

Indicators of Parish Vitality

Rockford Diocese

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An essential part of the Parish Consultations Process asks the faithful to assess parish life and ministry. To guide the Parish Consultations Committee and the Parish Pastoral Council in their evaluative process the Diocesan Steering Committee has put forth the following "Indicators of a Vital Parish." These indicators strive to reflect a model of parish life that responds faithfully to both the nature of the Christian community presented in the New Testament, as well as to the particular needs of our Church today as set forth in the documents of Vatican II.

It is important to understand that these indicators are intended as a guideline to assist a parish in its self-evaluation. They are put forth as a point of departure in a parish's effort to affirm its strengths and to determine which needs deserve further attention. These indicators are not intended to judge the capabilities of an individual or to criticize any group. Nor are they put forth as rigid standards to be considered apart from the many variables that determine the unique identity of any given parish.

The "Ideal" Christian Community

In determining the basic expectation of parish life (here categorized under the key topic of worship, community, service and education) and subsequent signs of its vitality, the indicators suggested below flow from an understanding of the ideal Christian community initially presented in *The Acts of the Apostles*:

"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common: they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need." Acts 2:42-45

This image of Church is complemented by the Second Vatican Council's exhortation to be responsive to the ever-present "signs of the times":

"The sacred Council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can call all mankind into the

Church's fold." The Constitutions of the Sacred Liturgy, #1

A parish faith community will always be so much more than what is listed below. These indicators simply serve as common reference points that allow analysis, planning, and creative renewal to begin.

I. Worship

"As they prayed, the place where they gathered shook, and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." Acts 4:31

"Mother Church earnestly desired that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy..., for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit." The Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy #14

Celebration of the Liturgy

Some characteristics of good liturgy are:

- Eucharistic liturgies are celebrated in a prayerful and reverent manner
- the liturgy is celebrated with music, competently led and sung, which invites the participation of the assembly
- homilies are instructive, challenging, well-prepared and assist parishioners in applying the Scriptures and church teaching to their life experience
- the physical environment (seating, art, sound system, etc.) is conducive to prayer and is capable of accommodating the rites of the church
- assembly is encouraged to participate in sung, spoken and silent responses
- the liturgical ministries (lectors, Eucharistic ministers, cantors, ushers, musicians, etc.) are a regular part of liturgies and are properly trained for their ministries
- there is a worship committee which meets regularly to plan liturgies

Celebration of the Sacraments

Some dimensions of a vital sacramental life are:

- there is daily opportunity to participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and to receive the Holy Eucharist
- there are adequate and regular opportunities for Sacraments of Reconciliation (individual absolution in both a communal and individual setting), and Anointing of the Sick (communal and individual)
- there is sufficient preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage in cooperation with the programs offered through the Diocesan Family Life Office
- there is proper preparation for reception of the Sacraments which includes family participation
- there are various forms of devotional prayer offered and encouraged (e.g. Rosary, Adoration of the Eucharist, Benediction of the most Blessed Sacrament, Stations of the Cross, etc.)
- there is Compassionate Ministry which assists in visitation to the home-bound and sick, care for the grieving, and assists at funerals with compassion and understanding
- the RCIA is being implemented and is part of the parish liturgical life

Spiritual Growth Programs

Some ways to encourage spiritual growth are:

- retreat/renewal programs that foster personal spiritual formation (parish missions, Cursillo, Christ Renews His Parish, Marriage Encounter, Life in the Spirit Seminars, etc.) are made available and encouraged
- prayer groups and small faith-sharing groups are explained and encouraged
- programs offered through the Diocese for spiritual enrichment (e.g. Millennium preparation, Life's Healing Journey, Family retreats, etc.) are utilized

II. Community

"Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it." 1 Cor 12:27

"Hence that messianic people, ...is, however, a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, love and truth, it is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all; as the light of the world and the salt of the earth it is sent forth into the whole world." Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #9

"The parish offers an outstanding example of community apostolate, for it gathers into a unity all the human diversities that are found there and inserts them into

the universality of the Church." Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, #10

Hospitality

Some illustrations of hospitality in the parish are:

- the integrity of Christian family life is fostered and respected in every parish undertaking
- all parishioners are greeted with hospitality as they enter the weekly liturgy
- an organized welcome program exists for new parish members
- the elderly are invited to participate in parish life
- physically disabled members are included in all activities and have access to all facilities
- adolescents and young adults are made to feel a part of the parish community

Stewardship

Some features of stewardship in the parish are:

- the parish has created a stewardship committee which promotes ongoing educational activities that instruct parish members about sharing their gifts as a faith response and as a way to meet the ministry needs of the parish and the local civic community
- the parish conducts an annual stewardship renewal of time, treasure and talent
- the parish encourages a theology of stewardship that promotes sacrificial giving
- the parish has a prepared budget and meets its ordinary expenses in timely fashion, including support of the pastor, liturgical worship and assistance to the poor.
- the parish participates in the three combined appeals (national, international and mission) at a level commensurate with its size.
- the parish regularly meets its target in the Diocesan Stewardship Appeal.
- the parish maintains its plant and facilities in good condition
- the parish facilities are adequate for the present and future needs of its people and its programs
- the parish works to retire any debt it has incurred and keeps up with interest payments on a timely basis
- parish staff are paid just wages
- the parish promotes the stewardship of assets and endowment awareness among parishioners for the

long term financial benefit of the parish, diocese and universal Church

Evangelization

Some aspects of an evangelizing parish are:

