

New Practices for Parish Renewal
A Report on the State of the
Diocese of Reno Parishes and
Recommended Responses

By

The New Practices Committee
of the Diocesan Pastoral Council
March 15, 2021

Table of Contents

Why This Report	3
The Current Climate in Our Parishes.....	3
Critical Issues	5
What To Do: Short-term Strategies	8
Addressing COVID-Related Challenges	9
Focusing on Connection as a Priority.....	10
Recommendations for Enduring Renewal.....	12
Focus on Spiritual Growth and Discernment	13
Parish Leadership Formation and Support.....	16
The DPC’s Role in Helping Parishes Embrace and Implement Renewal	17
1. Work with Pastors Desiring Change.....	18
2. Offer a Place and Resources to Start.....	19
3. Educate Parish Leaders on the Role of the Pastoral Council.....	19
4. Shift Focus from Program to Process.....	19
5. Focus on Spiritual Discernment and Creating a Plan.....	20
6. Create an Idea-Sharing and Support Hub on the Diocesan Website	20
Conclusion	20
Appendix A: NPC Committee Members.....	22
Appendix B: Parish Interview/Survey Questions	23
Appendix C: Sources.....	24
Appendix D: Synod Initiatives Related to the Recommendations	27

Why This Report

Bishop Calvo and the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) recognize the impacts of closed and restricted parish functioning during Covid. A full year after shutdown, our churches remain limited, with a recent increase to 50% of capacity. Even so, many churches in our diocese have kept restrictions at 25-35% because they cannot operate at half capacity *and* maintain the social-distancing protocol of six feet between people from different households.

But does that matter? As many parishes reopen, capacity limits aren't keeping people from in-person worship. Many masses don't reach their limited capacity. The pressing question, then, is, once our churches are fully open and people vaccinated, will all the faithful return?

Speculation and initial indications suggest many people will have grown comfortable not attending Mass and will not feel the need to return. Even before Covid closed our parishes' doors, the Church faced the problem of Catholics leaving or participating minimally. That is, Catholics might have attended Mass somewhat regularly, but more commonly than not, they didn't share in the life of the parish. This led to a shortage of volunteers, stemming from a widespread shortage of interest. Operations struggled and ministries shrank.

Bishop Calvo, aware of this issue facing the church, pondered whether the diocese should embrace this master "Pause" caused by the pandemic to shift how we have been running our parishes, and if we were to shift, what that might look like. Thus, Bishop Calvo put the question to the DPC: "Is there something we should be doing differently?"

In response, the DPC created the New Practices Committee (NPC) to investigate the current climate at the parishes and then to make recommendations based on the situation. This report contains those results and suggestions.

The Current Climate in Our Parishes

To assess the critical issues in our diocese, in January 2021 the New Practices Committee attempted phone calls to the 26 parishes and 6 missions in the diocese, using a list of questions intended to probe the needs of the people and of the parish. The goal of this informal survey was to talk to the person who regularly answers the phone to learn the kinds of calls they were receiving. Specifically, the NPC wanted to know what callers were asking for or concerned about. The committee reached 22 of the parishes (including one mission).

While responses varied, general comments included the following:

- Frustration around technology, regarding both equipment and know-how, thus inhibiting their ability to reach out consistently.
- Lack of volunteers.
- Problem of keeping up with the cleaning and disinfection.
- Social distancing restrictions limiting those who want to attend Mass and impeding the number and effectiveness of current activities/events.
- Some parishioners are angry about Covid protocols stripping them of their religious freedom to practice their faith.
- The youth transition to remote learning has gone better than expected. Religious Education seems to be doing well virtually, although the quality of it is uncertain.
- Outside of religious education, youth participation in church activities is down.
- Many of the elderly are afraid and lonely and some parishes feel the church is failing this group because parish outreach individuals can't get into nursing homes. (A couple parishes mentioned they could use support from the diocese to reach out to nursing homes.)
- The elderly, even those not in nursing homes, seem to feel the most isolated because many don't have the technology or the knowledge to connect virtually.
- Most parishes seemed to have the necessary financial resources, although not all.
- Across the board, there has been a big uptick in use of outreach services, especially food pantries.
- Hispanics have been consistently well represented at Mass once churches reopened.
- Parishes are losing parishioners and not gaining new ones. This is a big concern.
- Fear of infection is keeping people from attending Mass, but not everyone is struggling with not being able to go to church.

On the last point above, an observation is that many families are not returning. A draw that got families to attend Mass was their children serving as altar servers and involvement in other ministries. With those not occurring, many parents have minimal, if any, motivation for showing up at church.

