

LAWN CHAIR CATECHISM AT CATHOLICMOM.COM SUMMER 2013

Forming Intentional Disciples, by Sherry Weddell (Our Sunday Visitor, 2012)

Session 1: Introduction

What does it mean to form “intentional” disciples? In the introduction to *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell writes about a startling conversation she had with the leader of a local Catholic women’s group. The conversation was part of a series of interviews to help lay leaders learn how to use their gifts in the parish:

Her stories were so vague that I wasn’t hearing any evidence of how God might be using her. . . . So I asked her a question that I had never asked before: *Could you briefly describe to me your lived relationship with God to this point in your life?*

After thinking carefully for a few moments, she responded briskly, “I don’t have a relationship with God.” Her answer stunned me. My first thoughts were, “That’s not possible. You’re a leader in your parish. You wouldn’t do that without *some* kind of relationship with God . . .”

. . . By the end of the interview, I realized she had accurately described her spiritual reality.

Sherry goes on to explain that she began asking the question routinely. And here’s what she discovered:

We learned that the majority of even “active” American Catholics are still at an early, essentially passive stage of spiritual development. . . . We discovered, to our surprise and dismay, that many pastoral leaders do not even possess a conceptual category for discipleship. As long as this holds true, the theology of the laity and the Church’s teaching on social justice and evangelization will remain beautiful ideals that are, practically speaking, dead letters for the vast majority of Catholics

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

How would you describe your lived relationship with God to this point in your life?

What does the word “discipleship” mean to you? Do you perceive a need in the Church today to help lay Catholics become more fervent followers of Jesus Christ?

In your parish:

How would you describe your parish’s current efforts at discipleship? A hotbed of discipleship? A weekly gathering of spiritual sleep-walkers? Or perhaps something in between?

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Session 2: Chapter 1
God Has No Grandchildren

In her first chapter of *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell describes with detailed statistics the crisis of Catholics leaving the Church. She shares the evidence that most departures happen in young adulthood, and that most who leave never come back. She concludes:

If this trend does not change, in ten years it will cease to matter that we have a priest shortage. The Builders will be largely gone, the Boomers retiring, and our institutions – parishes and schools – will be emptying at an incredible rate.

After demonstrating that this trend is just as worrying among Hispanic Catholics, she delves into the reason for the emptying of the pews across all ages and ethnic groups. The primary cause of departures relates to an unexpected finding, discovered in surveys researching the beliefs of Catholics:

... one of the most fundamental challenges facing our Church is this: *The majority of adult Catholics are not even certain that a personal relationship with God is possible.*

She shares a conversation with an archdiocesan vocations director that underscores the statistical reality:

I asked him, “What percentage of the men you work with – men discerning a possible call to the priesthood – are already disciples?”

His answer was immediate: “None.”

“Why do you think that is?”

He was very clear: “They don’t know how. No one has ever talked to them about it.”

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Have you always been Catholic? How did the instruction and mentoring you received help you – or prevent you – from having a personal relationship with God?

If you were raised in a Catholic home, are your family members all still Catholic? What events among your friends and family seem to explain why some are Catholic, and others are not?

In your parish:

How’s your “retention rate”? What percentage of 8th graders in your parish are still practicing the faith at age 18? At age 24? Do young adults in your parish stay in touch with their childhood faith community, or do they drift away to an unknown fate?

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Session 3: Chapter 2 *We Don't Know What Normal Is*

In her extensive research, Sherry Weddell learned that most Catholics consider their relationship with God a forbidden topic – too private to discuss with others. What we don't hear about, we don't know is possible:

One of our most surprising discoveries has been how many Catholics don't even know that this personal, interior journey exists. A high-level, cradle-Catholic leader on the West Coast acknowledged to me recently that the very idea of a personal relationship with God was still new to him. The possibility had only dawned upon him for the first time a few years ago, when his parish started offering evangelizing retreats.

Our idea of “normal” Christian life is skewed. We consider an interest in the spiritual life to be an exception, and not the norm. To combat this mistake, the first Catholic discipleship group Sherry belonged to wrote a series of resolutions as part of their mission statement (here are a few excerpts from their longer list):

... It is NORMAL for lay Catholics to be excited Christian activists.

