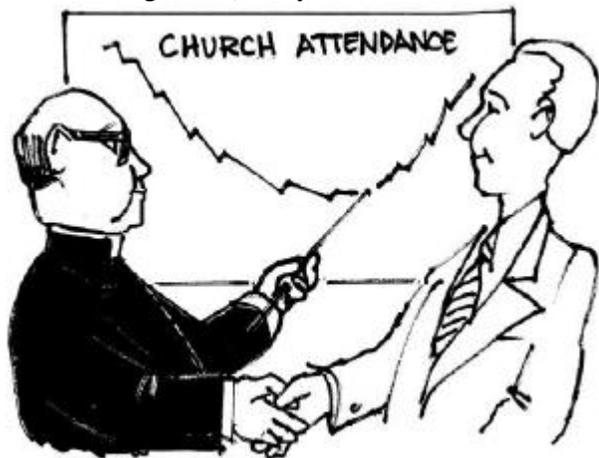


## Making parishes engaging and vibrant

Tom Gallagher | May. 27, 2009



### Mission Management

If the United States' 30 million former Catholics were their own denomination, their church would be larger than the Methodists, Lutherans and Presbyterians. Combined.

The situation is most stark in the Northeast, where the total number of Catholics is dropping in each state between 5 and 20 percent. Parishes are closing. Weekly Mass attendance has reached new lows. Most former Catholics have "just gradually drifted away," according to a recent Pew poll. Without immigrants, the total Catholic population would be in decline.

What to do?

Jesuit priest and author Tom Sweetser has a plan. Founder and director of the Milwaukee-based Parish Evaluation Project, Sweetser's most recent book, *Keeping the Covenant: Taking Parish to the Next Level* (Crossroad), was published in 2007. With Franciscan Sr. Peg Bishop, they put parishes through a rigorous process called the Parish Assessment and Renewal, a unique blend of information-gathering and planning.

The Sweetser program includes the following elements:

- Four months of self-assessment, during which Sweetser and Bishop collect information about the parish.
- A two-week on-site visit with personal interviews, telephone calls to parishioners, and analysis of parish liturgies, programs and ministries.
- A report of what Sweetser and Bishop have observed, and recommendations for the future.
- The report is presented to a gathering of parish leadership. From this information, the leaders fashion a plan for the future direction and renewal of the parish that involves several commissions with specific goals and regular "leadership nights" that bring the commissions together.
- A three-day follow-up visit six months after the initial report to assist in the implementation of the

renewal.

Sweetser has long believed that the key is finding a partner for the pastor who can serve as a mentor to the staff and take on many administrative functions for the pastor. He continues, "Priests are just not trained for administration." It is vital for the pastor to realize the most effective use of his time and how to enable lay leaders, says Sweetser.

According to Bishop, "Apathy is not the people's fault."

Parish renewal is not just the pastor's job. Parishioners matter. Laypeople need to sign up at a parish, attend Mass, join in the Mass by singing and connecting with people, contribute their time and resources, and pray at least six minutes a day, says Sweetser.

"People respond when they make the commitment and once you get people praying, they will want to get involved," he said.

Does Sweetser's program really work?

Fr. Steve Brice, pastor of 1,700-family St. Anne Parish in Wausau, Wis., thinks so. Sweetser and Bishop's work is about conversion of heart among the staff so that the staff begins to believe that every member of this parish is gifted with wisdom," says Brice.

One small change has made a big difference. Instead of the pastor creating an agenda and running a meeting, the agenda is created jointly with the staff. The meeting facilitator is rotated among staff. "Just this simple change in process has released many new ideas and much good energy in the staff," Brice says.

St. Anne has created five commissions and has identified a partner for the pastor by upgrading the role of business administrator to parish administrator responsible for guiding the parish through this period of transformation. This enables Brice to reduce his work overload and the parish to gain from a talented staff member.

Jesuit Fr. Craig Boly, pastor of 2,600-family St. Pius X Parish in Portland, Ore., said that "people are coming out of the woodwork" as a result of Sweetser's program. Boly's "partner in ministry" is a seasoned executive, Emma Dennis, who is his "umbrella against bad weather," says Boly. "It's so much fun now as pastor."

Sweetser and Bishop "model collaborative church," Boly says.

According to Brice, "More than anyone else I know, Sweetser has the vision and leadership style worked out in detail. His mixture of spiritual depth, hardheaded business sense, years of experience with and love for the local church make him a unique voice in our church with a message it is in critical need of hearing."

*Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to NCR. Ideas for a "Mission Management" story? Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.*

### **Online resources**

To learn more about Sweetser's work, go to [www.pepparish.org](http://www.pepparish.org)

To get a sense of parish commissions at work, visit the Church of St. Anne's Web site, [www.stanneswausau.org](http://www.stanneswausau.org), and click on the "Parish Renewal" tab found on the left side.

You may also visit St. Pius's Web site at [www.stpius.org](http://www.stpius.org)

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