



INSTITUTE OF SCHOOL & PARISH DEVELOPMENT

*Bringing People, Process, and Ministry Together to Build the*

*Kingdom of God.*

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## *Development Directions*

### *The Building of One-on-One Relationships with School and Parish Families*

by

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Back in the 1960's when I was a young teenager, I remember that one of the highlights of my family's year was when "Father Bob" would come for his annual visit in our home. This was a two hour affair with dinner, conversation, and fellowship. After the meal, I remember my brother and I were told to "go outside and play" or basically disappear for awhile so "Father Bob" and my mom and dad could continue talking. You see, I was raised in the Episcopal church, and this was simply part of being a family in that parish. Those visits continued for many years, even with pastor changes, and the relationships that were established, and the sense of stewardship that was fostered grew stronger and stronger. In 1975, I went through the RCIA program at Immaculate Conception Church in the Archdiocese of New Orleans and converted to the Roman Catholic faith. Unlike my Episcopal journey, there were no visits to my Catholic family.

Today Catholic parishes and schools are faced with challenges that are quite daunting. Every week, as we consult and teach throughout the country, we see these challenges knocking many Catholic institutions back on their heels, and even some of them out of the total picture. We all know what they are:

- Lack of parishioner involvement;
- Decreasing enrollment in Catholic schools;
- Costs of running Catholic schools;
- Leadership in our parishes and schools;
- Changing demographics;
- Facility needs of our parishes and schools;
- Lack of a "customer service and "people engagement" culture;

- Boss management vs. team management;
- Wanting dynamic change but doing the same things over and over again.

This is not to say that there are not Catholic parishes and schools who are moving forward in a visionary and dynamic manner. There are many solutions that are being tried. Some of them work, and some of them do not work. President-Principal structures, New Enrollment Management strategies, direct mail campaigns, Strategic Planning efforts, more personnel in the Advancement/Development office, better Stewardship processes, more fund-raising events, mergers, customer service training, new board restructuring, capital campaigns, new governance and operational models, business community relationships/partnerships – the list goes on and on. And, interestingly, with the right leadership and direction, many of the above work.

We would like to take this a step further and address a topic that we have talked about for the past 5+ years. It is a topic that usually meets with two responses and then is quickly dismissed. Those two responses are:

- “Interesting.”
- “Yeah, right. You must be out of your mind!”

Here is our belief: *In order for Catholic parishes and schools to prevail and meet the daunting challenges we are facing in this new decade, we must figure out the ways, means and processes for parish and school leaders to meet with every parish family and/or every school family (one-on-one) at least once per year for a lengthy conversation in their home or on the parish and/or school site – “eyeball to eyeball.” Interesting! Yeah, right!*

We understand the cost. We understand the logistics. We understand the time commitment, and we understand the personnel factor. However, if we really believe that *people engagement* and *meaningful involvement* and *fostering true stewardship* are the most important beliefs in Catholic Development, then we need to make this happen.

Let us say that your parish and/or school – over the next year – was able to recruit and train 5-10 teams of two people on each team. Sample combinations:

- Pastor and principal
- Principal and faculty/staff member
- Pastor and Parish Council member
- Two Parish Council members
- Two Board members
- Two faculty/staff members

- Two parent leaders
- Two parish leaders
- Faculty member and parent leader

Let us look at the conversation topics and the advantages of building the relationships with each and every parish family:

- What the Parish Teams can discuss and share with a parish family:
  - Vision and plans for the future of the parish;
  - Spiritual growth opportunities for all members of the family;
  - Educational opportunities for all members of the family;
  - Changes in the parish and how they will impact that family;
  - How the parish operates;
  - Ways of engagement and involvement that family members would enjoy;
  - Discussion of the three gifts of Prayer, Involvement and Financial Participation;
  - After bringing out the above, the Parish Team (of two) need to sit back and ask this question: *Mr. and Mrs. Johnson (or Ms. Johnson or Mr. Wilson or whatever), what we would like for you to do is share with us how (name of parish) can better serve you as your home parish and what we can do in order to continue to build a strong relationship in the future? What are your needs? How can we help you meet those needs? What gifts would you enjoy sharing with the parish? How can we help each of you in your spiritual journey?*
- What the School Teams can discuss and share with a school family:
  - Vision and plans for the future of the school;
  - Overall progress of the children as students in the school;
  - Changes in the school and how they will impact that family;
  - How the school operates;
  - Ways of engagement and involvement that family members would enjoy;
  - Discussion of the family's gifts of Prayer and Involvement;
  - Discussion of the family's financial commitment to the Catholic school:
    - Tuition and fees
    - In-kind giving
    - Annual Fund
    - Fund-raisers
    - Ways the family can generate financial resources for the school