... It is NORMAL for lay Catholics to be knowledgeable of their faith, the Scriptures, the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Church, and the history of the Church.

... It is NORMAL for lay Catholics to have fellowship of other committed lay Catholics available to them, to encourage, nurture, and discern as they attempt to follow Jesus.

... It is NORMAL for the local parish to function consciously as a house for formation for lay Catholics ...

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Are you comfortable talking with others about your relationship with God? Would you say that you're a “normal” Catholic using the criteria outlined above? Or are you a “typical” Catholic, fighting that feeling that interest in the faith is only for a few pious eccentrics?

In your parish:

Do you personally have, within your parish, a group of Catholics you meet with regularly, to discuss the faith, study the faith, and encourage each other to greater virtue? At this time, does your parish have in place a working system for actively mentoring those who want to grow in their relationship with God?

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Session 4: Chapter 3 *The Fruit of Discipleship*

Sherry Weddell opens chapter three by looking inside a parish where intentional discipleship is the norm. Vocations flourish (over 1/3 of the diocese's religious vocations coming from just two small parishes), financial support is abundant, and parishioners are actively involved in ministry within and beyond the walls of the parish. The presence of the Holy Spirit is palpable at Mass – the fruit of a laity wholeheartedly devoted to prayer.

This, she emphasizes, should not be considered an aberration. As a priest once shared with her, opening her eyes to a deeper understanding of lay and religious vocations, a steady flow of new disciples – Christians actively growing in their faith – is the expected fruit of priestly ministry:

No matter how many institutions we sustain or how much activity goes on in our parish or diocese, if new intentional disciples are not regularly emerging in our midst, our ministry is not bearing its most essential fruit.

Why would a ministry fail to bear fruit? Orthodox priest Fr. Gregory Jensen writes:

I would argue that what typically happens is that we ask people who haven't yet repented (and so who are not yet disciples of Christ) to take on work meant for apostles.

. . . We do this because we ourselves in the main are not disciples of Jesus Christ. Having neglected repentance in my life, I am indifferent to it in yours.

. . . We cannot ask even good and talented people who are not yet disciples to undertake the works appropriate only to apostles. And yet we do this all the time.

The standard operating procedure is backward. The question is not, "Who can I persuade to fill this vacancy?" The question is, "Who has God put in my parish, and what does He want them to do?" The supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit enable the believer to carry out his or her vocation.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Can you recall a "before" and "after" time in your life, when you became a true disciple of Jesus Christ? Have you ever witnessed that change in someone else?

In your parish:

What success stories can you share? In what ministries of your parish is "discipleship thinking" the norm? In what areas is Christian discipleship not yet the standard for ministry?

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Session 5: Chapter 4
Grace and the Great Quest

Will “the sacrament take care of it?” How much does it matter whether a candidate for the sacraments desires to know Jesus Christ, and has a basic understanding of what that relationship entails?

A belief in the efficacy of the sacraments – that supernatural grace is indeed imparted – mustn’t devolve into superstition. Sherry Weddell summarizes Church teaching on the question of mature faith:

. . . the council’s *Decree on Justification* describe in great detail the sort of spiritual development that needs to be in place in order for an adult to receive baptism fruitfully. It includes the following:

- Being moved to faith by hearing the basic proclamation of Jesus Christ and his work of salvation.
- Moving intentionally toward God.
- Believing in what God has revealed – especially that God saves sinners through redemption in Jesus Christ.
- Recognizing that one is a sinner.
- Trusting in the mercy of God.
- Beginning to hope in and love God.
- Repenting of personal sin.
- Resolving to be baptized, to begin a new life, and to walk in the obedience of faith.

There is one obvious descriptor for someone who has lived all the above: *disciple*.

She clarifies that a concern for the inward beliefs of those in the pews is no excuse for an inquisition. Jesus is quite emphatic in insisting we do not know what is going on in our neighbor’s heart. But she insists:

But this does not mean that *no* fruits of personal faith are observable from the outside. And it certainly does not mean that a dramatic and widespread absence of these fruits in the community overall cannot be recognized and addressed. Nor does it mean that we shouldn’t talk about these realities and structure our pastoral priorities and practices around doing everything we can to foster positive disposition and the fruit that flows from it.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

It can be hard to settle our minds on the idea of “cooperating with grace”. How would you explain the Catholic doctrine on salvation to others?