Critical Issues

The poll of parishes as well as current research on the topic support the prudence of evaluating how we resume operating our parishes. Specifically, four key areas came to light as worthy of attention:

1. Covid-specific concerns, challenges and opportunities
2. Lack of connection
3. Need for spiritual growth and discernment
4. Need for parish leadership formation and support (includes priests)

Covid-Specific Concerns, Challenges and Opportunities

The break in church-going has provided a convenient exit for disenchanting or simply disengaged Catholics. Covid likely accelerated the departure of the “Dones.” Dones are those who were likely active in the church or at least going to Mass somewhat regularly, but due to lack of connection or a number of other reasons, decided they were done with church. Dones are cross-generational, but many are “Boomers,” in their late 50s and older.

Due to the break resulting from Covid, parishioners verging on becoming Dones have grown more active in their own spiritual practices and perhaps feel they don’t need church to be close to God. Research in 2017 indicates that a large number of believers don’t go to church because they said they practice their faith in other ways. Covid has undoubtedly increased this phenomenon, therefore accelerating the trend of people skipping Mass now and, most likely, once the pandemic is under control.

“Nones” tend to be younger, aged in their 20s or so, and no longer affiliated with religion; they consider themselves spiritual. The Nones, we’ve known about. As a Church, we have been so focused on this younger cohort that we have failed to pay close enough attention to the Dones. And we’ll likely take a big hit of the Dones after Covid because of that.

Noteworthy are the opportunities Covid has created. Besides the complete cessation of parish activities as a chance to scrutinize their true value, other positives exist. The break sped up parishes’ adoption of technology, a key aspect of successful current-day church operations. Also, the student body at the diocesan Catholic schools has increased; religious education has transitioned to family catechesis program, which was one of the Synod initiatives; some of the faithful have a new appreciation for Mass and community, arising out of the

temporary complete lack of both; and Hispanics' presence at Masses has increased as parishes have reopened.

Finally, another opportunity Covid has created has been the chance for the Diocese to lead in a very visible and appreciated way. At the onset of the pandemic, parishes rightfully looked to the Diocese for leadership. When they found the Diocese there, leading the way by securing and distributing cleaning supplies, it made parishes feel the Diocese was there for them. This built up the community.

Lack of Connection

In addition to Covid-related concerns, the lack of connection is a problem in our parishes, and the Church in general. In fact, it's likely at the heart of both the Nones and Dones listed above.

One reason mentioned for lack of connection is the unwelcoming culture of some parishes. Covid has exacerbated this problem because physical closeness has been perceived as a threat. Still, some people glare or back away when others stand too close. In other words, social distancing has hindered efforts to make our parishes more welcoming, another Synod goal and one that many parishes were working toward.

The politicalization of mask-wearing might have further contributed to the lack of connection. For those who have returned to Mass, their desire to follow social-distancing protocols (or not) might label them as the "other" side.

Another point made in the article mentioned above is that now more than ever, people consider faith as private and focused on the individual, rather than something where community plays an important role. Thus, it's not surprising that people don't feel connected with others in their church. In their minds, as long as they focus on God and follow their own personal spiritual practices, they're fine.

Also worth noting is that when people watch Mass online, they can homily shop. No longer limited geographically, they can watch the Mass with the most engaging homilist. When there's a lack of connection to their local parish, this seems more likely to be the case.

The lack of connection is particularly strong in the youth, with research showing current teens and young adults as the loneliest generation ever.

Finally, lack of current technology or technological expertise at most parishes inhibits their ability to utilize this resource effectively to connect with parishioners. Parishioners who are frustrated by technical or quality problems as they try to connect with their parish might hop over to another livestreamed Mass.

Need for Spiritual Growth and Discernment

Spiritual growth covers understanding the faith as well as practicing it, the learning aspect and the relational. Both need attention.

Many people's doubts and reasons for leaving the Church are based on a wrong understanding of the faith. Multitudes of those who remain don't have a strong understanding of Catholic teaching. Current research indicates many Catholics are unclear and inarticulate about their faith and parents feel unprepared to form their children.

It's not surprising that Catholics misunderstand their faith. Not only have entire generations been poorly catechized, but also our culture relentlessly paints a misinformed picture of a domineering ruler, one that wants to control us instead of set us free. The faith is consistently portrayed negatively, as some set of arbitrary rules that have lost all relevance to informed, educated thinking.

Also widespread is the misconception that faith is mostly private, which leads to the faithful completely missing out on the communal benefit—and responsibility—of our faith. People who lack a full understanding of Catholicism can feel strongly connected to God. However, their incomplete grasp of the faith makes it problematic for them to fully embrace and pass on its truth and beauty. In other words, if Catholics don't know they have a responsibility not only to God but to the faithful community, and beyond, what are the chances they would live it?

This incomplete or incorrect understanding of the faith is part of the problem facing our parishes. In addition to missing the call to community, there is the essential evangelizing mission of the parish that often goes unheard.

