News



Matthew Kelly, left, speaks at a Living Every Day with Passion and Purpose event, June 1, 2015. (Wikimedia Commons/The Dynamic Catholic Institute)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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January 17, 2020

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Editor's note: *Matthew Kelly may be one of the best-selling Catholic writers of this generation. The Ohio-based author, speaker and management consultant also founded and runs a nonprofit evangelization organization, the Dynamic Catholic Institute, and owns a number of for-profit businesses. This series examines Kelly's enterprises, as one of the most successful efforts of a growing number of entrepreneurs selling catechetical, spiritual, organizational and leadership materials to the country's 76 million Catholics. Part 1 looked at Kelly and his business interests, while Part 2 looked at possible conflicts of interests with Dynamic Catholic. This is Part 3.*

Although National Catholic Reporter requested an in-person or telephone interview over the course of six weeks, Kelly agreed only to answer questions in writing. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from him are from that e-mail interview.

About 30 folks used to attend Bible study meetings at Most Holy Trinity in Covington, Louisiana, a parish founded in 2005 to accommodate the population boom north of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

But after Most Holy Trinity became a pilot site for the Dynamic Parish program, attendance soared. Now upwards of 140 people show up to study the Gospel of John using Dynamic Catholic's "Turning Point" materials — billed as "not your typical Bible study."

The increased turnout is at least partly the result of the consulting, materials and strategizing that are part of the Dynamic Parish program, said Joey Dembrun, a parishioner on the implementation team.

Dynamic Parish is a new initiative of Dynamic Catholic, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the "new evangelization" that was founded by Catholic author, motivational speaker and business consultant Matthew Kelly. It launched last year with 21 pilot parishes; the pilot program will triple in size in 2020, Kelly told NCR.

Although Dynamic Parish is free for those in the pilot program (except for some materials), Dembrun believes it would be worth paying for. "Anything that gets people more engaged, closer to the truth and more involved in the church is priceless," he said.



(Unsplash/Sarah Noltner)

At St. Pius X in New Orleans, the increase in engagement is not as dramatic — at least not yet — but Dynamic Parish has pushed the parish to focus on team building, leadership identification and communication, especially online.

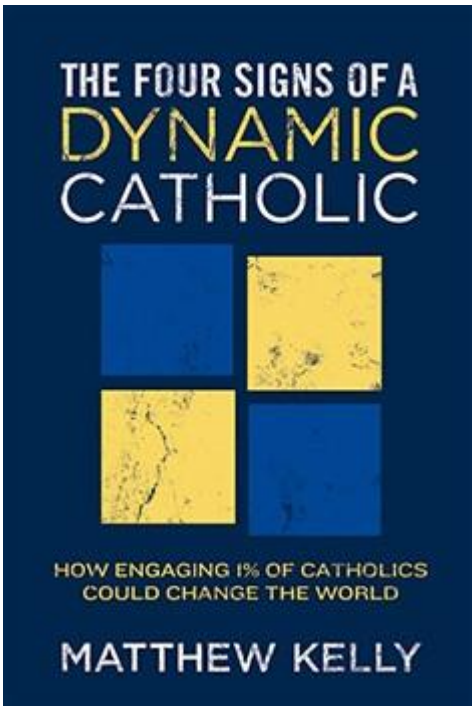
"It's been really great," said Susie Veters, a parishioner. "It's helped us tremendously, just to build that space and create more of a desire for people to want to get involved."

Veters, who is also archdiocesan director of stewardship and parish services, oversees other parish revitalization programs for the archdiocese's more than 100 parishes. Dynamic Parish's individual consultants, who meet weekly with the parish team, make it distinctive and less of a one-size-fits-all-approach, compared to similar programs, she said.

When piloting was initially promoted as worth more than $1 million to each parish, Veters thought that was "a crazy overestimate," she said. "But now I can see that it

is. It's really been incredible and an amazing gift to our parish."

