Developing a Parish Strategic Plan for Religious Education

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Change our Sunday School (catechetical) program? Why would we ever want to do that? This is one of the most common--and frustrating--questions catechetical leaders encounter. Clergy, Sunday School directors, teachers, and missionaries are typically zealous for excellence in education, and this calls for change at one point or another. The change might involve the need for a new curriculum, a different teacher, or a new meeting place. Whatever the reason, change holds the promise of progress and better meeting people's needs. Parishioners, however, may be threatened by change and its perceived disruptions. Many people thrive on the familiar and the routine. They love traditions and "the way we've always done things."

This workshop will examine the process of developing a successful change strategy based on a three-part philosophy and a five-step strategy. When all eight of these ingredients fall into place, the result is a potent formula for ministry success.

I. The Reason to Adopt an Educational Change Strategy

1. Change allows the parish to continue growing numerically by providing new member integration. Without change, members tend to remain in cliques and leave newcomers to fend for themselves.
2. Change allows educational department to keep the big picture in mind by resisting the temptation for educational ministry to remain insulated from the rest of the community or competing with other programs.
3. Change encourages new, vibrant, and perhaps more relevant instructional methodologies.
4. Change promotes personal spiritual growth by challenging members to serve God in new ways.
5. Change stretches us and forces us to get out of our stagnant comfort zones.

II. A Three-Part Philosophy for Change

1. Needs Based: Change must appeal to felt needs within the educational program and the parish at large. People must see how they and others will benefit from the result of change.
2. Mission Centered: Parishioners will champion and accept change when they are able to see how the contemplated change fits into the mission (growth, evangelism, etc.) of the Church.
3. Opportunity Focused: The life of the parish should be regularly scanned for current as well as future challenges. These issues should not be discussed as problems or threats but rather opportunities for positive change.

III. A Five-Step Process for Implementing Change

Efforts to implement change should be undertaken only when an acceptable philosophy is firmly established within the parish structure. Until people are “sold” on the need for and benefits of change, they will not likely display much enthusiasm. Impatient leaders should avoid attempts to ramrod change into place. Decisions should not be made in isolation but in a cooperative fashion. On-going evaluation should be understood as an integral component of the entire strategic plan. Monday-morning quarterbacking should be discouraged at all cost!

1. Information Percolation
2. Dialogue
3. Personalized Commitment
4. Participative Implementation
5. Celebration

IV. Asking the Right Questions

Strategic planning should be based on the answers to the following important questions.

1. Why do we exist? What do we most want to accomplish?
2. What needs of the greater locale would not be met if the parish did not exist?
3. What are we like now, and how do we want to be different in the future?
4. What do we do best? What are our unique and special strengths, capabilities and competencies?
5. What human, financial, and facility resources are at our disposal? In what way are our resources limited?
6. Why are people members of our church rather than choose to go to another?
7. What is the cultural "personality" (climate) of our parish? What ideals, principles and philosophies under-gird the direction of our parish?
8. What new direction do we want to adopt? What are the hopes and dreams of our leaders and members?

V. Comparison of Implementation Models

Author	Kanter	McComb & Whistler	Silverman & Casazza	Rothwell & Kazanas	Bryson
Model	Change Wheel	Professional Develop	Professional Develop	HRD	Non-Profit Strategic Planning
Step 1	Shared Vision	Inspiration	Focus	Clarify Purpose	Agreement On Mission And Plan
Step 2	Review Structures	Observe	Reflect on Practice	Scan Environment	Assessment External & Internal
Step 3	Education & Training	Understand	Analyze	Implement Strategy	Develop & Implement Strategy
Step 4	Select Champions				
Step 5	Celebrate Wins			Short-Term Comparison	Vision of Successes
Step 6	Communicate				
Step 7	Realignment	New Strategies	Incorporate New Action	Implement New Action	
Step 8	Measure	Ownership	Evaluate	Evaluate	Evaluation
Step 9	Rewards				

Note: Blank spaces indicate that the author does not include a description for this step.