In your parish:

How does your parish currently respond when there are serious doubts about the readiness of a candidate for the sacraments? How would a discipleship model of preparation fit into your current approach?

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Session 6: Chapter 5
Thresholds of Conversion: Can I Trust You?

What does evangelization look like? How do we lead someone from complete unbelief to fervent discipleship? Sherry Weddell outlines five “thresholds” in the spiritual journey towards mature faith:

1. Initial Trust
2. Spiritual Curiosity
3. Spiritual Openness
4. Spiritual Seeking
5. Intentional Discipleship

She emphasizes that this is not a mechanical process:

There is no one-size-fits-all way of negotiating the journey to discipleship. People will move through at different paces . . . or ping-pong back and forth between different thresholds

The thing to remember is that we are not in control of the process. Some people will not respond to our best efforts Others may dazzle us by choosing to cooperate with grace We are dealing with the mystery of a relationship that God himself is initiating in the human heart.

In chapter five we explore the first threshold, “Initial Trust”. This is not the same as an active, personal faith. It is a positive association with the Church that makes it possible to move closer to God. It could be a Catholic friend, a good experience with a Catholic school or hospital, or maybe even a positive image of the faith portrayed in a movie or book:

The first task of evangelization is to find out if a bridge of trust already exists.

. . . Many don’t trust God or the Church, by they do trust a Christian in their life. Maybe they trust you. *You* may be the bridge that will one day lead them to a life-changing encounter with Christ.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

How was the bridge of trust built for you? Who are the people who helped you to come as far as you have in your personal journey? Have you ever been that link of trust for another person?

In your parish:

What are actions you can take at your parish to make your congregation a place of trust? Are there barriers in the public imagination – such as a concern about scandals or financial misdeeds – that require increased transparency in order to foster genuine trust?

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Session 7: Chapter 6
The Second Threshold: Curiosity

“Curiosity” is when the individual shows an interest in the Catholic faith in a casual way. The individual is not yet actively seeking Christ – he or she may not even know who Christ is.

It is essential that we help people wrestle with the first, most crucial issue of a personal God. *Those who don't believe in a personal God and the possibility of a relationship with that God will never be able to move beyond the threshold of curiosity.*

It is very important that we tread lightly. You can easily quench inquiries by drowning a teaspoon full of curiosity with a gallon of answers.

How to arouse curiosity? A life of faith – prayer, trust in God, works of mercy – is inherently curious. Whether through word or action, one of the most helpful ways to arouse curiosity is to pose a question.

Jesus was a master of asking questions that made you sit up and think again. Jesus didn't so much run “Q and A” sessions as “Q and Q” sessions. In fact, he almost never gave a straight answer to a straight question.

. . . The point of this approach is to allow the natural curiosity of the human person to draw him or her to an encounter with the person of Jesus.

Who's curious? Extensive statistical and field research has uncovered a sobering reality: The bulk of Catholics in the pews today are at these early, passive stages of faith. A 2010 study found that only 65% of Catholics polled recognized Easter as a religious holiday, and only 37% listed the Resurrection as the meaning of that day. Sherry Weddell reports:

. . . as we led these sessions, however, we slowly came to realize that a significant number of Catholic leaders, even those deeply interested in evangelization, think of the faith as essentially passive.

. . . All the statistical indicators suggest that the majority of our “active” members are in the early and essentially passive stages of spiritual development, such as trust and curiosity.

An evangelizing parish must actively change to become welcoming to those curious about the faith, in order to meet the currently un-met spiritual needs of parishioners, lapsed Catholics, and outsiders.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Can you remember when you became “curious” about the faith – whether as a convert, revert, or cradle Catholic just waking up to mature discipleship? How would you explain the difference between an active and passive faith?

In your parish:

If a newcomer walked into your parish today, curious about the Catholic faith, would someone actively welcome him? Introduce him to others? Who would help him answer his questions?