...all the baptised, by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit and their infused charisms, become active participants of evangelisation....the whole community, and not simply the hierarchy, is the responsible agent of mission, since the Church is identified as the entire People of God.

The Church's mission belongs to all the baptized. Yet many of the faithful don't see the parish as a training ground for their work in the world. Instead, the parish is simply a place to receive the sacraments.

Another challenge facing our parishes is that many of the faithful do not seek a relationship with God. They don't even desire it, which reflects their lack of understanding of what awaits them and how to get there. They don't strive to know Jesus and emulate Him, nor do they hunger for the Eucharist. If people lack a relationship with the one we worship, it's hardly surprising they feel indifferent to showing up to worship.

Finally, discernment arises from spiritual maturity and connects one's church life with one's life in the world. Discernment helps people see the relevance of their

faith to their lived experience. It helps illuminate their charisms and how they specifically are called to live out their faith. Thus, with this lack of spiritual insight, one's religion feels irrelevant in their real-world life, separate from reality.

Need for Parish Leadership Formation and Support

Pastors were not meant to bear the burden of running their parish alone. Yet a challenge our pastors continually face is the lack of support from their people. The quote above makes clear that *all* the baptized are co-responsible along with the clergy for the mission of the church.

Creating mission-centered parishes that value such a model of shared responsibility requires: first, the understanding that this is how we all are meant to fulfill Christ's message, and second, the leadership towards personal and parish transformation to make it so.

While not all parishes in our diocese appear interested in changing, many of them recognize their parishes could be more effective. A lot of parishes don't practice basic management practices, such as having regular staff meetings. A lack of unity and collaboration creates instability and things "falling through the cracks." As the DPC has observed from strong attendance to pastoral council formation events, many parishes welcome leadership and support from the diocese to help them better run their parishes, and beyond that, to grow.

What To Do: Short-term Strategies

One can't look at the reality and not conclude the answer to Bishop Calvo's question, "Is there something we should be doing differently?" is a resounding Yes! In fact, across the nation, parishes are embracing the never-imagined universal break in age-old structures and practices as an opportunity to reassess which are worth bringing back—and which are not.

As parishes emerge from our Covid world, they are moving from a disposition of responding to one of recovering. This report looks even further down the road, to renewing. As a Church, it is what we are called to do. Pope Francis said:

I dream of a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.

Perhaps this complete cut from the usual way of doing things will propel us forward, helping us shed the practices that inhibit rather than foster living out our faith as disciples in the world. Perhaps the Covid Pause is just the gift the Church

needs to make strides toward renewal. The time is now for such focus and discernment.

We must admit...that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.

So, where should we start? Practically speaking, our parishes don't have the luxury to ponder what to do; they need to know what to do right now. Accordingly, the strategies below address the first two critical issues above: Covid challenges and the need to increase connection. The other two areas—spiritual growth and parish leadership—are longer-term strategies and are covered in the following section.

Addressing COVID-Related Challenges

During times of hardship and confusion, guesswork causes additional stress. Thus, one way the diocese could support its people is by offering regularly-updated, clear instructions and information, for wherever we are in the closed or opening-up process. Beyond that, it might also add content that is helpful and/or inspiring. Such practical and timely information that could go on a diocesan website might include:

- A bulleted, easy-to-read list of current Covid Protocols, including everything from occupancy limitations to whether snacks can be served at gatherings.
- Prominently accessible notes or tips on re-opening our parishes, including, perhaps signs and suggested positive language to use when people show up for a Mass that is at maximum socially-distanced capacity.
- Available services (such as food pantries) and outreach for those in need.
- Upbeat stories of hope and good news, such as our Catholic schools' success during Covid. Other inspiring messages to share are when the clergy advocate on behalf of the Church, such as when Bishop Calvo pressed the governor to treat churches equitably in occupancy restrictions. Also inspiring is Fr. Chuck Durante's work to temper the reach of proposed anti-life legislation. Not only is it uplifting to see the religious standing up for truth, but also, it serves to model Catholic activism, thereby instructing the faithful in what is expected of them.

Also, something that might reassure the faithful during these uncertain times is the encouraging presence of their Bishop. A 3-minute video, say every month or every other month, could uplift people. Beyond that, it would also increase the

connection people feel in our larger faith community as a People of God, journeying together.

Focusing on Connection as a Priority

The goal is to create regular opportunities for personal connection as a parish for the purpose of building community. We emphasize parishioner-led initiatives not merely to avoid overwhelming already stretched-thin pastors, but also because it is fitting for the laity to better claim their role as co-responsible with the clergy in the mission of the Church.

