

## The Process of Change

Two assertions and two related questions:

1. *The primary task of the parish church is to form Christians.*

*The gifts of the church are "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (Ephesians 4.12-13)*

2. **How can the parish be a place that helps that happen?**

The parish can help in the development of Christian character by offering direction, methods, and an understanding of how virtue and productive spiritual practices become habitual.

3. **We are to build Christian proficiency.**

It's not a new idea. Aristotle said, "Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."

In part, Christian proficiency and formation is also developed through intentional training, guiding, and coaching. The parish can assist its members become more competent for participation in the Eucharist and Daily Office, sharing in the common life of a community, engaging in reflection, and offering service in the places they find themselves.

4. **How can we shape such a parish?**

I'll address that in the remainder of this chapter and point the reader to my earlier books: *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church* and *Power from on High: A Model for Parish Life and Development*.

### Shaping a healthy community

I'm going to highlight just a few considerations about the process of change:

- Understand and use a critical mass strategy.
- Begin with what's easy to do.
- Understand what's involved in the "Use of Self".
- Understand the behaviors and assumptions that are barriers to change.
- Parish clergy engage parishioners around their spiritual life
- Place the parish in a context of support, competency building, and accountability

### Understand and use a critical mass strategy

Critical mass theories are about building the level of commitment, competence and emotional maturity at the center of the organization so that it grounds the system in a mission orientation and an organizational culture that supports the mission. This will take the shape of a series of circles, one within the other. Those at the center will share more of the "common language" of healthy and useful skills, knowledge, attitudes and values.

Critical mass models invite leaders to attend to building the center and to stop the tendency to obsess about "fixing" the problems and dysfunction at the edges. New and unskilled leaders are especially inclined to focus on the "difficult people" or those who constantly demand personal attention, or the crisis of the moment.

A critical mass model suggests that we should give much more of our time and energy to developing the center. Support and build the capacity of those willing and able to more fully give themselves, whether to the

overall health of the parish or to a particular project that moves toward health.

The emerging field of network science may help us understand how a critical mass develops. Network science studies how behavioral changes spread through social systems. There's an obvious link to developing and spreading emotional intelligence, sound spiritual practice, and virtues such as kindness, patience, gentleness, courage and perseverance.

These social networks are of people in face-to-face contact, people we see regularly. Researchers are looking at how the structure of these networks affects our adopting and sustaining habits. There's some evidence that networks of overlapping social ties were the most effective. That is to say, we don't know everyone in the network, but we know some people and they know others. It's like a web. In such networks, people catch things from one another.

“Most of us are already aware of the direct effect we have on our friends and family; our actions can make them happy or sad, healthy or sick, even rich or poor. But we rarely consider that everything we think, feel, do or say can spread far beyond the people we know...As part of a social network, we transcend ourselves, for good or ill, and become part of something much larger. We are connected.”<sup>i</sup>

Parish leaders don't control the social networks that exist within and beyond the parish. But they can encourage social connections and look favorably upon friendships in the parish. They may also influence those networks through the overall culture, climate, structures and processes of the parish. Exercising such influence has the capacity to build a critical mass around healthy and faithful practices.

Malcolm Gladwell's concept of the tipping point<sup>ii</sup> is related to the idea of critical mass. A tipping point is when the impetus for change becomes unstoppable. Gladwell defines a tipping point as “the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point.”

Gladwell believes, “Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread like viruses do.” To facilitate critical mass around a healthier set of parish habits we might pay attention to Gladwell's notion that three types of people are needed: 1) connectors, those who easily make friends and build connections; 2) people with the new and needed competencies such as spiritual practice and emotional intelligence; and 3) people with skills at persuading and negotiating. Not much good will happen in a parish if leaders discourage social connection, and/or are unskilled in the spiritual life, and/or are not able to draw members toward healthier practice.

The Shape of the Parish model is an example of a critical mass approach. See the Resources section for more on the model.

The Shape of the Parish model assumes that developing a “critical mass” around spiritual life and practice has the effect of drawing more people, and the parish as a whole, into a deeper relationship with God and the church. The existence of a critical mass of Apostolic Faith people in a parish can orient the parish toward Christ and away from its preoccupation with the more trivial aspects of religion and parish life.

By their behavior and character those closer to the center contribute to establishing a climate, “an energy not their own,” that attracts others toward the center. By living the faith they draw others deeper into God. They become a means of grace for the parish by their contagious influence.

A goal might be to develop a critical mass of people of Apostolic Faith in the parish making up 15—20% of Sunday attendees. That would, in most situations, provide the weight needed to orient the parish in a healthy direction. What's needed is a condition where those of Apostolic Faith and Practice constitute a critical mass, where there are enough of them that they are setting the tone and climate.

In addition, leaders need to facilitate and strengthen the critical mass, the Apostolic core, by firmly and gently tilting the structures, processes and climate of the parish toward maturity and health. The whole atmosphere of the parish says that there is more; more than we have yet experienced and known.

The grounding of the parish in health and faithfulness then is enlivened; made real in the lives of men and women. It is in the habits of people, not just the statements of leaders.

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<sup>i</sup> *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, Little, Brown and Company, 2009. page 30.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell, Little Brown, 2000.