

10 signs of a vibrant parish

Denise Simeone | Jul. 20, 2009



Pat Marrin

Parish Life

Stand on the platform of an incoming subway train and you can feel the train get closer. Stop alongside a car with a blaring stereo and your car shakes with the sound. Listen to the summer cicada; the air pulsates with their deafening noise. Feel the pulsing of a roller coaster under your feet as it whips around the track. Vibrations indicate movement. Vibrations that beat and pulsate imply a pulse, and a pulse means life.

What makes a vibrant parish, one with vitality and a healthy life people recognize? A vibrant parish is alive with a pulse that is felt and seen from within by its members and externally by those who know it by its works, ministries and reputation.

The following are 10 signs of a vibrant parish:

All who enter experience welcome and hospitality. Parish doors swing wide open to convey a hospitable spirit literally and figuratively. The stranger becomes a guest. People linger and engage with one another. Those with different needs are accommodated by rides to church, rooms to change babies, or wheelchair seating so someone can pray and worship in the midst of the community. Parishes can invite new people to join the roster and even have a welcome meal but they must also welcome new ideas and fresh ways of doing old business. Changes that new people bring into any system are met with a flexible and hospitable spirit. Asking parishioners regularly what they experience or notice at other churches invites them to constantly seek excellence and ways to adapt in their own community. Welcoming that kind of input makes any place fresh and alive with new energy.

Liturgy inspires active participation and offers an experience of God. Many components create good liturgy and almost everyone has an opinion on them. But some values help all liturgies. Liturgical ministers who are well formed in their roles invite all community members to celebrate together. Music responsive to the liturgical seasons as well as the cultures and languages that make up different assemblies moves the hearts and spirits of those who play, listen and sing. Relevant preaching connected to the lives of the community touches hearts and sends all forth nourished and challenged. Preachers who take the time to break open the Word during the week

are well prepared to preach and pray with power. Vibrant parishes offer liturgies that invite people to linger with God yet propel them into the world and the needs found there. Come to be nourished and then sent forth to act. A young parishioner made a drawing of his new church with two differently colored doors, one marked *IN* and one marked *OUT*. That is liturgy's role.

Parishioners recognize their parish mission. Parishioners know who they are and who they are called to be. They have seen their mission statement in writing or posted on their bulletin but they have also seen it in action and know their parish's connection to the broader Gospel mission. Their mission inspires and empowers them to be fully alive and awake in the world as a member of a body that has a purpose. A local church advertises on public radio with these words, "Our church seeks God, practices justice and creates community." One does not need to be a member or visitor to clearly know that church's purpose. Vibrant parishes make sure everyone knows their mission. One church made a conscious effort to post the mission throughout the facility and print it on every agenda and PR material. A parishioner was heard to remark, "In all the years I have been coming here I have never heard as much about our mission as I have these last few months." He recognized and appreciated it.

Collegial leadership is practiced. Parishes that offer opportunities and responsibilities for many to take ownership of the mission and ministry of the parish create an enthusiastic and mutual spirit. Leaders listen to parishioners' concerns, communicate consistently and engage members by challenging, inviting and welcoming their involvement in the community's life. Sometimes this is orchestrated by a pastor, administrator and pastoral staff. But simply having a staff does not make a parish vibrant, for many small urban and rural communities may have only one or two. All parish bodies, whether they are pastoral councils, finance committees or other leadership groups, gain trust when they systematically practice mutuality in decision-making, transparency in policies, and empowerment as an organization.

Members are recognized as gifted and called forth to use their gifts. Parishes that routinely use their stewardship process to identify and invite skills and talents to be developed in parish structures reap multiple rewards. Some parishioners would likely indicate they have never heard from anyone after completing a survey offering time or talent. Following up and directly inviting persons to engage in parish ministry based on what they offered in stewardship efforts creates true ownership and sense of belonging. Parishes that identify what they need for a ministry and specifically tell someone what they can offer a program, event or practice help members gain confidence and motivation. Parishioners' sense of collaboration and initiative grows. Parishes that work at this do not have the "same old people" doing all the work.

Faith is nurtured. Whether it is education programs, seasonal missions, youth activities, programs for persons in various ages or walks of life (the list is endless), formation is an active and vital part of every facet of the parish. Opportunities to nurture the spiritual dimension and deepen the sense of being called to love as disciples are constantly cultivated. The powerful gifts of Catholic tradition and social teaching are apparent and they are studied and pondered. Liturgical prayers and sacramental opportunities are explored and ritualized. The relational aspects of people's real lives are seized as wonderful opportunities for deepening the faith life of each member of the body. One parish shaped its faith by preparing reflections around the Sunday scripture and their parish mission statement by inviting all groups that gathered weekly to integrate 10 minutes for parishioners dialoguing together. The result was a powerful tool of formation without creating another program.

Outreach to the body of Christ is practiced. A vibrant parish faces the world with all the agonies, inequities and challenges found among God's people and responds. People who find themselves in need, lost, marginalized, vulnerable or sick are fed, clothed, nourished and welcomed. Members who are absent or separated from the community, perhaps by illness, college, military duty or imprisonment, are still connected to the body and given loving attention. Charity and compassion are offered but the hard work of creating justice is also attempted with all the difficulties and disagreements we find within the body. There are abundant ways to

be the body of Christ, respond as God's disciples and act as God's instruments. Parishes have found unique and unmistakable ways to respond. Churches grapple with multiple issues: homelessness, neglected neighborhoods, environmental irresponsibility, poverty, unemployment. The list of concerns is extensive, but vibrant parishes reach out and serve as disciples have been commanded.

There is a plan for a sustainable and responsible future. Responsibility and accountability regarding all aspects of the parish is developed and conveyed as a result of long-range planning. Members actively engage one another and envision their role and collective responsibility for their future. Stewardship for one's personal assets, church facilities and global and environmental resources is integrated into parish systems, programs and structures. Consultation is actively sought, widespread and ongoing. One parish planning committee spent the summer months actively but informally seeking input from parishioners and groups to develop a pastoral plan for building their parish community as they built their new church facility.

Communal life abounds. Vibrant parishes gather people for study, outreach, formation and fun. These moments are integral to enabling members to connect and respond to one another's needs. The time for care by a loving community happens every day; death, illness, family crises and life's difficulties come to all. Pastoral care helps parishioners respond because relationships have been built and nurtured when the community has assembled. Members connected communally find opportunities to engage even beyond themselves into neighborhood undertakings or ecumenical efforts.

Baptism's vocational call is cultivated. Baptism calls all to ministry and discipleship. This sacrament echoes over all members of a community, inviting a response of generous hearts and lives. Yet the baptismal call can provoke a personal response involving a life-changing witness. The ways to intensify one's baptismal vocation and serve God's people are abundant: service corps, priesthood, Catholic Worker houses, religious novitiates, lay communities, mission immersions, diocesan formation programs, theological study -- there are vast possibilities. Vibrant communities are places where members are encouraged in their call, supported in their discernment and find sustenance as they respond.

Life wells up from inside, becoming visible from the outside. Imagine the signs we might see from parishes pulsing with life or the humming energy we might feel if the spirit of vibrant parishes caught on, one to another, like a wildfire spreading across the land.

Denise Simeone is a writer and consultant skilled at group facilitation, long-range planning and mission development.

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