

PARISH OPTIONS

Saturday, February 5, 2022
In "Means of Grace, Hope of Glory"



Over the years I've worked with dozens of parishes as they made decisions to move in a different direction. Decisions to grow, to close, to merge. *Crying is all right in its way while it lasts. But you have to stop sooner or later, and then you still have to decide what to do.* — C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*

In every case there were hard decisions. Decisions full of pain, uncertainty, fear. But finally, in acts of humility and courage, parish leaders made the decisions that were necessary for the future.

Stories

A few examples of parishes moving from decline to a stable and healthy life. And one story of a graceful closing.

A historically Black urban parish in an area that was becoming gentrified and white. The members were older. Few lived in the neighborhood anymore. They were doing okay at the moment, but they could see that not too many years down the road they would have trouble surviving. At first, they did some of the things you do to attract new members. Their efforts were not working. We met. I asked them to each share what it was like to be at St. John's now. They went around the table sharing memories and frustrations. There were tears. They used the Parish Options model to consider their choices. Eventually they decided that merger was something to explore. They contacted several parishes and informally discussed the possibility. That narrowed down to one. They entered into discussions with the other parish and after about a year merged.

A parish in an area that city planners had targeted for development. They had been sharing their space with the congregation of another denomination, so some kind of cooperative relationship was on the table. But that option was driven partly by inertia and partly by their liberal impulse to be ecumenical. The series of conversations surfaced feelings of discomfort. They didn't like the compromises that had been making to live with the other congregation. So, they looked at being on their own. There was an exploration of, and some training, in growth strategies. That had some positive results but not enough. Finally, they worked out a deal with property developers. New buildings were constructed on the site that included condominiums and a new church building.

A suburban parish that was never able to develop much traction around membership growth. They had a meeting with a parish development consultant and one of the

bishops. The consultant laid out a way in which they could explore their options and receive some help in attracting new members. It was a lively session. Members were engaged. The spirit was hopeful. The consultant and bishop asked them to spend a few weeks praying and thinking on it and to get back to them with their decision to proceed or not. They decided that they simply did not have the energy for the work that would be involved. They decided to close.

A parish in an area of the city that had been largely working class. The members were older. A small group of white people in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly Hispanic. The diocesan bishop imposed a new arrangement. The existing congregation would now gather for an 8 AM Sunday Eucharist and a new Hispanic congregation would be formed. They would meet for the Eucharist at 10:30. The parish would have a new vicar who came from Central America. This was a parallel development strategy of caring for an existing congregation that was in decline and nurturing a new congregation that seem to have more potential in the situation.

A parish that had been experiencing a slow decline in attendance and membership over a 15 year period. Some members were convinced that they would not be able to survive. They began to informally explore the possibility of merger with another parish and even began to think about whether closing was going to be the responsible action in the future. A new rector was selected who had training in parish development and a charismatic and extroverted personality. The new rector used a strategy that focused on the three purposes of a parish church, was an appreciative process, and made use of marketing skills. Within a few years the parish almost tripled in average attendance.



Not safe or easy

I want to discourage you from choosing anything or making any decision simply because it is safe. Things of value seldom are. -- Toni Morrison

It was as though they were jumping off a cliff with no safety net. Leaders in these parishes had no certainty that the path they took would be fruitful.

Was this a mistake?

He felt that he was still groping in the dark; he had chosen his path but kept looking back, wondering whether he had misread the signs, whether he should not have taken the other way. — J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

It was natural enough to wonder, to second-guess themselves. They had all prayed, given themselves to hope and also to facts and data. Still, they wondered. The decision had to be made again and again. Persistence. Wisdom.