Kelly, who claims to have visited more than one in six parishes in the U.S., founded Dynamic Catholic in 2009 based on the need he saw for evangelization initiatives, world-class catechetical programs and parish renewal.



"The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic," by Matthew Kelly

Dynamic Catholic's book program, which distributes Kelly's and other authors' books free or at very low cost in parishes, is the evangelization initiative. "The number of people who have come back to the church, had their spiritual life renewed or been engaged on a whole new level because they were given a book is astounding," Kelly told NCR.

Next came catechetical materials, which Dynamic Catholic has created through its "Catholic Moments" series.

Now, as Dynamic Catholic moves into its second decade, it has turned its focus to parish renewal.

Parish consulting

Dynamic Catholic recently laid off two dozen of its nearly 100 employees (according to reviews posted on Glassdoor) as part of restructuring to launch and build the new

Dynamic Parish initiative, which is based on research funded by Dynamic Catholic and detailed in Kelly's 2012 book, *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*.

That research confirmed what many parish leaders already know: that a small proportion of parishioners — only 7%, according to Dynamic Catholic — are engaged in parish life, or "dynamic," as Kelly calls it.

"What will the Catholic Church be like 20 years from now?" asks Kelly in Dynamic Parish's introductory video. He notes that during a recent visit to Europe, he saw sparsely attended Masses lacking in young people.

What Kelly envisions 20 years from now is a church "meeting people where they are and leading them to where God wants them to be," he said. To achieve that, "It's time for us as Catholics to start dreaming again."

Enter Dynamic Parish. Billed as "the largest parish renewal initiative the church has ever seen," it promises to "increase engagement in individual Catholics by helping them develop a daily routine of prayer, regular study of the Catholic faith, generosity and evangelization."

According to pilot parishes' websites, Dynamic Catholic plans to invest millions of dollars in their parishes, at no cost to them, thanks to Dynamic Catholic donors. The investment includes "thousands of inspiring resources," programs and a consultant, according to the video.

The new program still incorporates Dynamic Catholic's mission to provide parishes with books and other materials that help them to "rediscover the genius of Catholicism."

But it also adds a component in which a consultant meets regularly with a parish to problem solve, build rapport and "effectively implement Dynamic Catholic solutions," according to a job posting for the position.

Dynamic Parish joins myriad other parish revitalization and consulting programs that have sprung up in the past decade, as Catholic congregations face threats from decreased institutional affiliation among younger Americans, negative press from the decadeslong sex abuse scandal and increasing financial pressures.

These programs and their consultants promise security in insecure times.

While individual consultants have long promoted their services to parishes, the field has grown considerably, as parishes have become more complex, said Charles Zech, professor emeritus of church management at Villanova University and the author of *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century.*



(Unsplash/Jeff Sheldon)

The goal of most programs is to increase parish vitality, often including outreach to those with weak or nonexistent connections to the church. The disaffected, ironically, are the most demanding, wanting vibrant liturgies, social justice

ministries, and social opportunities and community from their parishes, he said.

While parish revitalization websites tout anecdotal successes, Zech noted a lack of research to confirm those testimonials. Such programs and other consulting often work best with parishes already primed for improvement, causing a bit of a "self-fulfilling" effect, he said.

"Parishes that are really struggling and really need this can't afford it or aren't in a position to take advantage of it," he said. "I don't see this approach turning around a parish that is declining. … It's not for every parish."

Dynamic Parish and others programs appear to be modeled on similar evangelical Protestant ones that argue that the church can learn from business. They are nearly always founded and led by wealthy businessmen.

In Catholicism, these parish consulting programs include business writer Patrick Lencioni's Amazing Parish program, financial services businessman Tim Flanagan's Catholic Leadership Institute, investment banker Bill Simon's Parish Catalyst and the new parish outreach program from the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, or FOCUS, among others.

According to Catholic Leadership Institute's website, Flanagan* "saw all of the money and resources being invested into leaders in the corporate world, academia and the military, and asked the question: why not for the Catholic Church? Nothing is more important or deserving of our support that deserves the best in leadership development and training than our Church."

