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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY CONTINUING EDUCATION
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Transcript of
“Fostering a Faith Dimension and a Sense of Belonging,”
Video Segment 4
Transforming Parishes through Communities of Practice

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What I want to do is to spend the next block of time talking about what would that look like? How might you do that? What would be some of the ways in which we could foster that sense of intentionality?

So, the first one is being intentional about articulating and embracing the faith dimension of each of the parish communities of practice. How do we bring those to the fore? Couple of suggestions: the first is that in the places where we describe these boards and committees and groups, etc., we include in there the call to be evangelizers. If you you're going to join the parish council, if you're going to be on the finance committee, if you're going to be a catechist, if you're going to be all these, part of what you're signing up for is to be an evangelizer. Good, you know how to do money, we want you on the finance committee. But more importantly, you are a person of faith who is interested in learning and growing in your faith. So we include that in the call. The role of fostering the faith of the members is one of the tasks of the committee. So when somebody agrees to be on the parish council, they know that part of that experience is about growing in faith themselves. Make that very explicit.

Again, my experience, your mileage may vary, but my experience is we often downplay the commitment we're asking for because we want people to say yes. So we make it sound like this is not going to be much work and it certainly is not going to change your life. You'll want to do this. Well, this is a “no.” We need to warn them: “this is about changing how you think about yourself, engage with the world, change your identity.” So that's the first one, just to bring to consciousness. If you have a place where all of these committees are described, include that in the description of what the committee does. It fosters the faith of the members. Here's what you're signing up for.

Secondly, the importance of integrating prayer, reflection, faith conversation into the regular work of the community of practice. I often say, when we think about a period of time in which we engage in faith formation with adults, with anyone, we need a certain amount of that time to be about prayer reflection; a certain amount of that time to be about input, a certain bit of that time to socialize, etc. I think the same thing is true of our committees. What happens in many committees or in many groups, in the gathering of catechists or whatever, is you cut to the chase. You say, “OK, we have too much to do tonight to take time for prayer, so let's just do a quick prayer and then jump in.” This is saying, “that goes against what we're trying to do as an evangelizing Church.” That if we're not in our every gathering—remember that long list of gatherings of adults at St. Odo the Good—that if we're not at every gathering taking time for well thought-through prayer, reflection, conversation, then we're not engaging these communities as well as we could. So how do we do that? How do we have that as part of it?

Third one is how do we connect the communities of practice to the faith life of the parish? How do we have the communities of practice, the variety of them—I hope you have a half dozen you're thinking

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of in your own mind from your own parish setting—how do we make those more evident to the faith community and more participating in the life of the faith community. How do we have them be responsible for the Friday night during Lent, the soup meal and prayer, so each community of practice can take the responsibility for that. How do we help them to be more connected to the faith life of the community? So they're not off here doing something without experiencing that connection.

Secondly, being intentional about recognizing that communities of practice are the essential resource in welcoming new parish members and renewing established ones. I know you can tell many stories that start like this: Yes, I'm going to St. Odo the Good for about a year, but it was only when somebody asked me to be a catechist, my child started the religious education program, somebody invited me to the book club, somebody asked me to be on the parish council, whatever.

We don't belong to parishes. Well, we do. But that sense of identity and belonging is not to a parish, it's to a small group within that parish. We can think of a parish as a community of communities. To think of it as a community is not helpful, I think, for hardly anyone. So we need to be intentional about saying, how do we establish a way for people to connect with the life of the parish? With the practices of what it means to be a Christian by connecting with communities of practice?

It also, I think is really helpful for how we bring people back. Here's just a real quick example. There's a couple of friends of mine. They raised their children, three boys, and they were really involved in the Church, did all this stuff for the Church—religious education, youth ministry, lectors, etc. And then their kids graduated and went off to wherever and got married. Then it's like they didn't know what they were going to do then. They didn't really have an entry point for, and they went to church. They did, yeah, yeah. But there wasn't any place where they felt like they belonged. They loved the parish but then one time, this happened at the time of when Katrina hit in the New Orleans area, the husband, name is Bert, actually Bert had seen an ad, something in the bulletin about going to a meeting about people who wanted to do something about Katrina. Ann was not that excited about it, but they went. Ultimately that became their point of re-entry into the life of the parish. They took on a new identity. They went down to New Orleans, they were part of the trip down to New Orleans. They spoke at liturgy, they became involved in social justice committee, they became active members again.

So that's what I say. It's both new parish members, but renewing established members as well. How do we do that? We recognize that welcoming new members is essential to the health and vitality of a community of practice.

One of my first positions as religious educator was in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the first DRE there for a few years. One of the hard things about it was it was basically military there, which meant everybody left every three years. There was just a turnover. Actually, it was good because you ended up having to find new people and having to mix up the group. Of course, at the time I didn't recognize it, I just whined about it constantly. But in looking back, I recognize that that was why that was such a vital parish. It was because people came in with experience from other places, as well as an energy for being there, and they knew they only had three years to make those commitments and to make those relationships, and so they were in it.

How do we do that? How do we engage people and recognize that that's necessary? We need to be deliberate about how new members are integrated into the group. Quite often what can easily happen is somebody signs up on time and talent and you call them and they come to a meeting, and they're either clueless on what's going on, they're on the periphery, or they get assigned everything. Those seem to be our two responses to new members in groups. So how do we nurture them? How do we

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support them? How do we establish some kind of system of mentorship between new and established members so somebody in the group is responsible for being sure the person knows what they're talking about, knows what's going on? Whether it's a finance committee or the group of catechists. . . . How do we do that? How do we make that connection, and that we cultivate a milieu or a context in which members move in and out of communities of practice?

A parish that I've been in, not the one I'm in now, but a parish that I've been in, had so many lectors that you lectored about once every four months. Kind of forgotten your lines by that time. There were so many that it was like, wow, which is, at some level, great, but on another level it meant that we had people who had been lectors forever and ever and never found other ministries they wanted to do.

How do we do that? How do we create a context in which, like the parish council, there is a term limit? Even to our catechists, as a person who's been a DRE, I know how frightening that is to think that you're going to say to some of your catechists, "Thanks, what else do you want to do?" I know, I can see the panic. But I think for the vitality of the group that it's an important thing to think about.