Opinion



by Dennis Coday

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Let me share with you something that has been nagging me for several weeks now. It's an observation and really only a half-formed idea. I'm hoping NCR readers can help me fully form it.

To get to my idea, though, I have to show you the path that led me there.

Two years ago, we embarked on a reporting project that we dubbed "**The Field Hospital**." The idea was to report on the life of the church from its most basic building block: the parish.

It began with a question that intrigued us and that readers and others were constantly asking: How has the papacy of Francis influenced the ordinary folks in the pews? One of Pope Francis' primary images of church is the field hospital, a place of refuge and healing from an oftentimes violent, unfriendly, challenging world. Another way to ask the question might be: How are Catholics in the era of Francis living out the Gospel mandate of mercy and justice at the parish level?

We called on two of our best contributing reporters, Peter Feuerherd and Dan Morris-Young, to explore this question. Over the last 24 months, they have written some

fascinating stories from the perspective of people in the pews. Here are a few examples, chosen pretty much at random:

- Parish roundup: California wildfire crisis; helping stranded Puerto Ricans
- Methodist experience in closing congregations offers lessons to Catholics
- Participation in lay ministry training programs down 16 percent
- Parish roundup: First mission church for Rother; Mexico earthquake; 'Share the Journey' of migrants
- El Paso parish's ministries awaken a missionary community
- Pittsburgh plan would consolidate 188 parishes into 48 groups
- Opening doors to Latinos invigorates North Carolina parish
- Should we hold hands or not during the Our Father?
- The results are in: NCR readers on hand-holding during the Our Father
- St. Matthew keeps Jesus at center of its megachurch-style campus
- Francis effect infuses St. Augustine in Philly

Stay with me. I'm just about to begin talking about my idea.

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A little more than a year ago, we created a subset of reported stories for the Field Hospital series to examine the growing Hispanic influence in church life. We drafted Global Sisters Report staff writer Soli Salgado to write about La Iglesia Hispana. Those stories are especially important as the U.S. church is in the midst of its fifth, every-four-year Encuentro (gathering) process. These consultations begin at the grassroots level and build through diocesan and regional encuentros and a national gathering, this time in Dallas in the fall of 2018.

The reporting by Salgado, Morris-Young and Feuerherd has taken us to many places. We've explored many ministries and parish outreach programs; we've talked with disgruntled and inspired parishioners. We've talked to people whose parishes have closed and were merged with another parish. We've talked about music and preaching and pastors' styles.

After reading these two years of reporting, I have recently been struck with a thought -- based right now solely on the anecdotal evidence I have seen in the Field Hospital. I'd suggest that parish life in the United States is on the cusp of some major changes. We are at the very beginning of what could be a profound

realignment of what a parish is and how it functions.

> 'We are seeing profound shifts in how Americans socialize and establish relationships on personal and community levels. ... Where is it taking us?'
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In the relatively near future, it may be 10 years or 15 years from now, I don't know, but I believe that the way people worship and gather in that next period will be profoundly different from how you and I gather and worship today.

What has led me to this thought? I am seeing the confluence of several streams of events inside and outside the church. We are seeing a decline in the number of priests able to serve parish needs and a decline in professionally trained lay staff who are paid a living wage. The demographic shift from the traditional heavily Catholic strongholds in the Northeast and Midwest to the South and Southwest has been well-documented, but I think the implications of that demographic shift are just emerging.

At the same time, we are seeing profound shifts in how Americans in general choose to socialize and establish relationships on personal and community levels. For example, people don't make retreats like they used to. Ask anyone who staffs a retreat center. Ask the Marriage Encounter folks. The Lions Club and Junior League have similar issues of recruitment and membership. All of this is happening at once. Where is it taking us?

I am going to ask the Field Hospital reporters to start looking more intently into these issues. But I'm also betting that among our readers are people studying and researching these questions of belonging and membership, service and relationships, community and self-actualization. If you are doing research into these kinds of questions, especially as they apply to church life, I'd like to hear from you. I'd welcome your thoughts and ideas as I try to work through this.

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If you'd like to read more of the kind of reporting I described above, please consider making a donation to our **Friends of NCR campaign**.

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