

What Is Pivoting?

The Covid-19 pandemic made “pivoting” a popular and necessary stance for healthcare, businesses, families, and, yes, churches.

So, what is pivoting? The Britannica Dictionary says that the verb “to pivot” means “the action of turning around a point.” One can pivot toward something or away from something. The noun “pivot” means “a person or thing that is central or important to someone or something else.”

Think of a basketball player who pivots on one foot while looking around for a chance to shoot, for a teammate to whom they can pass the ball, or to avoid a defensive player. The pivot point is the foot on which the player turns and balances. The pivoting is the turning around to find the right target.

During the pandemic, healthcare systems pivoted around patient care and the changes called for due to this public health crisis. We saw entire wings of hospitals become dedicated Covid wards.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS *A division of Bayard* ■ 977 Hartford Turnpike Unit A;
Waterford, CT 06385 ■ (860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411 ■ www.twentythirdpublications.com

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ISBN 978-1-62785-709-3 ■ Stained glass image: ©capic/stock.adobe.com ■ Printed in the USA

Businesses, in order to sell their products, had to pivot too: restaurants devised new delivery practices and initiated “contactless delivery.” Other businesses pivoted away from their existing product lines to manufacture antibacterial cleaning products, Plexiglass barriers, and personal protective equipment—face masks, gloves, and the like—to help keep people safe from the virus. Achieving business goals while offices had to close meant that working from home became the norm. Families had to pivot as well: while keeping the health and well-being of their members as a central priority, they had to devise new working and schooling plans.

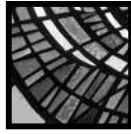
Churches have their mission as their pivot. They pivoted when no one could come to church services, such as by livestreaming the Sunday Mass. When groups that were used to meeting—to pray, build community, guide church operations, and reach out to those in need—couldn’t gather, they had to find another way. The mission was still to form disciples who would witness to and share the good news. Yet, the way we were used to doing things was gone—at least temporarily.

Many church leaders, like a lot of other people, thought the pandemic wouldn’t last long. They continued to plan for “when things got back to normal” but did little to address the current reality. When weeks of Covid turned into months and beyond, those who had planned ahead for normal times were left with no plan at all.

Some church communities were paralyzed. “If we can’t gather for Mass, there is no assembly. If people can’t come together, there can be no community. If restrictions say we can’t donate clothing or serve at the soup kitchen, there is no outreach to those in need.”

These statements are dead ends. The parishes that pivoted had the same realities. But instead of ending with “there is no” liturgical assembly or community or outreach, they would say, “If we can’t do

it the way we have been, how can we do it?” The paralyzed churches focused on the way we have done things rather than why we do them. The pivoting churches asked, “Why do we do what we do, and how can we do it a new way?” This booklet offers ideas to help your parish become a pivoting community that faithfully and creatively serves its people.



You're Doing It Already!

Ready or not, you are always listening to parishioners. Sometimes you hear complaints—the “I didn’t like”s and the “Why can’t we do it differently”s and the multitude of other comments that can sometimes drain our energies. Yet, we listen, because we want to know what people think and feel, and, more importantly, what they need to be more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Even in complaints, there can be kernels that suggest a new direction.

When we listen carefully, our pivoting can be simply in response to what the staff thinks should happen or what just one or two people say is needed. Catholic Tradition tells us that one person can be prophetic; it’s important not to rely on “majority rules” but also to listen to the Holy Spirit.

We try to listen to those who aren’t around a lot, those who come and go quietly, those who no longer come at all. It’s important to always be listening and to seek out those whose voices are drowned out by more vocal members as well as those who are hurting too much to speak. How do we listen so that we might pivot effectively?

Some parishes have regular town hall meetings to elicit feedback, usually on a big project or new initiative. Other parishes have an “idea

box” where people can submit suggestions. Parish organizations that have regular meetings are good places to garner insights into whether a pivot is needed.