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Session 8: Chapter 7
The Third Threshold: Openness

Openness means acknowledging that we are willing to change. Curiosity says, “Tell me a little more.” Openness says, “If this turns out to be true, my life is forever changed. And I’d have to follow through on that.”

Shepherding a friend through the transition to openness requires patience, intercessory prayer, and open eyes. Some struggle for years – even decades – advancing and retreating on the edge of openness. Others – especially the formerly passive Catholic who attends an evangelizing retreat – may quickly move through the stages of trust, curiosity, and openness in a single weekend.

Ways to foster openness include honest sharing of our own relationship with God, and asking and answering questions in a non-judgmental manner. This is an appropriate time to invite someone to spend time in prayer – including Eucharistic adoration – and to speak directly to God, perhaps even asking for a sign. Consider praying together for God to help your friend become open to Him.

Follow-through is necessary when someone reaches the threshold of openness. When the Church is unable to intentionally disciple those who are growing spiritually, a loss results:

Numerous Catholics are experiencing spiritual longings but may have little or no language for what they seek. They sense there has to be more to faith than what they have encountered so far. In terms of thresholds, these people range from the later stages of curiosity through openness and early seeking. Their spiritual antennae are up, and they are quietly looking for people who might know, for clues, for guidance. But they are often invisible to the rest of us.

. . . These seekers are part of the group that told Pew Researchers that they left the Catholic Church because their “spiritual needs weren’t being met.”

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

To believe in a personal God is to believe that God truly will meet us in prayer. It can be difficult to evangelize when we ourselves are going through a “dry spell”, or struggling with some spiritual question. Do you have difficulty trusting that God will show himself to those who do not yet possess the faith?

In your parish:

Over the next six months, what changes can you personally make, to help your parish disciple those who are at the threshold of openness? If you are currently at this point yourself, to whom can you go for spiritual mentoring?

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Session 9: Chapter 8
Thresholds of Conversion: Seeking and Discipleship

The seeker is actively seeking Jesus Christ. He is not yet following Him, but he's considering it. When he makes the decision to drop his net and follow Jesus, he becomes a disciple.

We have found it useful to think of the two thresholds of seeking and intentional discipleship as a whole, as well as considering them as two separate stages. What both thresholds have in common is that they are *active* rather than essentially passive . . .

When large numbers of parishioners are actively seeking or are disciples, the spiritual atmosphere in the parish heats up dramatically.

Seekers can be helped by inviting them to practice the works of mercy, and introducing them to a variety of types of prayer. We must also model what it is to be a disciple, and share what is going on in our own relationship with God.

I certainly feel anxious at the thought of exposing some of the reality of my own relationship with God to someone else. But seekers need to see what life is like for an authentic disciple of Jesus whose struggles are real—and whose victories are therefore believable. It is far more important that your relationship with Jesus exist and is real than that it conform to some imaginary template of Catholic perfection.

The seeker can be helped to move towards discipleship by exploring what obstacles still exist, and by helping the seeker see how he fits into the Church and what gifts he has to offer. Intercessory prayer remains essential. A particularly sharp difficulty faces those in pastoral leadership who are not yet disciples:

One practical issue that has come up often of late is that of how to help existing leaders – sometimes highly visible diocesan and parish staff – negotiate their own personal journeys to discipleship.

Pastoral leaders often lack for a spiritual mentor, or feel embarrassed to admit they are only now developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

. . . As leaders, we need to think through, in advance, how to help *all* in our parish who are not yet disciples.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Are you ready, spiritually, to acknowledge that certain leaders in your parish or diocese may not yet be disciples of Jesus? Are you prepared to treat those persons graciously? To let go of past hurts? To respect them as they make their journey to discipleship?

In your parish:

What is the spiritual atmosphere in your parish? Have you noticed any change over the past several years? If God were to ask you to mentor a small group of seeking and new disciples in your parish, would you be ready to accept that task?

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Session 10: Chapter 9
Break the Silence

Setting goals and following through with a plan of action can transform a parish. A realistic five-year goal is to strive to double the percentage of active disciples in the parish. This is done via an intentional strategy of sustained prayer and effort.

