

COVID-19: Altering the Status Quo Parish Sustainability and Viability

CONSIDERATIONS BY MARK MOGILKA

The current health crisis is significantly impacting parish sustainability and financial future. What should parish leadership be focusing on at this time?

Some have suggested that whether parishes will be able to withstand the pandemic is dependent on how healthy, viable and full of vitality they were prior to the crisis. Those parishes that consisted of highly engaged members, that provided vibrant and life-giving liturgies, developed collaborative servant-shepherd leaders and were financially viable will find the parish community rallying in the face of the health crisis and come through even stronger. Those that did not have these qualities prior to the crisis may not be able to survive. Some will find themselves in another significant wave of unfortunate parish closures, mergers and linkages.

DATA

A 2014 national survey of Catholic parishes found that 24% were operating at a loss and 8% received a diocesan subsidy for their operations. It also showed that Catholics contribute half as much to their parish as a percentage of income compared to Protestant households – 1.1 to 1.2 % versus 2.2 to 2.5%. (See book – Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century, Zech et al 2017)

- **The financial toll on parishes and dioceses as a result of suspended masses is painful.** And slow openings with significant regulations will not fully alleviate that pain. “Many dioceses rely on income from parish collections and may not be able to support parishes for too long, as their reserves dwindle. They’ll want to pay everybody, but they have to be realistic about that. In the short term...they’ll have to start looking at other options.” (Interview with Patrick Markey, executive director of the Diocesan Fiscal Management Conference, Catholic News Service article written by Michael J O’Loughlin March 20, 2020)
- **“Average parish collections will be down by 50% – 70% per week until churches can reopen.** When they reopen, as many as 40 percent of their parishioners will be out of work, temporarily furloughed, or trying to figure out life on half a paycheck. This also means that fundraising galas and big events that typically provide 25% of the annual revenue for a charity/ministry are not going to happen.” (Interview with Andrew Robinson, President of Petrus following a Catholic Fundraising Summit sponsored by Petrus. Interview appeared in CRUX – April 11, 2020 edition)

- **While total giving during the great recession decreased significantly, there were noteworthy exceptions with more targeted giving to poverty-relevant causes.** Total funding to food banks in 40 cities increased by 2.2% during 2007-2008 and by 31.9% from 2008 to 2009. (Charitable Giving and the Great Recession – The Russell Sage Foundation and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality – published October 2012)

ACTION

A parish's viability should ideally be determined by the members of that community, based on their willingness to step up to the plate, rally together and put together a plan for their future. Pastoral praxis has shown that in the face of crisis, some parishes and schools are able to rise to the challenge and come through a crisis even stronger. Others, while making a good effort, come to a point of acknowledging they need to let go and move on. Those parishioners will be more likely to accept working with another community, knowing they gave it their best efforts, than if they were not given the opportunity to save their parish or school.

- **Parish leadership needs to communicate with parishioners.** Keep in mind that especially in small town, rural areas a significant number of parishioners do not have access to the internet. Use both the internet and regular mail to communicate.
- **Emphasize the need for parishioners to continue supporting the parish's mission.** Highlight how the parish is creatively adapting and continuing to provide service to members. Show how your parish is reaching out to parishioners in need, to people in the neighborhood and those in need beyond the parish boundaries. Acknowledge how some members may find it difficult to maintain giving levels due to loss of income. Let them know the parish understands, supports them and encourages them to remain active and fully a part of the parish. For those who are more fortunate, and who may be able to increase their generosity, encourage them to prayerfully consider what more they could do.
- **Transparency is also critical.** Share detailed and understandable financial statements or, better yet, graphics to explain the challenge(s) the parish is facing. State clearly what your needs are.
- **Engage in a short-term “fill-the-gap” funding effort aimed at the parish’s most committed and generous supporters and donors.** Parish leadership, at times, may hold these supporters “in reserve” for larger projects in the future, but now is the time to share the need to sustain and build the vitality and sustainability the parish community and its needs.

- **As much as possible using facetime or Zoom, practice safe distancing but these asks from major donors should be made face to face.** Seek professional fund-raising advice and counsel to provide direction and support for the short term as needed.
- **These committed and generous supporters need to receive a personal invitation from the pastor and/or key influential leaders of the parish.**
 - Ask for matching funds, i.e. if parishioners make special contributions up to a given amount, would the donor be willing to match those contributions dollar for dollar.
 - If the parish has increased its outreach and service to the needy in the parish and community, share that information with a potential donor and suggest that 50% of their donation will support parish or local community charities and 50% will help maintain staff, basic parish operations and services.
- **Catholics often like to put an envelope in the collection basket.** Encourage parishioners to drop it in the mail, suggest including a donation to the parish when paying monthly bills.
- **During live-streamed Masses, have the priest place his personal donation at the time of the offertory collection into a basket that is at the foot of the altar.** Encourage those watching to be generous as well.
- **The average regular church-attending Catholic attends mass about 40 times per year.** Income is lost during those 12 weeks per year that they do not attend. It is well documented that average household giving goes up significantly when parishioners sign up for monthly electronic giving. There are several programs and services that can be used for electronic giving that should be researched and provided to parishioners.
- **If parishes have annual Spring or Summer fund raising events – do them online.** Catholic schools have been effectively pivoting to the virtual world with funding events and can serve as a good source of how-to information for a parish.
- **While not necessarily a strategy that can help the parish in the short run, there is an increased awareness among some parishioners of the need to get their final affairs in order given the daily accounts of deaths due to COVID-19.** Many parishioners do not have a will. The parish probably has an attorney who may be very willing to do an online seminar on how to put together a will. Focus should be on the nuts and bolts of assembling a will. As an afterthought, note the possibility of leaving a legacy by including the parish or other charitable groups in their will.