

An Energy Not Its Own: Three cycles of parish life and the purposes of the parish church

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Introduction

Every parish church has three intrinsic cycles. Each describes a process that is inherent in the parish's life. They are "given" rather than something we create. They will happen with or without our awareness of it, with or without our cooperation. And yet, our cooperation matters.

The Parish Life Cycle explores stages of creation, formation, stability (healthy/stable, and static), decline, disintegration, and death. The ministry of maintaining, developing, or revitalizing the parish is seen as the community's movement back to the issue and dynamics of formation. The second cycle is the Relationship Cycle that can help leaders keep the parish in a renewal cycle while avoiding the high level conflict cycle. And the Renewal-Apostolate Cycle is primary to understanding the Christian life—our need to form an inner core of silence as we act as instruments of God's love in daily life.

All the case stories are of real churches. Often, we change the name of the parish.

Chapter 1: The purposes of the parish church

There are three intrinsic purposes of any parish church.

1. The worship of God
2. The formation of the People of God for the sake of the world
3. Being a sanctifying presence in the broader community

These purposes aren't something we create ourselves. They are the innate, natural functions of the local microcosm of the Body of Christ, the parish church. We may engage them effectively or not. We may adequately understand the issues and dynamics within them or not. The parish may have a high level of commitment and competence in regard to them or not. They are our underlying reasons to exist regardless of whether we are effective, comprehending, and committed.

Chapter 2: The Parish Life Cycle

Keep the parish in an oscillation between Stable-healthy-maturity and Formation. That's your goal. The way to be a church that is healthy is by returning to Formation, to matters such as direction, vision, and charisma; to routines of incorporating new members, and to nurturing Christian proficiency. And all of that soaked in the prayer life of the parish's congregations.

Chapter 3: The Relationship Cycle in Parishes

All relationships in parishes can be seen as going through six stages. These stages seem to hold true between priest and the lay leadership, the priest, and individual parishioners, and the individual or family and the whole parish. The cycle can be used in regard to the whole parish system as well as sub-systems. The same stages are present in forming a new parish working group, guild, or committee.

There are three primary cycles

1. Creating the relationship
2. Maintaining a healthy and faithful relationship
3. A conflict cycle

At the end of the chapter is “Bonding: Priest and Community.” One of the relationships that is central to parish life is that between the priest and the parish community. The “Bonding: Priest and Community” theory offers us another way of looking at a relationship cycle.

Chapter 4: The Renewal – Apostolate Cycle

The Renewal – Apostolate Cycle is a way of describing a central dynamic of Christian life. The Cycle focuses our attention on the Christian’s movement between being renewed in baptismal identity and purpose and living as instruments of God’s love and grace in daily life. The Cycle is interested in both the individual’s movement and in the ways in which the parish church supports and facilitates that movement. This is a primary task of any parish church. It places a high value on both the Christian’s need for strengthening and the lay apostolate in the world.

In the Renewal-Apostolate Cycle we move between a conscious and intentional attention to God, our prayer life and spiritual practices *and* a subconscious reliance upon God as members of the Body of Christ, in the workplace, with family and friends, in civic life and in the church.

Appendix A: Parish Options

When a parish is static or in decline it may need to engage choices about whether to “downsize” parish structures and programs, consider merging with another parish, or to try to increase membership and attendance. The “Parish Options” diagram offers the standard possibilities available in such a situation. Leaders can use the diagram to explore the choices before them. We’re going to look at how to use the model in such an exploration.

We’re also going to discuss the model in relation to what has been covered in the life cycle and relationship cycle chapters.

Appendix B: Some Key Factors

The “Some Key Factors” model is used to begin and focus a conversation on the state of the parish. It’s one of many models that identifies strategic elements. In a limited way such models say to us, “This is what health and vitality look like.” One of the values of this model is that it sees the heart of a parish in four features:

- A. Overall satisfaction – This is very subjective and yet essential. Parishioners may rate other factors in a low range and still be very satisfied. On the other way around. It takes some wisdom to understand what's being said in these ratings. A low rating may mean that it's time for the rector to leave. Still, there are many situations in which people are satisfied, even love, the priest, while able to acknowledge that there are problems the community needs to address.
- B. Effectively engaging the three purposes of a parish church – We see this factor as primary in assessing faithfulness. The parish's authenticity and fidelity is our concern here. To what extent are we engaged in the central work of a parish?
- C. Vibrant – Is this parish alive? Do words such as enchantment, awe and wonder seem appropriate? A couple of bishop's working on a book decided to step aside from visiting congregations that fit their work and attend a city church. Later they wrote about the liturgy, that it was "Worship that swept us off our feet... we experienced more fully the power of shared gesture for building up a sense of the body of Christ and other community intent on God... a stunning in moving experience... a deep spirituality of engagement by the entire congregation... a beautiful dance."
- D. Alignment – The elements of parish life are in relative harmony; they work well together. For example, income is adequate to cover parish expenses.

Appendix C: About Models

Models are like a map, "a great help on the journey, yet not the same as the journey itself. The journey is full of smells and sights, of wonder and awe, of fear and excitement; the map is only lines on a computer screen or piece of paper. Still, maps help us move forward on a purposeful journey." (Updated from *Power from on High*, Ascension Press, 1983)

Conceptual models simplify the complex dynamics and forces present in a situation, and at the same time, help us perceive more complexity than we usually notice. Models are limited. They focus our attention on some elements of a situation. There is no one model that will serve all situations. Therefore, one of the competencies of a parish development practitioner is the ability to select which model or models will best help us understand and intervene in a specific situation.