Some new practices to consider are:

- Adoration at least one day a week.
- Intercessory prayer for the parish.
- Written letters and postcards are especially popular among the youth. Real mail, scarce as it is, has become a treasure.
- Daily or weekly Zoom prayer sessions (and/or in-person, as possible).
- Homilies as an opportunity to help people grow spiritually, to build understanding and awaken a more intentional faith in the baptized. The priest might ask questions during his homily for people to discuss in their family or their own Zoom or in-person groups, as possible.
- Have parishioners drop off envelopes filled with “love:” devotional book, photo collage of memorable parish activities, notes or drawings from religious education kids, and an encouraging note from the pastor about seeing them back at Mass soon. This benefits three groups: those creating items for the packets, those dropping them off, and those receiving them.
- Food Pantry/Delivery for Community Support: Several parishes are doing this and noted its value. A couple are connected to Catholic Charities.
- Communications to re-engage parishioners: Maybe a dedicated campaign to jump-start people’s connection to Mass and the church. One simple first step is directly addressing livestream viewers: saying we miss them and inviting them back to the church.
- Phone Tree: Several parishes are already doing this, but not in an organized and enduring way. The idea is to have personal contact through a phone call with every parish household in the community toward the goal of deepening the relationship of the parishioner to the parish.

This idea was presented in a well-mapped out strategy by Dr. Leonard J. DeLorenzo of the McGrath Institute for Church Life at Notre Dame. According to him, this phone call should include three things:

1. Check-in: “How are you doing? What is your situation going into this outbreak? Do you need anything right now?”
2. A pledge of support: “Here is my phone number and email. I am your personal contact with the parish community. If something comes up, if you or someone in your household gets sick, if you need help with shopping or errands, if you need someone to talk to, if you just get lonely ... you can call me. I will work with our parish community to get you what you need. We are in this together.”
3. Further outreach: “If you know other people in our area who need help or support, let me know — neighbors, coworkers, friends ... whoever. I will work with our parish community to try to find them what they need. Our parish is here to serve.”

The parishes that have done this or some form of this in our diocese reported being positively received. Most people haven’t needed anything, but were pleasantly surprised by the personal contact. And although many of the callers ended up not reaching a live person, even leaving a recorded message constitutes contact from the parish to a household. Such check-in calls pledging support help establish the parish as the go-to resource when people do need something, even if it’s just a person to talk to.

Note that this is a personal connection led by parishioners and not the pastor or parish staff, although both can help. Also note it is a personal connection, not a program. What we need are stronger personal connections. Communion is nourished through personal bonds.

- Focus on creating or improving welcoming and hospitality, recognizing the website is often the first door to the parish. This welcoming lens means we have to be creative when Covid protocols make us turn someone away from Mass, for instance. How do we ensure they leave feeling welcomed?
- Practice faith-sharing at meetings. Utilize Patrick Lencioni’s Zoom small-group questions, a proven way to accelerate trust and group cohesion:
 - What’s your biggest challenge trying to follow Jesus in our current world?
 - Have you had any remarkable experiences of God lately? (these can be a sign of a charism)

- What is prayer? When and how do I pray? What does prayer mean to me? How can prayer make me a more whole (holy) person? How does prayer link me to my parish community?
- Improve and utilize technology. Beyond the parish's website, many other platforms can increase connection: Instagram is big with younger people and YouTube has re-emerged due to Covid. Podcasts and video-conferencing are also popular. (Many younger people see Facebook as for old people.)
- Get people engaged doing things for others. In another address, Dr. DeLorenzo emphasizes that not all community activities are equal for creating connection. He argues that we can't build community by being insular. Thus, pizza and movie nights and parish picnics are good. However, they don't bond a community in the same way coming together to meet the needs of another does. You form community by facing outward. Parish outreach, he says, mustn't be considered in addition to the life and health of the parish. Rather, it is essential to it.

Many parishes have had to invest in technology to operate during Covid. While technology investments can be costly, their benefit will be lasting. Like it or not, as we emerge from Covid, we are living in a hybrid world. Having virtual access is no longer a bonus; it's a requirement.

Of course, in-person meetings are preferable and we're slowly returning to them. But we have learned virtual meetings can powerfully reinforce community building. Technology also gives access to many, though not all, homebound people, opening up a community experience they did not have before. Beyond that, it gives access to people who otherwise would not have signed up for a program because of the requirement of physical presence.

Recommendations for Enduring Renewal

The strategies above addressed the first two challenges our diocese and the Church, in general, are facing: Covid-related issues and the need for greater connection to build community. Below, the suggestions cover the other two challenges identified earlier:

- Need for spiritual growth and discernment
- Need for parish leadership formation and support

Short-term strategies might help us maintain our church operations, an important goal indeed, especially now as we work to recover from Covid's impact. What's

crucial for lasting change, however, is a focus on mission. Here is Pope Francis' vision again:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.