- the parish encourages all community members to ongoing spiritual conversion
- the parish supports the Mission activities of the Universal Church, e.g. Propagation of the Faith
- individual parishioners feel the responsibility and the freedom to invite others to join the community of faith
- the parish, in some fashion, reaches out to the un-churched, alienated, non-practicing and marginal Catholics

Leadership

Some characteristics of leadership in the parish are:

- parish leadership identifies and encourages talents and interests of those in the community
- parish leadership seeks a wide diversity of people for involvement in activities and ministries
- parish leadership is able to identify the changing needs of the parishioners
- the parish has sufficient qualified personnel as staff and for program leadership
- the parish has an active Pastoral Council which meets regularly and advises the pastor
- the parish has an active Finance Council which meets regularly and advises the pastor
- the parish provides and encourages training and ongoing faith formation for all staff, as well as Pastoral and Finance Council members

III. Service

“If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should do also.” John 13:14-15

“Christians can yearn for nothing more ardently than to serve [people] of this age with an ever growing generosity and success... It is the Father’s will that we should recognize Christ our brother in the persons of all [people], and love them with an effective love, in words and in deeds, thus bearing witness to the truth; and it is his will that we should share with others the mystery of his heavenly love.” Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, #93

Within Parish

Some features of service within the parish are:

- parishioners are instructed in their baptismal responsibility to serve in Jesus’ name
- parishioners are made aware of the Social teachings of the Catholic faith through homilies and various educational opportunities
- the parish keeps contact with shut-ins and the ill, especially by means of Eucharistic visitations
- disadvantaged parishioners can get assistance with their material needs

Local Community

Some ways the parish can be of service in the local community are:

- the parish welcomes beneficial community activities, such as: blood drives; food or clothing drives; various kinds of support groups such as A.A. and bereaved groups; Girl Scouts; and Boy Scouts
- parish groups reach out to local institutions: nursing homes, hospitals, prisons, etc.
- parishioners are invited to participate in local soup kitchens, PADS and other outreach programs in the local community
- the parish contributes a portion of the Sunday collection to Diocesan social ministries and worthy community and regional programs for the needy

Beyond the Local Community

Some ways the parish can serve the needy throughout the world are:

- parishioners are encouraged to respond generously to diocesan appeals for international aid to the poor and needy
- parishioners are encouraged to understand the Church’s teaching on abortion and to protect every human’s right to life
- parishioners are informed about the Church’s missionary efforts and encouraged to support them with prayer and finances

IV. Education/Formation

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20

“Quite early on, the name catechesis was given to the totality of the Church’s efforts to make disciples, to help [people] believe that Jesus is the Son of God so that believing they might have life in his name, and to educate and instruct them in this life, thus building up the body of Christ.” Catechism of the Catholic Church, #4 and Catechesi tradendae, #1,2

“Before [one] can come to the liturgy [one] must be called to faith and conversion” Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #9

Total Parish Education Programs

Some concerns for every parish educational program are:

- parish educational programs assist parents in understanding their primary role in the spiritual formation of their children
- the parish looks for opportunities to educate the faithful concerning respect for life issues and sponsor Pro-Life programs and activities
- parish educational programs foster an awareness of religious vocations

Religious Education

Some features of effective Religious Education programs are:

- the parish offers complete programs of religious instruction for adults, youth and children
- the parish allots adequate funds, staff and space for effective catechesis
- the parish has a qualified Director or Coordinator of Religious Education
- the parish encourages and provides opportunities for training and educating for its catechists

Catholic School (where applicable)

Some indicators for a vital Catholic School are:

- the parish provides Catholic elementary education
- the parish supports students in obtaining a Catholic high school education
- the parish employs a qualified Principal who encourages and oversees the Catholic identity of the school
- the parish encourages and provides opportunities for training and educating for its teachers

Adult Education

Some dimensions of Adult Education are:

- the parish offers a variety of opportunities for adult learning experiences (e.g. Bible study, speakers, discussions, etc.)
- the parish supports its lay ministers and volunteers with regular and ongoing in-service programs
- the parish provides printed, audio and/or video materials for ongoing theological education
- the parish provides occasional educational programs that address special needs such as single parenting, divorce, caring for the elderly or disabled, communication skills, etc.

RCIA

Some important aspects of the Adult Initiation process are:

- the parish implements the prescribed Rite for Adult Initiation, both liturgically and catechetically
- the parish supports the training and ongoing formation of lay ministers who serve as catechists and team members for the RCIA

Youth Ministry

Some features of Youth Ministry in the parish are:

- the parish encourages and provides young adults with opportunities to engage in activities which enhance their faith life
- the parish has (or shares) a qualified Youth Ministry Coordinator
- the parish has an active youth ministry program for adolescents and young adults
- the parish encourages training and ongoing formation of lay ministers responsible as leaders in youth ministry

Ecumenism

Some ways to encourage a spirit of Ecumenism in the parish are:

- the parish engages in education for Christian unity and in ecumenical activities
- the parish fosters interfaith understanding by conducting and participating in ecumenical worship services
- parish leadership encourages interfaith dialogue and, when possible, participates in ecumenical worship services