

Changing the Culture: Moving a Church from “Maintenance to Mission”

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While interviewing church leaders in England, one independent church pastor told me that many churches transition from “movement to monument to memorial to morgue.” It is true that older churches get stuck in their ways, parishioners age, and things can get stagnant. But how do you reverse this trend, and move from maintenance to mission? It is risky. Shaking up the status quo will cause some laity—often those with deep pockets who like things the way they are—to leave. Some want to just show up, enjoy the music and homily, and go home. But taking a risk is often needed to move a church toward flourishing.

Here is the story of how the priests in one Catholic parish in Eastern Canada changed the culture of the parish such that involvement in evangelization and parish life became the “new normal.” In 2022-23, three researchers (Cathy Holtmann, Sam Reimer, and Misha Maitreyi) studied St. Jerome’s Parish (pseudonym). We interviewed eleven staff and laity, observed several masses and other meetings, interacted with 50+ engaged laity in an “appreciative inquiry”, completed an online survey of lay respondents, and examined documents online and in-print. This parish is one of twelve congregational case studies of Catholic, mainline, and evangelical Protestant churches across Canada, led by the Flourishing Congregations Institute. There is much overlap between what we found in this eastern parish and what Joel Thiessen found at St. Paul’s in Western Canada, and we encourage readers to read “Strain and Resilience: Volunteering in a Catholic Parish” also on this website.

First, successfully changing the culture of a church often goes better when a great opportunity presents itself. In this case, the diocese was in the process of amalgamating congregations, and in 2004, the process of amalgamating three parishes into one began under the leadership of Fr. Jim (pseudonym). Declining church attendance and a shrinking proportion of Catholics in Canada drove the need, as did the challenge of sexual abuse committed by priests locally and globally. The plan was to build a new \$9.5M building in a growing neighborhood, with an increasing immigrant population. The opportunity for a fresh start was there.

But the leaders did not want to just pool resources. They envisioned a “new way of being new.” The amalgamation process involved Fr. Jim’s visionary leadership and was “guided by prayers and consultation.” The new building was planned for growth and for active discipleship. Once the new parish was established, leadership moved from Fr. Jim to Fr. Mike (pseudonym), another entrepreneurial priest with a clear vision. Fr. Mike asked the bishop for permission to make the parish a “laboratory” for a new movement in parish renewal. So, he set to work to change the culture where the expectation was that laity would be ministers—those who serve, not those who are there to be served. All laity were to be “missionary disciples.” Fr. Mike worked hard to communicate this vision. One poignant example of this is when he asked the congregation from the pulpit if they thought he had a tough job (to move the parish from maintenance to mission). Upon receiving nods from congregants, he emphatically stated, “Then I quit!” He made it clear that unless everyone was committed to moving the parish toward mission, he could not do it and he would not stay.

For many parishioners, this was an exciting “grace filled” time of change, yet others felt like they had entered an “arranged marriage with an unwanted partner.” Many left, but in Fr. Mike’s view, he wondered if they ever really had them. Yet, many others bought into the new vision and internalized it.

Research tells us that to change an organization culture, 1) a new mission must be clearly articulated and internalized; 2) leaders must be trained and motivated to implement and maintain the central mission; 3) the organizational outcome(s) must be regularly measured and monitored; and 4) structures and processes must be evaluated in terms of the organizational goals, and changed when needed.

It was clear to us that the new mission was internalized by staff and active laity. Interviewees spoke the same language, talking about the mission of the church in the words that they had heard from the priests. Lay training began in earnest. All laity were expected to participate in Alpha (a series of videos and discussions over a meal, focusing on evangelism and discipleship), and all were expected to participate in a life group. Three Leadership Summits are held each year, with 70-100 parishioners being trained for leadership roles each time. Regarding measuring discipleship, St. Jerome’s keeps a database of lay member’s growth in discipleship, regularly polling the congregation on service, devotional practices, parish involvement, etc. Finally, the parish was structured so that all activities of the parish were focused on growing missionary disciples. For example, parents are not to drop off their children for

catechism or first communion classes. Rather, parents are expected to be learn and grow in discipleship along with their children in these classes.

What does the new culture at St. Jerome's look like? Their current pastor, Fr. Peter (pseudonym), communicates the "high expectation" that all laity should attend, give, and serve. The parish, he teaches from the pulpit, is like a "family business so we're all co-owners." One staff member noted that the Fr. Mike would "call people out" for leaving after communion and not serving in the parish. No one was to be an observer; everyone was called to be part of the mission.

The strength of this culture of engagement is hard to overstate. One staff member said that he was "pulled in" to voluntary service because "everyone was doing it." A volunteer said that there were people in the church working fulltime and not being paid. St. Jerome's, she said, will post an unpaid job and they would be "bombarded with applications." She went on to say:

"When I'm at the end of my career, I hope that I can go and give back that way, because you know, they're just wonderful warm giving faithful people. You know, I would love to be like them."

High engagement is the new normal.

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