The focus on mission is clear. He says further:

The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented...

This leaves no doubt that something needs to change in our parishes. But how do we get there? Drawing from Jesus' example, building the Church happened one heart at a time through personal relationship with Him. Two thousand years later, we can observe that when we draw close to Jesus, we begin to notice our hearts moved. And as we discern together, we see that we are all being pulled in the same direction. Toward Him.

The dioceses and parishes striving for renewal have done just that: they started with Jesus. Thus, we recommend the starting point for moving our local church toward our divine mission is to focus on drawing the faithful closer to God by cultivating a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Focus on Spiritual Growth and Discernment

No longer should we cater to the consumer mindset, where young families come to a parish because they want their child to receive a sacrament, which they get as a prize for attendance. Mission-oriented thinking requires more of us; we would evaluate where people are in their stage of faith and meet them there, inviting them into the community. Thereby beginning the journey together, fostering a sense of community along the way, with the sacraments serving as touchstones on the path of formation.

Anything short of accompanying people on their faith journey diminishes both individuals and the Church, for Catholics with the passive consumer mindset are unlikely to embrace the Holy Spirit's call:

The whole People of God must urgently embrace the Holy Spirit's invitation to begin the process of “renewing” the face of the Church.

It's doubtful they would even hear it. Today's Catholics need to be formed to better understand that collecting sacraments and just-me-and-God thinking is not

Catholic. Parishes must convey that as members of the Body of Christ, we are pilgrims journeying together, and that living a robust Christian life takes place in community, not in private.

Indeed, renewing the face of the Church demands nothing less, because it is the spiritually seeking Catholics who will heed the Holy Spirit's invitation. It is heartening to witness how the fruits of spiritual growth build community and produce people eager to serve. When people deepen their faith through habitual prayer, they hear God's call to take care of their sisters and brothers. They volunteer and enliven parish life.

This is important: Spiritual maturity swells the desire to serve others. That means the motivation to help, to accompany, is *internally* motivated, not externally. When the emphasis of parish life is on one's relationship to Jesus instead of outreach and volunteerism, the urge toward service possesses the depth that flows from the love of God. And it's enduring.

Furthermore, personal spiritual growth is a critical first step because it draws out people with the charisms and desire to serve. It helps them see that things should improve and that they have a role in that. Not surprisingly, then, personal transformation is a hallmark of parish renewal, including those leading the change. This makes sense, as you can't renew a parish without renewing its members.

For disciples, those who are spiritually mature and always seeking, personal discernment is an integral part of their prayer life. In their ongoing desire for closeness to God, they search for clarity in *how*, exactly, they are called to serve. Through such discernment, the laity can be empowered with vision and the motivation to improve their skills. Moreover, they can better assume their God-given role of being co-responsible with their pastor in renewing their parish.

The shift that would help adult Catholics mature is an emphasis on personal prayer and discernment. Were parishes to focus on discernment, it would teach people to seek spiritual growth because they would see closeness to God as necessary to understand His will for them.

In other words, leaning on God in prayer to draw closer to Him, the vertical connection, would help them see their purpose in life lived out in the world, the horizontal connection. Not only would this bring more hands working toward mission, it would also fulfill the hungry hearts searching for their specific role in God's plan.

For this to become a reality, parishes need to embrace their purpose as one of inspiring their believers to desire closeness to God and then providing the path for such spiritual growth. Below are some specific ideas and resources to help stir the hearts of the faithful:

- The First 15. Begin each parish meeting with fifteen minutes (or more) to answer questions on one's relationship with Christ and the challenge of following Jesus, or some related faith question. People report initial discomfort at such unfamiliar sharing, but without exception, it bears abundant fruit, deepening not only people's faith, but also their connection with one another.
- Numerous free, high-quality materials now exist online.
 - How you worship matters. Fr. Mike Schmitz gave this powerful and moving talk to Notre Dame students just weeks before Covid lockdowns began. The video is an hour long, but would be excellent as part of a campaign designed to gather people back after Covid, especially if there were some discussion after people viewed it. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyiEJB8-Yzg> (Start at 9 minutes in to skip the intro.)
 - Ascension Presents, including Fr. Mike Schmitz's short but inspiring messages. A priest might send out links to the best ones in a weekly email.
 - "Struggle is Necessary," (under 8 minutes) is particularly good during hard times and for youth. His talk is encouraging, as he reminds people that whatever struggle they're facing right now is doing something to them and if we want to be the people God wants us to be, struggle prepares us.
- Word on Fire with Bishop Barron is an excellent resource for going deeper in the faith.
- Podcasts and recorded books on everything from the Bible, to Augustine's *Confessions*, to favorite saints. Just search under podcasts.
- The ones you personally use already.

