



A Review of the Best Evangelization Methods and Resources Available for Parish Outreach Efforts

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Determining the “best” outreach efforts for parish evangelization requires a context for understanding what is “best.” Social communications media and Internet technology have given us vast opportunities to proclaim the Good News to the most distant of places and to a vastly diverse audience. Many parishes and dioceses have made admirable use of these opportunities for spreading the Gospel. Yet, as admirable as these efforts are, they lack an important ingredient, as Pope Benedict XVI suggested strongly in his message for the forty-fifth World Communications Day on June 5, 2011. Reminding us that virtual contact cannot take the place of direct human contact, he asserted, “The Gospel demands to be incarnated in the real world and linked to the real faces of our brothers and sisters, those with whom we share our daily lives. Direct human relations always remain fundamental for the transmission of the faith!” (www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/document_s/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day_en.html).

This context of making face-to-face contact with seekers and inactive Catholics provides the criteria for reviewing the best evangelization methods and resources that are available for parish outreach efforts. The “best” resources must include at least one of two components.

First, resources for outreach must help Catholic parishioners learn to invite others to consider the Catholic faith in a personal way. Having some form of printed invitation is helpful, but Catholics need to learn how to use them. Many communities have found helpful the use of public media, like billboards and radio ads, for making an outreach appeal in the name of the Catholic Church. We want to encourage these efforts, while affirming that personal contact provides the “best” way of reaching others who are not aware of the treasure of the Catholic faith.

Second, the best programs for outreach also need to provide a way for those who respond to an invitation to connect with the Catholic faith in a way that helps them address the questions and issues they have regarding the meaning of faith in their lives. If we are

going to invite others to consider the Catholic faith, we need to create an environment where they can connect with real-life people whose faith has made a difference in their lives. By engaging others in conversation, we open up a way for them to connect with the Church and start to identify the role that faith can have in their lives.

Particularly when reaching out to inactive Catholics, we need to be aware of the many kinds of inactive Catholics we are trying to reach. For those who were connected for a time to the Catholic Church, programs that welcome people “home” are helpful. Yet a large segment of this population, especially the young, never experienced the Catholic Church as home, either because they did not grow up in the kind of Catholic culture that was strong in the twentieth century, or because they simply had little association with the Church. Programs need to provide an opportunity for people to make a connection or to reawaken a faith that has been dormant.

Paulist Evangelization Ministries (www.pemdc.org) provides two resources for helping Catholic parishioners invite others. *Invite! Ask Someone to Explore the Catholic Faith* provides an invitation (*Come and See*) that Catholics can give to seekers or to those who are not affiliated with any religious tradition. *Invite!* also includes a parishioner guide (in a six-panel brochure format) for learning to identify and invite others to explore the Catholic faith and a parish manual so that evangelization teams and parish leaders can help parishioners learn how to invite others in an effective way. In addition, the parish manual offers tips on how to respond to inquirers and what options might be followed when

inquirers discover they would like to move forward in becoming connected with the Church. The second resource, *Catholics Reaching Out*, parallels *Invite!* by providing the same three components (invitation, parishioner guide, and parish manual) in seeking to reach inactive Catholics.

For connecting with seekers who are unaffiliated with a religious tradition, most parishes make use of catechesis and rituals associated with the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* or some adaptation of that if the seekers have been baptized in another Christian denomination. Where parishes do not have a year-round process for Initiation, *Seeking Christ* from Paulist Evangelization Ministries provides a way to make that connection at any time of the year through structured conversation and video reflections on central issues of faith.

For reaching inactive Catholics, Sally L. Mews offers a method based on her pastoral experience entitled *Inviting Catholics Home* (www.catholicsreturninghome.org). The book, along with the website, provides an understanding of why people leave the Church and why they return, an overview of the *Returning Home* program, and a checklist for starting the program in parishes. This is basically a six-week program that starts with an anonymous questionnaire that serves to make evident the issues that people are facing. The book is very practical and detailed, offers a variety of forms for inviting, and addresses the hurt many returnees have experienced.

Landings International, an apostolic arm of the Paulist Fathers, offers *Landings*, with six to eight small group sessions where inactive and active Catholics interact to provide support

and an environment for discussion and dealing with questions. The small groups give inactive Catholics a way to be with ordinary Catholics who are trying to live their faith in a real way. The safe and confidential environment allows a focus on the faith journey of each person. This resource includes both participant and coordinator guides that help participants move through each session with time for welcome, prayer, sharing, and reflecting on topics about faith. Training for group facilitators is available in person or online (www.paulist.org/landings).

Paulist Evangelization Ministries developed *Awakening Faith: Reconnecting with Your Catholic Faith* (www.awakeningfaith.org) with a focus on inactive Catholics who tend to be younger and who grew up without a strong Catholic identity, yet who do not think of themselves as being “away.” This outreach program aims to reawaken faith in those individuals or help them connect on the level of human experience. With six to ten sessions, meetings are based on structured conversations about faith and what it means to appropriate faith. The resource includes a parish manual for setting up the program, helping others extend invitations, and making provisions for the meetings. A CD provides sample ads, bulletin announcements, invitation letters, and more. The group facilitator’s guide provides the material for leading the groups, and participants also have a booklet for their use. Full participation by everyone in the group strengthens group identifications and paves the way for moving into the “larger” group, the Church, with a greater degree of commitment. **Alpha for Catholics** (www.alphausa.org) provides ten basic

sessions to introduce the faith to people who do not attend church and to inactive Catholics who are loosely connected. The meeting environment is designed to be friendly and nonthreatening so that participants can explore the faith in a manner that relates to the questions they have. The leaders of Alpha have discovered that the sessions also reinvigorate active Catholics. A simple meal helps to gather people together. In addition to the ten sessions, the program includes a one- or two-day retreat conducted away from the parish. The Alpha Essential Kit consists of an array of resources (books, videos, and posters) for inviting people to join, conducting the sessions, and training facilitators.

Renew International offers *Why Catholic?* (www.whycatholic.org) with the aim of helping Catholics discover the richness of their faith in a way that increases their enthusiasm for sharing the faith with others. Based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the forty-eight sessions cover four basic themes: Catholic beliefs, morality, sacraments, and prayer. While it is not a direct outreach program, inasmuch as it targets active Catholics, the program can serve as an inspiration for parishioners to become more mission-oriented in the way they share their faith.

With a parallel aim, Paulist Evangelization Ministries developed *Living the Eucharist* in both English and Spanish (www.livingtheeucharist.org) with the conviction that deepened participation in the Mass will motivate Catholics to be more committed in their outreach to others. This three-year renewal program, conducted primarily during Lent, includes resources for

adult and teen small groups, ministers of liturgy, families, and all parishioners.

In establishing the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, Pope Benedict recalled words from his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”

(no. 1, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html). The best methods for evangelization outreach will create that atmosphere in which all people have an opportunity to encounter that person, Jesus Christ in whom we live.

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