While *we* cannot make anyone “drop their nets” any more than a gardener can make a seed germinate, we can intentionally and intelligently work to create an environment that is conducive to discipleship. We can intentionally shape the atmosphere, experiences, structures, and spiritual culture of our parish life so that it fosters the journey that Jesus Christ asks all of us to make: following him.

Sherry Weddell outlines a series of steps that parishes can take to foster this culture of active faith. In this chapter she discusses the first of several elements of the step she calls “Break the silence”.

The first thing that must be done is to deliberately and persistently break the code of silence if it is in place. The Catholic norm of silence about a relationship with God, about Jesus Christ and his story, about our own stories of following Christ, and about the need for everyone to decide whether or not he or she will follow as a disciple is stifling the emergence of a culture of discipleship and all that flows from it.

A “threshold conversation” is the practice of asking others about their relationship with God, and then *listening*

A threshold conversation is a supportive, inviting, open-ended, prayerful act of listening evangelization. . . . During this conversation, we focus on *listening* to the other and set aside the need to share our own story. Neither is it counseling or apologetics, and certainly a threshold conversation is never judgmental.

A threshold conversation can begin with an opening question, such as “Can you tell me about your relationship with God to this point in your life?” Do not settle for labels, but ask clarifying questions to better understand what the individual thinks and feels about God. The second essential question is, “If you could ask God one question that you knew he would answer right away, what would it be?” This question often reveals current needs or struggles that someone in the parish may be able to address.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Have you ever listened to a “threshold conversation”? What was it like? Can you think back to a time when perhaps you should have listened supportively and asked clarifying questions, and instead you jumped in with catechesis, or apologetics, or giving personal advice?

In your parish:

Has your parish hosted a discipleship training program that included practice listening to “threshold conversations”? What ministries or events at your parish tend to create situations where a threshold conversation might occur? How can you prepare lay leaders to listen and respond?

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Session 11: Chapter 10
Do Tell: The Great Story of Jesus

We can no longer assume that even an educated adult knows the basic story of Jesus Christ. But knowing this story is essential to conversion:

Our own personal witness can help illuminate and make living, compelling, and believable aspects of Jesus' story, *but it cannot take the place of Jesus' story.*

In trying to decide when and how to share the story of Jesus, there are four questions to consider:

1. Does our friend know the essential "acts" of the Story?
2. Has he or she connected the dots? Does he or she understand the story as a whole?
3. Does our friend understand the personal significance of the Story?
4. What is or has been his or her response to the story?

The essentials of this story can be broken down into a series of "acts" that need to be told, but the order and timing may vary according to the needs and questions of the hearer.

Proclamation of the Kingdom: God is love.

He created us for a life with him, full of peace, truth, beauty, goodness, and meaning that begins now, lasts forever, and can't be taken away.

This life is what is called the "Kingdom of God". Jesus Christ is the very face of this kingdom. He reveals the love of the Father and the nature of God's Kingdom through his every word and action. The characteristic actions of the Kingdom are *healing* and *forgiving*.

Jesus Embraces the Cross:

. . . Jesus's ministry results not in "success" as the world understands it but rather in the mystery of his rejection, betrayal, crucifixion, and death. Yet it is *for us* that Jesus embraces the cross in obedience to the Father, as the means of our salvation and access to God's life.

Resurrection, Ascension, New Life, Adoption, and the Kingdom: The Cross is not the end of the story. Seekers can investigate the historical evidence for the reality of the resurrection. Satisfied with that evidence, they can move on to asking, "What does this mean for me?"

The seeker thus comes to a final set of thresholds: Jesus asks me to follow him. He forgives my sins. I'm ready to drop the net and become a disciple.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Are you practiced in sharing the Gospel story? Have you ever heard it told especially well? How can you become more skilled at explaining and answering questions about the Gospel?

In your parish:

What are times and places at your parish when the Gospel story could be shared in a few quick words? In more detail?

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Session 12: Chapter 11

Personally Encountering Jesus in His Church

After breaking the silence about Jesus, the second step in evangelization is to create **multiple, overlapping opportunities for people to personally encounter Jesus in the midst of his Church**. Any ministry of the parish, as well as informal encounters with other parishioners, can be a point of encounter:

We need a wide spectrum of opportunities, because there is no single silver bullet. We need to have a variety of different paths or doors to discipleship available and visible so that most people will find at least one way to connect with or draw closer to Christ. Instead of thinking of these ministries as separate, siloed endeavors run by different parish interest groups, we need to see all of our ministries in light of our primary call to make disciples.