Priests who focus on the spiritual maturity of the people, recognize it as crucial to what ails the Church—and the world. Spiritually mature Catholics, or intentional disciples, would address all the issues mentioned above. Thus, this—spiritual growth of the people—is the starting point, which, conveniently, is also the purpose of parishes. That is, the conclusion isn't that we have to adopt some new model. It's simply that we have to better live out what we are supposed to be doing in the first place. All of us.

Lasting parish renewal springs from prayerful reflection and constant reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide the process. Process? What process?

Parish Leadership Formation and Support

Each parish's path to renewal will look different, depending on the community in which the parish exists as well as the charisms present among the faithful. Fortunately, much of the process will be similar. And, unlike a decade ago, resources abound to offer guidance to priests and other leaders for parish transformation.

Some things hold true for almost all parishes seeking renewal: it is challenging and takes longer than anticipated, around three to five years, depending on the size of the parish and other factors. And regardless of parish specifics, two things consistently surface as necessary for renewal:

1. A strong leadership team.
2. A plan.

A Strong Leadership Team

The pastor cannot and is not meant to lead alone. Fortunately, when a pastor commits to renewal as an intentional goal and focuses on people's prayer lives and discernment, parishioners begin to show up to serve in ways they hadn't before. Among these will likely be the leaders to help him. Some will have the skills necessary to lead change, but most will need development.

First, it helps to understand what a leadership team is not. It is not the pastoral council. Father James Mallon says, "A parish leadership team is a group of people—most likely between 4 to 6 members—who share responsibility for the success of the parish with the pastor." People on this team are usually influential and trusted staff members who oversee major areas of responsibility and are capable of having strategic conversations.

Many pastors and their leadership teams opt to bring in an outside professional to guide them as they navigate change. Pastors find this valuable for parish transformation because a third party:

- Is someone not promoting his or her vision, but the vision of the group
- Provides an objective person to hold the pastor and staff accountable and push them forward
- Challenges parish leadership to push itself, to think differently

- Coaches the pastor on how to be a better leader
- Offers someone to whom the pastor can vent

Once a pastor has his leadership team in place, they need to figure out what to do. The parish needs a plan, which will provide the path they take to renew their parish.

A Plan

This is where the pastoral council comes in. The pastoral council should be the planning body of the parish and should involve the staff and parishioners in part of the process. The *Diocese of Reno Parish Pastoral Guidelines* are a good starting place to understand the purpose of a pastoral council, as well as how to select the best members.

A good plan bridges the desire to improve to a new lived reality. This is where intentionality takes root. A plan should serve as the map of where to focus and when, capturing pastoral priorities and turning them into a practical, how-to strategy.

Two websites offer excellent materials for all phases of planning, from discerning strong members for the pastoral council, to how to know when a decision should be by consensus or vote.

- The Diocese of Rockford is one of the richest websites for pastoral planning resources: www.rockforddiocese.org.
- The Diocese of Trenton also has excellent planning resources, including pastoral council training videos, best practices, and a sample plan: <https://dioceseoftrenton.org/pastoral-planning>. (This site is also good for youth and young adult ministry ideas.)

One more resource worth mentioning is priest support. In addition to selecting key people to propel the growth of the parish, effective priests often benefit from the support of other peers. Small priest-support groups, of say six to eight men, who meet regularly to provide a space where priests can talk freely about their hopes and challenges, facilitate idea sharing. Such pastor fraternity also contributes to their overall well-being and ignites their imaginations.

The DPC's Role in Helping Parishes Embrace and Implement Renewal

A noticeable phrase repeats often in the Synod document, *Renewed in the Spirit*. That phrase is: "With the support of the Diocese." Thus, we must ask ourselves

as members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, What is the best way for the DPC to support our parishes?

In considering this question, we should revisit the DPC's purpose of overseeing the implementation of Synod initiatives. Then we must decide whether our emphasis on parish transformation as presented in this document is a diversion from our purpose, or an extension of it.

The New Practices Committee believes our focus on creating mission-centered parishes is directly related to parishes' ability to implement Synod goals. In fact, as the DPC has previously concluded, the successful implementation of Synod initiatives *depends on* having the people to lead the charge, and transforming parishes creates those holy helpers.

The NPC recognizes the need to back up and identify processes at the parish level that stir people's hearts, which should be considered the first step toward the goal of implementing Synod initiatives. Successful processes result in flourishing programs, not because the bishop is telling them to create programs, but because such ministries have naturally flowed from people's *personal* spiritual maturity. Bishop Calvo highlighted this crucial relationship in his commentary in *Renewed in the Spirit*.

If mission is the organizing principle of [the Synod's] initiatives, then the personal encounter with Christ through prayer is the fundamental source and inspiration of all our efforts and actions.