- After discussing the above, the School Team (of two) need to sit back and ask this question: *Mr. and Mrs. Johnson (or Ms. Johnson or Mr. Wilson or whatever), what we would like for you to do is share with us how (name of school) can better serve you and how we can continue to build a strong relationship with your family that will last a lifetime? What are your needs? How can we help you meet those needs? What gifts would you enjoy sharing with the school? How can we help each of your children as students in our school?*

Now before we hit the panic button on this one, let's set some guidelines and state some basic tenets.

- We are not saying that this needs to be put in place next month. We are inviting you to begin serious discussions with your parish and/or school leaders about how this would be possible and why this would be so valuable.
- As a Catholic school, you may begin to look at sitting down between May and August with every new family that will attend your school in the 2012-2013 school year. Can you imagine the PR and the response out in the community as your new families talk about this one-on-one experience to other families? How their Catholic school actually takes the time to sit down and personally discuss their situation? How their Catholic school is all about building relationships and really engaging people?
- As parish leaders, you may begin visiting with the new families that move into your parish in 2012. That would be almost unheard of in many Catholic parishes. Most of the time, we REACT. New families registering are asked to come to a coffee and donut gathering or some monthly new parish family function. We are saying that the first visit with the new family is the first step of many visits in the future as you chart the course for this family and their journey with you for many years to come.
- In order to be perfectly clear: the goal here is to visit with EVERY family in your parish and every family in your school (elementary school, high school, regional school, etc.) once per year in a meaningful conversation.
- The advantages are overwhelming. Every new family in your school and every new family in your parish would know from the "get-go" that this is the way you build your faith community – one by one. This would become the new norm. This would be the way that parish and school leaders could track progress from year to year. Naturally, forms will have to be created; files will have to be kept, and the most important component of all of this is RESPONSE. The ability to respond to the needs of each family will mean the difference in success or failure.

- This is setting up the Catholic high school, elementary school, regional school and/or parish operation with a TOTALLY NEW MODUS OPERANDI. It is exciting, and the contacts, the resources, the relationships, and the connections have the potential to be unbelievable.

Before you begin to quickly dismiss, let's go back to the challenges and look at how this Personal Relationship Building Campaign can address the very concerns that keep Catholic leaders awake at night.

- Lack of parishioner involvement
  - This would be directly addressed in every conversation with the emphasis being on: *What would you enjoy sharing here at your parish?*
- Decreasing enrollment in Catholic schools;
  - This could be discussed with invitations for families to make referrals and the personal visit certainly would be building a very strong retention action.
- Costs of running Catholic schools;
  - This could finally be explained in full -- how tuition does NOT cover the cost of educating a child in a Catholic school.
- Leadership in our parishes and schools;
  - This could un-surface many potential volunteer leaders for the parish and/or the school.
- Changing demographics;
  - The visiting Team could learn many things about the area, the neighborhood and the families living in that area.
- Facility needs of our parishes and schools;
  - The case for support plus the identification of facilities needs could all be part of this conversation.
- Lack of a "customer service and "people engagement" culture;
  - With the family visits, this is exactly what you would be doing – serving the customer and engaging the family.
- Boss management vs. team management;
  - It would be easily seen that the Catholic institution's management style is collaborative and inviting.
- Wanting dynamic change but doing the same things over and over again.
  - This is major change.

So, what do we have to do to convince you (pastors, principals, presidents, board members, development officers, Catholic school leaders, parish leaders) to open up the discussions on this topic? This will vastly change the way we operate as Catholic institutions. This outreach can be integrated into the

culture of your Catholic institution, and ten years from now we will not be saying, "How do we keep the doors open?" but, "Can you believe how strong of a faith community we have now that we have, 'Opened Wide the Doors to Christ'?"