

# It's Time for a Change

“Change is the only constant in life.” This quote, attributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, rings resoundingly true today. The pace of global, economic, and technological developments themselves demonstrates that change is constant. Change can happen in an instant or can take hundreds of years, but it is always present. When thinking through why we as pastoral leaders must embrace change, we must acknowledge that change is inevitable and is constantly taking place around us.

***We are able to choose and direct some changes, but often change is thrust upon us.*** Our need to change is often a reaction to our environment. While we cannot stop the need for change, we can learn to embrace it and equip ourselves as leaders who are capable and ready to shepherd our communities through these changes. Better still, we can direct change within our faith communities to more deeply fulfill Christ's great commission: to bring the love and Good News of Jesus Christ to the world.

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## **In Real Life**

A few years ago, we might have talked about needing to adjust some aspect of parish life; following some initial discussion, we might have come to the conclusion that we could avoid that change for a while. Kick the can down the road, so to speak. And then, within a few short weeks, we went from “normal” to pandemic, from Sunday Mass being our primary, or perhaps only, contact with parishioners to the suspension of public liturgies. We realized that we were experiencing something that had not happened since the 1918 influenza epidemic—a once-in-a-hundred-years moment of extreme change. Monumental change had been thrust upon us. Some parishes experienced a sudden, dramatic reduction in financial giving, causing them to furlough staff. Many parishes that were not already live-streaming Mass quickly became adept at doing so. Some offered daily email reflections, increased social media posts, and phoned elderly parishioners to ensure they were safe and well.

Hope that we could quickly return to “normal” parish life faltered as the spread of the Covid-19 virus ebbed and flowed throughout the months that followed. As the months wore on, pastoral workers began asking themselves harder, more honest questions: Were the people who came to Mass regularly before the pandemic truly on the path of discipleship, or was their attendance more attributable to habit or a sense of obligation? What about those who had left the active practice of the faith years earlier? Were the many activities of the parish that had been suspended during the pandemic contributing to the way the parish lives out the mission of Jesus Christ? Is the parish a true community of faith or simply a place where people come to Mass and then leave unchanged? Could this be the time to reconsider parish life, following Pope Francis’ vision in *The Joy of the Gospel*?

## **You Are Called to Lead Change**

Identifying the need for change is a critical role that every pastoral leader plays. Change can be an opportunity for progress and can build on something your parish is already doing well. Conversely, failing to identify the need can negatively impact your community engagement, including financial contributions and participation. The changes we most often deal with in our communities are pursued as a solution to a problem. The pastor, staff, or parishioner leaders may have identified the problem themselves, or it may have been brought to them by parishioners or the diocese, or it may be a larger-scale problem posed by current events like natural disasters or changing demographics in the neighborhood or diocese. While the circumstances for change aren't always of our choosing, how you and your parish react is! Identifying and naming the situation quickly is critical to the way you understand and accept the necessary change, limiting any negative impact and driving future growth. Once you understand the opportunity to grow or the problem to be solved, you can begin to work to find a solution and implement the change in a way that supports and builds on the positive attributes of parish life.

### **How to Use This Book**

***Each chapter begins and ends with prayer.*** While the principles, attitudes, and skills presented in this book are founded on proven leadership practices, our ministry as leaders must first and foremost be rooted in a heart of prayer and discernment. We invite you to pause in prayer as you begin each chapter and to conclude all explorations and discussion in prayer. Open your heart and mind to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as you consider new possibilities for your community.

***In the context of prayer, you will be invited to learn and grow in three ways:*** First, each chapter explores practical change management theories and tools, all within the context of ministry. Second,

we will consider real-life examples to help build understanding. Lastly, you will be guided through a process to apply the content of the chapters as you lead change in your community. This tool can be used by an individual or group, such as your parish leadership or parish council, or, as we will discuss later, your coalition for change.

In the spirit of prayer, we begin with the passage from the Letter to the Philippians below. Be assured of God's presence and peace as you lead your community toward life-giving change in Christ.

Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers [and sisters], whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. **PHILIPPIANS 4:6-8**

# Vision: The Parish as a Community of Faith

*Walk with us, gracious and loving God,  
as we journey through this process.  
May your Holy Spirit guide us this day.  
Inspire and free us to respond generously to your call.  
Give us a generous heart to respond to  
the challenging path ahead  
and the strength to follow you wherever you lead. Amen.*

We often speak of our parishes as communities of faith. However, a true community is more than a group of people who attend Mass at the same place and time. A strong faith community draws people toward communion with Christ and one another. Fashioning our parishes as communities requires us to have a clear vision of what we hope to be; the willingness to let go of former practices that no longer serve, engage, or lead people to the Good News of Jesus Christ; and the readiness to listen to one another, discerning our future together. Even if things in your parish are going well, there is always a need to strive toward more. We must be ready to inspire and lead change, building on the best of what our parish is now, toward deep, living faith as a community in the years to come.

***What vision guides the life of your parish as a faith community?***

Is the vision clear? Do parish leaders and parishioners share your

desire to bring people together in community? How would you articulate your vision for the future? Is your vision bold? Seeing the current state of life in the parish and having a clear vision for the future are essential in discerning what should change and how the change may be enacted. Without a clear and bold vision for the future and the willingness to examine the current reality, any change you might bring about will be subject to the whims of circumstance.

### **In Real Life**

***Don't skip this step!*** It may be tempting to think that focusing on vision is not necessary. Surely everyone understands the need for change without taking time to talk about vision, you might think. Yet, even a brief discussion with others is likely to illustrate the importance of clarifying the vision of the parish as a community of faith. You and the others with whom you serve may have a similar goal in mind. But without clarity of vision, it is likely that you will discover differences in what you hope will happen, and those differences may result in confusion and frustration. Some may envision the parish as a place where everyone thinks and acts alike—where unity means uniformity. Others may think of community as a family, in which people are valued in spite of, or even because of, their differences—where diversity contributes to unity. Without taking the time to focus on vision, you may perpetuate the current state of things because it is com-

#### **Vision is informed through:**

- Sacred Scripture
- Universal and local Church documents
- Local community situation
- Parish history and culture
- Best practices of other parishes (local or elsewhere)

fortable and easy, even when you know things could be better. Or you may adopt a new process or practice without giving it the due consideration needed and find that it did not help you achieve what you hoped, simply because you weren't clear about the goals for the program to begin with.

### **Gain Clarity of Vision**

Shaping your vision is not meant to be a weeks-long or even months-long project that leads to a perfectly crafted statement and then is set on a shelf to be revisited in five years. Rather, it is a way to ground the work you are about to embark on to effectively build your parish community. How do you gain a clear vision for your parish, ministry, or group?

*Lord, we are so grateful for your love and guidance.*

*As we seek clarity in direction, help us make  
the choices in keeping with your will.*

*When we are unsure, remind us to pause  
and seek you for wisdom.*

*When we are afraid, help us to stop and  
ask you for courage and faith.*

*We pray that you would empower us to  
follow you wholeheartedly,  
no matter where that path will lead. Amen.*

# DISCERN YOUR VISION

*Your vision should be brief and concise: ideally, just one or two sentences. As you go through the coming chapters and begin the journey of leading change to help grow and strengthen your community, you will look back at your vision as a guardrail or North Star.*

**What should your parish be in the future? How is your parish called to live Christ's great commission in this time and in your neighborhood?**

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**What Scripture passage or paragraph/quote from a Church document informs your vision for the future?**

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**What is your vision? Describe it clearly and succinctly here.**

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