Bishop summed it up perfectly. The NPC hopes this document takes it a step further, suggesting *how* such changes might be encouraged. That is, How does a parish organize around mission? How does a parish help facilitate an encounter through Christ?

Learning from the DPC's work over the last four years, based on our review of the literature on the topic, and drawing from experience in our local parishes, we offer the suggestions below as to how the DPC can assist parishes to move toward being mission centered.

1. Work with Pastors Desiring Change

Parishes cannot be transformed by merely working with pastoral councils: pastors must desire change. We, the DPC, should focus on helping to equip pastors who desire to move their parishes more toward mission.

Priests might be inspired by the co-responsibility model, which emphasizes the laity's role in living out the mission of Christ. The faithful must be formed beyond the practice of offering ideas on what should be done, to that of taking on their baptismal responsibility, working alongside the clergy.

In addition to priests needing real, mission-owning support of the laity, they would benefit from brotherhood-building support from one another. Regular connection would not only contribute to their sense of community, but would also create opportunities to interface with one another on the topic of improving parish management.

2. Offer a Place and Resources to Start

A suggestion to start with Jesus and personal prayer that includes discernment might help a pastor find the people in his parish to be co-responsible with him on the path to parish transformation.

An additional idea here is that a more visible diocesan presence at the parishes might be helpful as a show of support. The mere presence of the Bishop, DPC members and diocesan staff communicates interest, concern and connectedness of the Body of Christ.

3. Educate Parish Leaders on the Role of the Pastoral Council

A main goal of the DPC should continue to be to help parishes establish strong leadership. The DPC's creation of updated guidelines in 2019 for the Parish Pastoral Council addressed an important and recurring question DPC members heard from their pastors: How does one get the right people on a pastoral council? Moving forward, the DPC should continue its goal of guiding pastors in utilizing their pastoral councils as key to renewing parishes by appointing discerning and prayerful members and developing plans.

Fr. Mallon in *Divine Renovation* suggests forming a pastoral council that focuses exclusively on these two questions: Where are you going? and How will you get there? In his parish's transformation, his pastoral council was no longer operating as a management committee or a reporting body, but was attempting to be about broad strategy.

4. Shift Focus from Program to Process

Focusing on programs is not a long-term solution for parishes, as most of us have probably learned firsthand. Processes endure because they provide the context for programs. Intentionally designed processes create paths so that when one program ends, another one begins, thus continually propelling the pilgrims' journey. Emphasizing process over program also rightly shifts outlook beyond the present, to the mission to which all parish programs and activities should point.

A practical first process to start defining as soon as possible might be the one of Faith Formation, which would begin as part of the welcoming process. After all, it is through educating the laity about their co-responsibility of evangelizing the

world and helping them to discern what that means for them personally, that will create the disciples necessary to do such work in our communities.

5. Focus on Spiritual Discernment and Creating a Plan

Towards increasing our own effectiveness, the DPC's activities should align with the suggestions put forth in this document. By starting with our own spiritual growth and a plan, the DPC would be modeling the steps of renewal it is suggesting for parishes. With our plan in place, we would have our own map toward accompanying parishes in renewal and would be confident that everything we do serves our defined purpose.

6. Create an Idea-Sharing and Support Hub on the Diocesan Website

The Synod brought out the people's desire to share ideas among parishes. Not only would this help people learn, it would build unity and a sense of togetherness as we strive to grow.

The Covid pandemic clarified people's need for leadership and assistance, particularly in the areas of food pantries and nursing home outreach. In areas of crucial need such as these two, perhaps the Diocese could help parishes establish outreach to the vulnerable as a regular part of parish life.

Another suggestion is to have a contingency directory for unexpected situations or emergencies that arise, a go-to binder and/or web page to get direction and answers. It could merely contain telephone numbers: whom to call for specific questions and concerns.

Guided by the Synod initiatives as well as the goal of supporting parish leadership, the DPC could define what kinds of resources parishes would find most helpful on the diocesan website. It should be noted that for the Diocese to become a support hub for parishes as envisioned in the Synod initiatives, investment in technology and dedicated personnel would likely be necessary.

Conclusion

Clearly, there's a lot to be done! But to anyone paying attention, this is not a surprise. The pre-Covid trend of Catholics leaving the faith is familiar. In fact, it's so well known that "former Catholic" has become a common religious identity.

But as Christians, we take heart. We were made to build up the Church and, although it often doesn't feel like it, we have been prepared for it. Pope Francis said, "In the Bible, the Holy Spirit can evoke two diametrically opposed reactions: openness and closure. Openness is what defines the disciples and apostles."

To be open, a prudent first step would be to practice humility as we slowly reopen our parishes. Let us all, clergy and lay leaders alike, discern in the spirit of openness whether what we were doing is, in fact, what we *should be* doing to meet people on their spiritual journey and accompany them.