To be good listeners involves our eyes too. What do you see in your parish? Do people’s faces reflect the joy of the Gospel? Who comes? Who used to come but doesn’t anymore? Do the people represent various races and cultures that are present in your community?

What do you see in the broader community beyond your parish? How does the parish engage with the wider neighborhood? Have businesses closed? If so, perhaps the parish could pivot to address unemployment. Is the racial/cultural makeup shifting? If there is a new population moving in, does the parish need to reach out more directly to newcomers and see what their needs are? Is there another language group to consider? Is there a need to incorporate another culture?

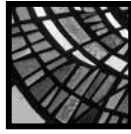
Examine the ways you currently listen, and to whom. You already do it, but now consider the ways from your parishioners’ point of view. Can they easily give input through regular avenues? Not everyone has access to computer technology, so extend feedback options beyond the Internet. If people have an idea or a suggestion or want to begin a new organization or ministry, the parish only benefits if people know where to go to share it.

If your parishioners were asked how decisions are made, do you know what would they say? Not every proposal is viable. But if people don’t know where to take their idea, there is a danger that they will become disengaged.

When people have hearing loss, they pivot closer to the source to hear. Pivot to turn your eyes and ears to see and hear more clearly and widely!

TAKE ACTION

Engage good listeners and plan some listening time at each parish event. It may be just one focus question, such as “How can we better reach out to our homebound parishioners?” or “Where do you see a need that our parish can serve?” The more you listen, the more your people will speak up and share their insights.



Vision and Mission as the Pivot Points

Pivoting implies that there is a central point on which one pivots. The basketball player pivots on one foot. Companies may pivot to attract new customers but keep their goal (or the company's key product or service) in mind. Pivoting is not wandering aimlessly but staying grounded in what is most important to meet the goal more effectively.

The question for a parish is this: What is your pivot point? A parish vision and mission are pivot points, though in different ways. While some people get confused by the terms "vision" and "mission," there is a clear distinction between them. Think of vision as the compass—identifying the direction of the parish efforts. The vision identifies where we are going and why. The mission, then, is more like a GPS, pointing out the specific ways the parish gets to the direction they have identified. The mission names the ways in which we are going—how we are going.

The parish vision may be "Gathered and sent to do the work of Jesus." The parish mission then spells out the specific ways we will gather in liturgy and study and community social events. The mis-

sion also names the ways the parish will send its members to feed the hungry, promote justice, and do the work of Jesus. The parishes that pivoted during Covid often focused on “How do we gather when we can’t do so in person?” Many “gathered” on phone lines to connect; many used a social media platform or conferencing app to gather in groups for support and study and prayer. If the vision also includes being sent, the mission says where we are being sent to and what we will do. Perhaps the parish mission is “We are sent to those most in need to proclaim the good news in word and witness.” In a crisis, the parish may pivot on being sent to identify those affected by a fire in the community or a growing number of homeless people.

The vision remains constant and is the pivot point. Dimensions of the mission can remain but may pivot to address a new need or population. Sometimes the mission changes. The ways that used to serve the vision no longer do so.

So, the primary pivot point is the parish vision. If we must gather differently or be sent in new directions to do the work of Jesus, that’s when we pivot. Without a clear vision we can flounder, trying all kinds of programs and opportunities without a clear direction, a clear *why* to our activities.

When a basketball player pivots, the goal is clear: protect the ball and try to score. Is the parish vision clear enough to pivot on? Can it help you determine what to continue, what to adjust, what to begin? Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). His vision for his life was clear, though sometimes restated in other words, like “I came so that they might have life” (John 10:10) or “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

One can measure Jesus' words and actions to his vision. The "why" of his life was abundantly clear. Is the parish vision clear and inspiring and broad enough to pivot on?

TAKE ACTION

What is your parish vision? If there isn't one, identify how you currently make decisions. Which values and priorities are present? This can be the beginning of the vision statement. Elicit buy-in from parishioners and then communicate the vision constantly.