Zech said most parish revitalization programs are strong on soft-skill development, such as leadership and other relationship skills, but weaker in the "hard skills" areas of financial management, facilities management, technology and fundraising.

"The church is not a business, but we do have a stewardship responsibility to take care of resources, which requires good business practices," he told NCR.

Donor-funded

What differentiates Dynamic Catholic's consulting — at least so far — is its low price. Most of the materials and services are offered free or nearly free. This follows the organization's distribution model for books by Matthew Kelly and some other

authors, in which parishes or individuals pay a dollar or two, plus a minimal shipping fee.

How does Dynamic Catholic afford that?

Through donors, whose contributions make up the majority of the organization's revenue. In 2017, the most recent year for which tax documents are available, Dynamic Catholic had nearly $20 million in total revenue. Nearly $15 million came from contributions and grants.

That includes modest grants from foundations such as the Cincinnati-based Tom and Genny Sedler Family Foundation, which regularly donates $20,000 a year, according to its tax documents. Dynamic Catholic also has received grants from the Omaha Community Foundation and the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation.

Members of Dynamic Catholic's board — which includes Kelly's father-in-law Patrick Burke, real estate investment mogul Lamar Hunt Jr. and businessman Brian Caster — are among the organization's largest donors, Caster told NCR in an email interview.

"It is also important to note that Matthew and his wife, Meggie, are Dynamic Catholic's largest donors," Caster wrote.

Donations can come from individuals, who can contribute to Dynamic Catholic — and to Kelly — in a variety of ways, including as one-time gifts, by donating stock or leaving money to the organization in their wills or trusts. "Ambassadors" who give at least $10 per month receive free materials as well as access to monthly spiritual coaching calls with Kelly and other Dynamic Catholic leaders.



(Unsplash/Markus Spiske)

Not everything at Dynamic Catholic is free, however. Parishes that would like to host a "Welcome" parish retreat (formerly Christ Renews His Parish, or CRHP, which Dynamic Catholic acquired in 2017) are charged a $495 "registration fee" plus an annual renewal fee of $100. This covers marketing materials, training videos and phone calls, plus discounted prices on materials such as team guides and participant journals.

By comparison, CRHP materials were once freely shared among parishes, although a handbook could at one time be purchased from the Diocese of Cleveland for $45.

Another moneymaker is events, during which speakers — primarily lifecoach Jonathan Fanning or Allen Hunt, a former megachurch pastor who converted to Catholicism — join a Christian musician for an evening on "Passion and Purpose for Marriage" or "Find Your Greatness."

Kelly also has spoken at approximately 20 Dynamic Catholic events per year over the past 10 years, bringing in more than $15 million in revenue to the nonprofit, Caster said, noting that Kelly has never received a fee for those speaking engagements. No events with Kelly are currently scheduled for 2020, however.

Likewise, Dynamic Catholic's Parish Book Program has resulted in profit for the organization — but also for Kelly personally. In 2017, the program netted $1.8 million for Dynamic Catholic, but resulted in more than $4 million in profit for the Kelly-owned Beacon (now Wellspring) publishing house.

Caster said Dynamic Catholic has "tens of thousands" of ambassadors, most of whom pay a minimum of $10 per month.

Even those who do not donate money can help by becoming volunteer "parish champions" who promote the Parish Book Program through prayer and sharing free materials with their own parish leaders and decision-makers. In exchange, champions receive a monthly video email.

The organization's goal is to have a parish champion at every parish in America, according to an online fact sheet. In 2017, tax documents listed 4,050 volunteers in the organization, which may mean they are almost a quarter of the way to a presence in the more than 17,000 parishes in the United States.

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]

**This story has been updated to correctly attribute a quote to Flanagan.*

Advertisement

A version of this story appeared in the **March 6-19, 2020** print issue under the headline: Donors to Dynamic Catholic fund new Dynamic Parish program.