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Strategic Planning – Building Your Team

By **Howard Craig**

“But when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return by way of Macedonia. Sopater, the son of Pyrrhus, from Beroea, accompanied him, as did Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia who went on ahead and waited for us at Troas.” Acts 20:3-5 (NAB)

Be First, but don't be Last.

When one looks carefully at the missionary journeys of St. Paul, it is immediately apparent that Paul never travelled alone. He always went with a team. Likewise, no parish leader and no pastor should be expected to lead the parish forward without the help of others. It is absolutely vital that strategic planning engages both the clergy and the laity. “. . .the more the individual himself, especially the layman, takes on ecclesial responsibility, the more deeply he feels with the Church, indeed, on an ever deeper level, he feels himself to be the Church.” (von Balthazar, *Razing the Bastions*, p 93). Nowhere is this concept of shared responsibility more evident than in planning for the future of the parish. Before the Mission can be expressed or the Vision shared, a team must be in place to discern, understand, share, interpret, and communicate the Mission and Vision God has for your parish. So while the pastor may be considered the first member of the parish (i.e. the leader), no pastor should be the last (or only) member of the planning team. As you engage in strategic planning, follow one simple rule: “Be First, but don't be Last.” Build a team.

Selecting Your Team.

There is no easy way to select a good planning team. One might be tempted to simply allow the team to form in some “democratic” fashion, either by a quick election of members from the parish at large or by self-selection of those who have expressed an interest in planning. While this way of selecting a team might seem best in

our Western democratic worldview, what championship sports team is formed in such a manner? What world class business allows its employees to just choose the job they want to do for a day? A far better, though admittedly more difficult method is this: the coach and manager set out with a list of qualifications, and then actively recruit the best candidates to fit those positions. In this respect, the Church can be no different. If a pastor wants success in strategic planning, he must be actively engaged in refining the qualifications needed and then aggressively involved in recruiting fellow team members.

Seek counsel and input first.

“It is possible to offer frequent and fervent prayer even at the market place and strolling alone. It is possible also in your place of business, while buying or selling, or even while cooking” (Saint John Chrysostom). “Pray first. Pray most.” (Lucado, Max. *Outlive your Life*). This may seem obvious: before going to others, seek the wisdom and counsel of God. Spend some time in prayer about this decision. Ask God to enliven you as you discuss your dreams and hopes for the parish. Seek His wisdom as you consider who to approach to help you. And ask for His words as you speak and encourage others to assist in the task. It might be helpful to find a mentor or guide to assist you in the process of evaluating and planning. Seek out another pastor who has done strategic planning. Ask him what he would have done differently. Take notes, and weigh his advice. Don't spend time re-inventing the wheel! If you are new to a parish, spend time getting to know your parish first. Find out about their strengths and weaknesses, their interests and abilities.

Recruit primarily the “fully engaged” parishioner, but also consider the “not engaged.”

Albert L. Winseman and the Gallup Organization have spent the last several years researching the apparent contradiction between the resurgence of interest in spiritual matters and the statistical fact that the church continues in decline. In his book, *Growing an Engaged Church*, Winseman

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and his team of researchers identified three types of parishioners:

1. “Engaged” parishioner. Engaged parishioners are people who know what is expected of them, regularly have the opportunity to do what they do best, feel their spiritual needs are being met, and feel their opinions count. (p. 67). The engaged drive virtually everything in the parish.
2. “Not engaged” parishioner. The “not engaged” parishioner may attend regularly, but “they do not have strong psychological or emotional connections to their congregation; their connections are more social than spiritual.” They are just as likely as the engaged to be “satisfied” with their parish, yet they give less, serve less, and invite less.
3. “Actively disengaged” parishioner. According to Winseman, there are two types of actively disengaged parishioners. The first only attend once or twice a year. They are on the membership rolls, and little else. The second type are what Winseman calls “C.A.V.E.” dwellers: “Consistently Against Virtually Everything. They are unhappy with their congregation and insist on sharing their misery with just about everyone” (p 70).

Only 29% of the members of the parishes surveyed by Gallup were identified as “engaged.” However, the research showed that their spiritual commitment was twice as high as other parishioners. They were thirteen times more likely to have invited someone to participate in their congregation in the past month. They are three times as satisfied with their lives. They spend more than two hours a week serving and helping others. And they give three times more to the parish than the “not engaged.”

Therefore, parish planning must start with the leadership who are actively engaged in the parish.

But if the goal is to have a stronger parish, it is important to gain some insight from those who are not as engaged. They may provide a fresh perspective on the parish image and may be

able to provide insight on how to engage them in the future of the parish. However, do not confuse the “not engaged” with the “actively disengaged.” The “not engaged” parishioner is pleased with his parish, and attends. He is just not as involved.

Enlist members with the right skill sets.

In baseball, general managers often seek the best pitchers first. While every member of the team is important and has a role to play, poor pitching costs runs and games. Likewise, when considering strategic planning team members, it is important to gather team members with the right skill sets. Potential team members should be analytical, creative, organized individuals. They should be self-starters who are not afraid to try something new. They need to be positive about the parish. And candidates should represent a cross-section of the parish demographics (age, status, gender and race). One final suggestion is to recruit one or two members who can think a little “outside the box.” This person should be a critical thinker who raises questions and thoughts in a constructive way. This person is sensitive to traditions, ministries and interest groups, but is not subservient to them.

The pastor needs to make “the ask.”

There is no way to get around this requirement. If you want a successful planning process, you must personally recruit the best team possible. Consider these few steps for success. First, engage them in person. Schedule an appointment and set aside the time necessary to bring that person on board. When you meet with them, provide an initial timetable, a “job description” for the committee, and the desired outcomes of the planning process. After they have accepted the position, follow through with a thank you note and a reminder of the first meeting.

In a later article, we will provide some suggestions for convening the team and implementing the planning process. Selecting a good team takes time, but do not shortcut the process. Take the time now, and the first step towards success will be yours. *“For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late.”* Habakkuk 2:3 (NAB)

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