We recognize that the faithful can be open to change, yet feel overwhelmed by the chasm of need, the vast expanse of all that must be done. In Father Tom Bonacci's virtual talk at the 2021 Diocesan Virtual Day of Renewal, he encouraged the faithful in light of the work before us: "It takes great courage to do what you can when you know it's nowhere near what needs to be done."

Do what you can. Move imperfectly. Father Bonacci tells us to rise to the occasion and "don't wait to fix everything before you fix anything." Thus, let us embrace the universal "Covid Pause," as an opportunity, then, to identify what we can do, each one of us.

And then do it, while remembering to "go slow to grow" and "fast won't last." These memorable sayings will help set an intentional mindset that emphasizes process over program.

Also important is to realize that moving ahead imperfectly means we will make mistakes. Discernment can be messy as we figure out how to do what we are called to do. Thus, it's imperative to not let fear of failure prevent us from moving at all. Rather, we can appreciate missteps as vital information in guiding the process. Regarding moving, Pope Francis said:

Someone once said that the equilibrium of the church is like balancing a bicycle: it's stable and goes well when it is moving. When you stop it, it falls.

So let us pick up our feet and move together on our journey, our eyes fixed on Jesus as we wobble, imperfectly but faithfully, forward.

Appendix A: NPC Committee Members

The New Practices Committee responsible for writing this report includes the following members:

Neil Gallagher
St. John the Baptist parish in Lovelock
NPC chair
DPC vice chair

Debbie Larson
St. Francis of Assisi parish in Incline Village
NPC secretary and principal author
DPC chair

Theresa Currivan
Immaculate Conception parish in Sparks
DPC member

Christina Davis
St. Albert the Great parish in Reno
Diocesan Director of Youth and Young Adults

Jaimee Maranon
St Rose of Lima In Reno
Young Adult Member

Theresa Phillips
St. Gall's parish in Gardnerville
DPC member

Appendix B: Parish Interview/Survey Questions

The following questions were asked of the person at the parish who typically answers the phone.

1. Since the pandemic started, how has the parish stayed in contact or reached out to parishioners who are not attending in-person masses and events? If something was done, how successful was it?
2. What are the main issues that you have had to deal with during the pandemic?
3. Has there been any discernible change in the participation of parish youth in masses, in-person or virtual, and in religious education?
4. What are the resources that you have relied upon to help you support the parish (eg. food pantry, gas vouchers, volunteers)?
5. What are the resources that you could have used or needed, but did not have access to?
6. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing your parish moving forward?
7. Has your parish been supportive to you and your family, not only for your spiritual needs, but other needs you may also have? Are you willing to share how?
8. What else would you like the parish to do to help you?
9. In a perfect world where you could have done anything at all to help callers, what would you have done?

Appendix C: Sources

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Appendix D: Synod Initiatives Related to the Recommendations

Below are the Synod Directions and Outcomes related to the recommendations in this document, organized by the eight Synod themes.

MISSION

- Reach out and be welcoming to everyone.
- Awaken in all people a deep relationship with Christ.

COMMUNITY

- Welcome everyone as family, giving them a sense of belonging in our community.
- Create a sense of loving community, working together with the mission of developing a closer relationship with Jesus.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

- Each parish will have an assessment of the demographic profile of Catholics residing within its parish boundaries in order to have an awareness of its cultural diversity and of pastoral needs related to this diversity.
- As Church, we will identify and empower new ethnic leaders to participate more fully in the life of the Church.

EDUCATION

- The Diocese will assist each parish to establish family-focused Catholic education beyond sacramental preparation.
- Inspire individuals and families to continue lifelong faith formation so that they can deepen their relationship with God and to respond to the needs of our world today.

FAMILY

- Each parish will develop and implement a plan to encourage family participation in the liturgical life of the parish.

YOUTH

- Provide new models to achieve a personal experience with Jesus rather than traditional model of catechesis.
- The Diocese will increase communication (including sharing of best practices) by maximizing the use of websites and other forms of the latest technology.
- The Diocese, in conjunction with parishes, youth ministers and directors of religious education will initiate a diocesan-wide model to educate, inspire and support families so that parents can witness the Catholic life and form the faith of their children.
- Each parish will (by partnering youth with other established parish groups) develop innovative, engaging and relevant youth programs.

CLERGY

- The Diocese will establish a uniform program to help people discern their calling to pastoral ministry and provide formation.
- Provide more people in administration to help free the priests for more spiritual needs and responsibilities.
- Provide for ongoing intellectual, spiritual, human, and pastoral formation.

SPIRITUALITY & FORMATION

- Awaken the spirituality of Catholics.
- Renew and inspire the desire for prayer to deepen our relationship with God.