An evangelizing parish is not the work of a single leader or small group of spiritual elites. All the baptized receive charisms, or spiritual gifts, that aid in the work of evangelization. As newcomers encounter the Church, they can find a niche under the wing of a disciple whose charism is ideal for fostering their next stage in spiritual growth:

People on the frontier of *trust* can be greatly encouraged by those with a gift of *hospitality*. . . . Those at the threshold of *seeking* may find those with the gifts of *teaching* particularly helpful.

The St. Catherine of Siena Institute has a primary mission of helping parishioners uncover and begin to use their charisms. The discernment process may yield unsettling results:

After working with tens of thousands of Catholics in the discernment process, we have noticed something important: Not all charisms are welcomed and valued at the parish level. This is almost never intentional or bad-willed, but it hampers the work of the Kingdom all the same.

. . . Which charisms are we not likely to welcome? *The charisms primarily aimed at starting new initiatives, evangelizing and proclaiming Christ, forming disciples and apostles, and freedom for unusual ministry and prophetic change.*

An essential ministry is the formation of small faith groups by those with the gift of “pastoring”. *The last thing new disciples need is to feel isolated and alone within their parish.*

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

How would you describe what your spiritual gifts are (or might be)? In what ways could you evangelize or disciple others using those gifts?

For parishioners:

Think for a moment about the other members of your parish. Who do you know who seems to have a very evident gift for some type of ministry, but perhaps is not aware of it?

For pastoral leaders:

Think for a moment about the lay leaders of your parish. Which would you describe as “disciples”? As not yet disciples? [Or: Don’t really know.] Over the next six months, what steps can you take to help the disciples learn to evangelize? To help disciples-to-be grow in their faith?

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Session 13: Chapter 12
Expect Conversion

Sherry Weddell opens the final chapter of *Forming Intentional Disciples* with an unsettling story:

. . . a priest friend was talking to me about a woman he knew who had just gone through a conversion and was changing in dramatic ways. . . . This new disciple was badly catechized, but the most astonishing spiritual wisdom was coming out of her mouth, and my priest friend couldn't get over it. What, he asked me, could be going on?

I sat for a moment in genuine bewilderment at his surprise. "Well . . . it's the Holy Spirit," I said slowly. Surely, didn't this wonderful, intelligent, prayerful man understand what was happening? . . . It turned out the answer was no. Even though he had been a priest for twelve years, my friend had never witnessed anyone go through a major conversion before.

As Catholics, we must expect to witness God at work. We should expect to see God acting in our community, and prepare to receive new disciples as the fruit of our evangelization efforts. Discipleship should be the norm, not the pious exception, to parish life:

. . . what few people seem to understand is how debilitating spiritual isolation can be even for highly committed Catholics who are disciples.

. . . I have yet to meet a pastor passionate about evangelization who hasn't told me privately that he feels almost completely alone in his concerns among his brother priests.

At the parish level, evangelization and discipleship include several significant strategic priorities:

Prayer: Mobilize existing prayer groups, and encourage and support new initiatives. Build inter-connectedness among prayer groups. The Mass and other communal prayer services should be oriented towards evangelization and discipleship.

Intentional Evangelization: Seek out individuals longing to hear the Good News. Create processes to prevent parishioners from getting lost in the crowd. Train parishioners in the skills needed for evangelization. Find ways to explicitly share the Gospel both within existing ministries, and as part of new initiatives.

Forming and Equipping Disciples: Train spiritual companions to mentor new disciples. Create small-group environments within the larger parish, as places for discipleship and on-going formation. Help disciples discern and learn to use their spiritual gifts, and thus to answer their calling from God.

Questions for Discussion

In your own faith:

Have you ever felt isolated in your quest to follow Jesus? What are ways you have built a community of spiritual companions?

In your parish:

You've put a lot of energy over the course of this study into learning about the need for evangelization and discipleship, and how to fulfill that need. Do you plan to take action? In what way?