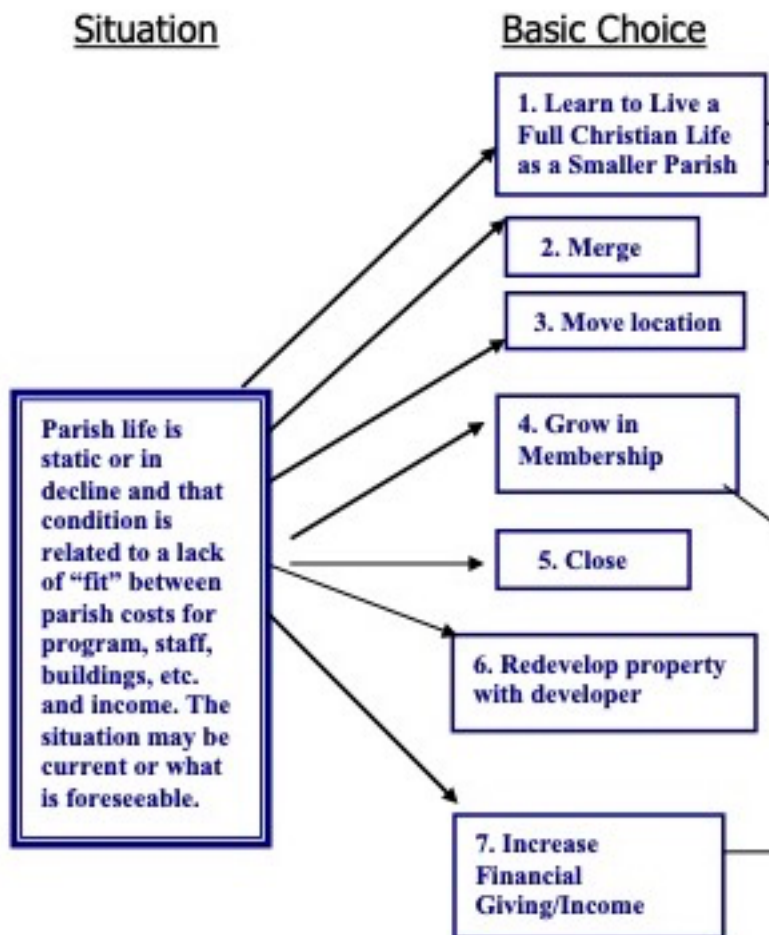
Parish Options Model

Maybe parish life has become static and is drifting toward trouble. Attendance is down 30% over the past decade. But giving is up. An example. We spend time and money upgrading the bathrooms. But we can't seem to have the discussion about where we will be another ten years down the road. Or maybe it's totally clear. We are in decline. Our energy is flat. We have no idea what to do and we fear asking for help.

In all the stories above, leaders engaged in a process of identifying the possible pathways to turn around. They didn't want the future they saw ahead of them. In humility and courage, they looked at their choices and set out in a new direction. At some level they knew that hope was not a plan and despair was not a solution.^[1]

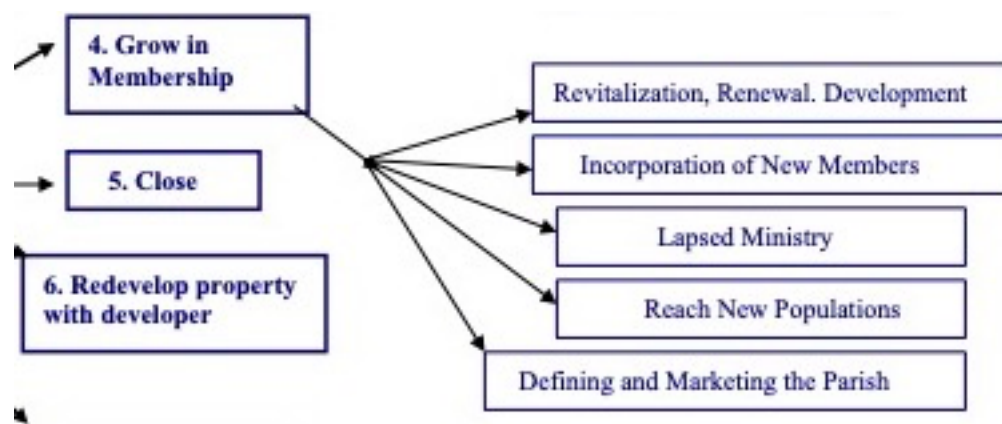
Some consciously used the Parish Options Model. [Here's a PDF of Parish Options](#)

The model assumes that there are seven broad options available for these parishes. Of course, there are variations on each.



They engage a process of discussion, prayer, and prioritization to narrow the list down. No parish has the energy to investigate all the options. Usually, it's obvious that some options make no sense in a particular case. Often, they will be attracted to an option that might allow them to experience minimal disruption to the way they were currently living and doing ministry. Grow in membership seems to be a favorite. And at times that is a sound decision either on its own or in combination with one of the other options. And at other times it's a fantasy solution, wishful thinking. There was one parish where everyone was in their 70s and 80s. They actually did some of the things you do to try to attract new members. But after a year of that they accepted that they simply didn't have the energy to stay with that option.

Once a parish begins to focus its attention on an option the work really begins. They'll need to work with a credible developer if they want to work out a way to sell some of their property and use the proceeds to build an endowment large enough to maintain the church building. If they want to consider merger, they'll need to enter into conversations with other churches to see if anyone is interested. If they want to work on membership growth, they'll need to look into the standard options for doing that. See [Six Strategies for Growth and Evangelization](#).



Always light

There is always light. If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it. — Amanda Gorman, inauguration poem, The Hill We Climb

Parishes can turn things around. They can find the stuff within themselves, nudged and added by that "energy not its own"^[ii], to shape a new life. Character matters here. Such work requires humility, perseverance and patience.

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Robert A. Gallagher, OA

[i] Thanks to Jonathan V. Last for the phrase. The Bulwark, February 5, 2022

[ii] A Charles Williams phrase for the Holy Spirit