: Who is missing (inactive)? And how can we reach out to them?
- Host a forum discussion on religious freedom or other issues facing the community.

- Sponsor a booth or open house in concert with popular community events and provide a welcome packet and people available to meet with inquirers.
- Tailgate! Host a tailgate party at an upcoming Bills game complete with free food, booming Christian music, and give away sponge footballs printed with the contact information for the parish, and worship schedule.
- Identify young adults leaving home for college or employment and present them with a care package with spiritual support, a local parish contact person and an invitation to return for the holidays with contact information. Participate in the College Connection initiative sponsored by Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministry.

Welcome

Even if people come in the front door it does not insure that they will not go out the back door. Churches that want to keep people start with warm welcome. Here are some welcoming ideas:

- Give a special welcome to visitors and returning Catholics in holiday seasons and on feast days. (endorsed by Synod)
- Establish a parish hospitality team and host occasional receptions for newcomers and have a parish greeter follow up with them.
- Preach on the importance of hospitality and commission every parishioner as a minister of hospitality. Exercise the “Three Minute Rule” – parishioners spend the first three minutes after Mass visiting with someone that they do not already know and introduce them to a friend at church.
- Sponsor an evening of inspiration, communication and prayer for married couples.
- Greet people warmly at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Offer support for any personal needs or faith issues and offer follow-up with contact information.
- Establish a welcome center just inside building entrances to the church, office and hall. Include coffee, tea and cookies along with CareNotes, OSV pamphlets or Catholic Lighthouse videos and information on parish activities and services.
- Conduct an accessibility survey and encourage parishioners who are differently-abled to accept visible roles in liturgical leadership.
- Welcome visitors as part of gathering rite of Mass on the last weekend of each month.
- Offer an anointing for those in need of healing at a Sunday liturgy on a quarterly basis.
- Observe family milestones at Sunday liturgies (e.g. bless graduates and new drivers, bless sport players at start of sport season, vacationers before summer, couples for key anniversaries, bless backpacks for return to school, first responders).
- Provide welcome cards and invite newcomers to fill them out and drop them in the collection basket or another designated receptacle. Be sure to follow-up.
- Ask a friend from another church to visit yours and report back on the experience – quality of welcome, music, preaching, etc.
- Teach regular attendees how to respond warmly to visitors and guests. (The easiest way to let people know that they are unwanted is to ignore them or avoid smiling).
- Equip parishioners with skills to get acquainted with newcomers (e.g. know more about the parish, introduction skills, share interests and why they love this church).

Engage

We know that today belonging leads to believing. How can we help Catholics to get better acquainted? How can we give expression to our shared faith? How can we encourage everyone's contributions to the parish mission and ministry? Consider these possibilities:

- Equip parishioners to be "***Catholics and Confident***" as witnesses to their faith in homes, workplaces, and marketplace (offered by Office for Parish Life)
- Host a parish retreat ("***God Awaits Us... in Our Stories***" – offered by the Office for Parish Life).
- Distribute and encourage the use of the Mission Passports.
- Provide families with a family retreat-to-go with instructions to share: family history highlights, the story behind each person's given name; fondest moments at home; what makes God most proud of us; a reconciliation activity; and generate family beatitudes or a family crest based on shared hopes and the family at their best.
- Adopt a Lawmaker – make a personal connection with a local legislator (especially one who is Catholic) and see what support and advice you can provide to the legislator in making faithful decisions.
- During holy seasons (e.g. Lent) encourage parishioners to reflect on the Scriptures and share their insights and questions (see "Pray with Us" Lenten booklet from Office of Parish Life).
- Publicly commission parishioners involved in the explicit outreach efforts for the parish.
- Highlight the contributions of young Catholics in parish leadership.
- Host a *Strengths Night* to let people name their talents (a simple and free inventory is available from Office of Parish Life, Diocese of Buffalo).
- Observe the parish anniversary (even on an off year) in a public way. Celebrate it with an intergenerational learning event or act of service in the community inspired by the patron saint (e.g. blood drive, park beautification, care for immigrants).
- Host an appreciation event for all ministry leaders with a presentation on a theme from the Second Vatican Council universal call to holiness, evangelization in the world, religious freedom. Christ the King Seminary has excellent speakers to recommend.
- Initiate small church groups (consider using one of many published materials (many of which are available for review at the Office of Parish Life).
- Occasionally, invite a parishioner to share why they are Catholic or a member of the parish at the website in the newsletter and incorporate this witness in a homily.
- Preach on the role of lay people as disciples and witnesses over a few weeks (see USCCB document: *Disciples Called to Be Witnesses* (cf. the reflections questions in particular).
- Ask parish organizations to start or end their meetings in the Year of Faith by taking a few minutes to consider a focus question (e.g. Who is missing?, How can we be more responsive to young families? How do we equip our members to reach out?).
- Conduct a parish vitality survey and consider the implications with staff, pastoral council and ministry leaders (available through Office of Parish Life).