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Parish Transformation: A Tool for Financial Health and Parish Renewal

By Frank Ferguson & Albert J. Holder

At the heart of the Church is its mission to bring about the salvation of souls and the conversion of sinners. This mission is lived out in the care for the poor and sick and other works of social justice. It is present in the work of evangelization and catechesis as the Church seeks to preach the truth of Jesus Christ both in and out of season. And finally, it culminates in the sacramental life of the Church wherein we are continually renewed at the table of the Lord and made holy by the power of the Holy Spirit. Parish Transformation is a process and a resource to help parishes renew their commitment to their mission through pastoral visioning, performance benchmarking and long-term resource planning.

Before outlining the process and steps of parish Transformation, it is important to stress that at the heart of this process is the individual parishioner who seeks to enter into more deeply a relationship with the Lord. Their work in this process must be viewed as a response to this relationship and not an end in itself. Such a view will help to enkindle a spirit of humility which reminds them that the work they do in building up the kingdom of God in their parish is not theirs but God's alone. As St. Paul, reminds us, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth." (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

Parish Transformation engages pastors and parishioners in a prayerful review of parish life, its various apostolates, and the resources needed to fulfill more completely and robustly the mission of the local Church. Too often, the mission of the parish is constrained by financial limitations, when, in fact, it is the parish mission that should dictate financial plans and resource utilization. In response, the Parish Transformation process has been designed to achieve three goals through a three step process:

- Pastoral Visioning – Renewing Parish Mission and Vision;
- Benchmarking – Improving Parish Operations; and
- Long-term Resource Planning – Proactive planning to meet long-term needs.

Pastoral Visioning is intended to give parish communities the opportunity to review and strengthen their parish by prayerfully discerning their mission and vision, reviewing a number of essential components that should be part of any parish while recognizing its own uniqueness and personality or divine gifts. Affirming their strengths and identifying their weaknesses, followed by crafting a plan for growth and development, will yield a harvest of more effective parishes that in turn furthers the mission of Christ.

Benchmarking is a technique that involves comparing the financial practices of an individual parish to the financial practices of other, similarly situated parishes to determine and share best practices. Each parish can evaluate and interpret its financial picture by reviewing strategies that work in other parishes throughout the diocese, identifying its greatest opportunities for improving financial performance, and creating specific action plans to address those opportunities.

Long-Term Resource Planning – After having reflected on their mission and vision and having performed the evaluation and benchmarking analysis, Long-term Resource Planning is designed to help parishes exercise faithful stewardship of their temporal resources now, as well as plan for the future. This step involves reviewing and reflecting upon the current and anticipated needs of the parish and working to strengthen the parish's ability to fund specific needs such as new facilities, deferred maintenance, old and new outreach programs, and any other anticipated parish community needs outside the general

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operations of the parish over the next five to ten years.

The final result should be stronger parishes with a renewed sense of mission and vision, sustainable operating budgets with spending priorities to match the parish mission, and real plans to address the long-term financial needs of each parish.

In sum, the work of Parish Transformation should lead a parish to not only greater financial vibrancy and strength but also provide an opportunity for parish renewal as parishioners are invited to reflect upon their mission as disciples of Jesus Christ and deepen their conversion. Drawing upon the example of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Pope John Paul II reminded us to, "walk with her [Therese] the humble and simple way of Christian maturity at the school of the Gospel. Stay with her in the 'heart' of the Church, living radically the option for Christ." (*Messsage for World Youth Day*, 1997 no. 9).

This is the same choice made by the little boy, who trustingly placed all that he had – five loves and two fish – into Jesus' hands. It was in this act of faith, that Jesus was able to accomplish God's work of feeding the five thousand. The late Cardinal Francis Xavier

Njuyen Van Thuan, who spent thirteen years in prison in Vietnam, nine of which in solitary confinement, reflected upon the important lesson taught to us by this little boy's faith and trust. "Choose God and not God's works," he writes, "It is a beautiful choice, but a difficult one." (*Five Loaves & Two Fish*, p. 21 (Pauline Books & Media: 1997)).

As we go about any good work including the work of Parish Transformation, we should be reminded of the importance of choosing God over God's work. All of the efforts engaged in by the parish in this process should point parishioners back to Christ and seek to re-engage them more deeply in the life of the Church. If this is accomplished, the work of Parish Transformation will be a resounding success, no matter the temporal or financial outcomes.

Like all things Catholic, there is the intersection of the human with the divine, the horizontal with the vertical which forms the venerable Cross as the sign of our faith. As we engage in the horizontal work of planning and strengthening the financial health of our parishes, our eyes should always be fixed upon Christ as that intersection between God and man reminding us always that it is God whom we seek and not His work.

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