

Mission-driven parish: Is it even possible?

The parish as photocopier: a model of evangelisation, discipling and missioning



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Why your parish photocopier is a great model for your parish mission.

Who are we as a parish? What have we been called to do? Pope Francis is challenging us to make forming missionary disciples our core activity as parishes. We might ask though: is this even possible? This article is intended to ‘provoke’ you and your parish team to engage in some serious thought about what it might mean to be a more missionary parish.

What’s your parish model?

We all have an ideal, and maybe subconscious, image of what a parish is for. Differing understandings of the purpose of a parish can lead to conflict within parish leadership teams. This conflict can thwart your parish mission to make disciples and grow. Here are six common (and slightly tongue-in-cheek) models that can hinder your parish mission:

1. Parish as a social club

This model sees the parish as a place to promote leisure and social activities (bingo, concerts, dinners, outings). The focus is on ‘community-building’. **But:**

- Are we building Christian community?
- There is a difference between socialising and fellowship. Socialising is when we gather with people like us. Fellowship is socialising with a purpose, where we are radically open and welcoming to people who may not look or think like us.
- A heavy emphasis on socialising can hinder the mission of a parish by tying up energy and resources that would be better directed towards evangelising and fellowship.

2. Parish as a service station

This model sees the parish priest and staff as providers of sacramental ‘services’ such as baptisms, funerals and weddings, often for people with little or no church affiliation. This is seen as an important part of the provision of pastoral care, and the priest’s time and the parish facilities are directed towards this. **But:**

- According to a recent International Theological Commission report ([The reciprocity between faith and sacraments in the sacramental economy](#), 2020, §57), there are serious questions about how fruitfully these sacraments are being received.
- The way we offer sacraments has the potential to cripple our missionary efforts when they monopolise time and parish resources that could perhaps be better directed towards more fruitful ministries.

- To be more intentionally missionary, guidelines may need to be negotiated, including asking uncomfortable questions about how easily available we make these ‘services’ to non-parishioners.

3. Parish as a museum

In a ‘museum’ model, change is seen as negative, and stagnation is seen as ‘stability’. We can have a fixation on the physical buildings in the parish and on maintaining things from the past. As numbers decline and we merge communities, parishes can end up with multiple churches, presbyteries and halls, spending up to 80 per cent of total finances in maintaining, insuring and running their buildings. **But:**

- As Winston Churchill said, ‘We shape our buildings and then they shape us.’ Are we wedded to our established way of doing things? Or are we committed to our mission? Our buildings can seriously hinder our mission.
- There can be an uncomfortable tension between preserving traditions, on the one hand, and equipping disciples for the twenty-first-century context, on the other. Funds tied up in extra buildings or in buildings no longer ‘fit for purpose’ could be released to employ pastoral people or build modern facilities that are comfortable and welcoming and that assist our evangelising mission.

4. Parish as a bank

In the ‘bank’ model, the primary focus of the parish is on debt reduction and having money in the bank. When funds are short, staff are fired and programs closed. **But:**

- Casting a strong vision, and giving parishioners something to aim for, frequently results in strong ‘buy-in’.
- The question should not be ‘How much did we save?’ but rather ‘Who was saved?’ Disciples are made through relationships, but you need people and programs to enable this.
- When you make disciples, you have more committed members who give more money, so you can hire more staff to make more disciples, and so on. Aim to spend almost every cent.

5. Parish as a school

The ‘school’ model sees the parish school as the major focus of the parish’s financial and missionary energy. Too often we have a Catholic school with a ‘parish’ attached, with parish funds and staff resources primarily used in the school. **But:**

- Jesus told us to teach the adults and bless the children. Yet traditionally in parishes, we teach the children and bless the adults!

- In a missionary parish, the evangelising and teaching priority is adults, who are intentionally led into a relationship with Jesus and are then formed into missionary disciples.
- Missionary disciples will bring their kids to the parish for formation and the sacraments.

6. Parish as soup kitchen

The 'soup kitchen' model sees the primary purpose of the parish as providing services to parishioners and the local community by serving the poor and working for social justice. The 'parishioner' is seen as someone in need of care and support, which the priest and parish staff or volunteers provide. **But:**

- Pope Francis reminds us that justice and charity must not lose their link to the Gospel: 'the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care ... Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, §200).
- A missionary parish primarily uses its resources to focus on forming competent apostles, who are sent out to bring Christ to the world through acts of love, charity and mercy.



What, then, is a useful model for a parish which prioritises the making of missionary disciples?

We can find ourselves working out of a 'therapeutic' model of pastoral care, in which parishioners are viewed as coming to us in need of services and care, and in which we see our purpose as priests and leaders as pastorally caring for people. They come to us and we help them.

Rather, what a mission-driven parish does is form competent apostles who are equipped and ready to meet the challenges that face them in the world. Each of our parishioners is called by God and has a special role to play—a unique mission to accomplish. Our role as pastors is to form and equip our parishioners so that they are effective witnesses of God's love in their workplaces, their local community and the world.

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The parish photocopier can serve as an illustration of what a mission-driven parish looks like:

Paper trays

Evangelisation (kerygma): drawing people in

Everything we do as a parish needs to be an 'in-tray' feeding people into the heart of the parish ('photocopier'),

which is relationship with Jesus. There are different in-trays for different types of people.

- Parish social events intentionally build trust and introduce people to our community's life.
- An Alpha course or another kerygmatic process proclaims the good news of Jesus and invites people into a close and personal relationship with him.
- Sacramental programs invite parents to meet Jesus and then draw their children into the life of the church.

Imprinting the image

Discipling: baptising, teaching, forming

- People receive the imprint of Jesus on their hearts, through baptism and the reception of the sacraments.
- Lives are changed and transformed as formation in the parish results in an ever-deepening discipling.

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Mission: sending out

- People are 'sent out' from the parish to the world.
- Parishioners bear the imprint of Jesus, who is an indelible and integral part of who they now are. Their whole lives bear witness to his love.

Characteristics of a mission-driven parish

Our parishes can be like jammed photocopiers, drawing people in but then jamming them inside the machine. Such a 'jammed' parish fails to send competent missionary disciples out into the world. Instead, the mission-driven parish:

- is united in how it understands its mission and its communal identity as focused on making disciples
- has a culture that expects, nurtures and sustains the ongoing work of conversion in individuals
- transmits the faith through an intentional and systematic offering of pre-evangelisation, kerygma and catechesis, thus creating a clear and simple path for individuals to become missionary disciples
- clearly communicates this discipleship pathway, and the community understands that it has priority—all other experiences of the parish flow from this path or flow to it.

The mission-driven parish is indeed possible! May we see this pandemic as an opportunity to dream about a more intentional missionary focus in our parishes, not putting a box around our expectations of what we think God can do in this time. Instead may we catch Pope Francis's dream 'for a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, §27).

This article is a summary of the 'Models of parish which hinder your mission' workshop, and is designed to provoke discussion in parish teams.

The Archdiocesan Animation Team is available to facilitate this workshop (remotely) with your parish team. Contact Lorraine on 0402 217 123 or at lorraine.mccarthy@cam.org.au.

NEXT WEEK: 'The kerygma enigma'