



Learning Commons Introductory Community Module

Parishes strive to be intentional communities that live and function in a specific way. All members of the community have opportunities to engage in **worship** (communal prayer, sacraments/communion, praise), **learning** (studying scripture, preparing for sacraments), **fellowship** (mutual care, encouragement and sharing resources) and **service** (sacrificial giving, meeting the needs of the community). These activities are what make our parish communities different from others who may share some of the same priorities (such as Lions Club's focus on service or Scouts' focus on learning and fellowship).

Christian community should work to foster meaningful relationships between members. Thriving parishes are aware of their demographics. There are identifiable parishioners who actively lead to ensure that worship, learning, fellowship, and service are available for all. Community members with minimal or low commitment are actively welcomed in ways that “meet them where they are”. Visitors and newcomers are embraced with Christian hospitality instead of insisting visitors quickly adapt to insular cultural norms.

All communities go through experiences of growth and change, planned and unplanned. The wisest results of planned change come from the wisest group: one that is diverse in experiences, viewpoints, and vision and who is committed to working together. In this case, working together means talking and thinking deeply together leading to agreement that the outcomes proposed are worth supporting. Thriving parishes produce robust outcomes that are meaningful when the parishioners involved in the planning are truly representative of the community.

When unplanned change and growth happen, managing conflict will likely be necessary. People need alternatives to adversarial approaches in disputes. Rather than “managing” or “dealing with” conflict, there need to be community members who are open to identifying the underlying root cause. People can work together and form solutions even when conflicts arise. Thriving communities are open to surfacing the key background information, uncovering the core of the conflict, using practical tools to move from conflict to solutions, and ultimately implementing solutions.

Moving towards a thriving parish or congregation can start with some simple practices and principles to live into. If you can do these things, your community will begin moving towards the five marks of a healthy congregation covered in our [Introduction to Parish Development module](#).

Living Into Community

Late Christian author and professor Christine Phol, in her book *Living Into Community*, claims that most conflict in a parish happens because a healthy culture has not been developed there.

She argues that parishes that work towards four basic principles are much more successful in developing a healthy and sustainable community: gratitude, promise keeping, truth telling, and hospitality. Principles create culture, and parish culture is what drives towards specific goals and marks.

Gratitude is a simple but important practice in communal life. Not many people are attracted to groups of people that spend most of their time grumbling or pointing out the things that are wrong. These behaviours are exhausting and make relationship building a real struggle. Communities and individuals that intentionally look for the good, the beautiful, and the hope within their midst often inspire positivity. Members feel honoured and appreciated and people outside of the church hear about the wonderful things going on in the parish. That's the kind of thing that might inspire someone to "come and see". In her School for Parish Ministry Development, Bishop Melissa Skelton says that the "buzz about town" that you create about and within your church will have a significant impact on how successful your community is. Communities with a culture of gratitude remember to recognize their volunteers regularly, and not just by official leaders. Everyone can and should participate in noting the good work that is being done around them. It lets members know their work is not just noticed and appreciated but is also part of the sacred work of the kingdom. Does your parish have formal and informal ways of thanking people for the work they do?

It is also important to not let a commitment to gratitude go too far. For example, parishes can struggle to move towards functional and sustainable ministry because memorial plaques or rooms named after beloved parishioners and donors are considered "sacred cows" that cannot be re-purposed. We should always be grateful for the generous gifts our members give, but like all things, those gifts are to further the glory of God and the ministry of the church. They are not intended to be eternal family memorials or social badges of honour. All things have a life span in which they are actually helpful. When their time has ended, it needs to be ok to let them depart in peace so God's new life and new wineskins can emerge. For further guidance in stewardship and donors relations, you can contact the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa Director of Communications and Development.

Promise keeping comes from the idea that "your word is your bond". It may not be a phrase you often hear in church, but it really should be. God has made promises with us, and lives in a covenantal relationship with us. Being faithful to the promises we make with each other, and with God, is essential for Christian life. When people keep their promises, expectations are formed, relationships are built on trust, and the community has integrity. These kinds of promises can range from following through on a commitment to read on Sunday morning, to the parish intentionally increasing their monthly offerings to meet the commitment of the approved budget at Vestry.

A word on "promise keeping" and conflict: each of our communities strives to be a safe space



for all who attend. Sometimes, conflict within the parish not only makes community life difficult, it can make our experiences unsafe. One of the ways we can create and maintain healthy and safe parishes is to prioritize addressing conflict in a timely manner. As the Canadian Mental Health Association often quotes in training sessions, “the behaviour you ignore is the behaviour you permit”. Promising to work towards safe and healthy communities means sometimes having difficult conversations. However, when done well, these can also be opportunities for growth, restoration, and grace.

It probably goes without saying, but deception can quickly tear down a community. Truth telling is essential within a thriving community. Members must feel able to speak their truth to others, but to also have opportunity to lovingly speak truth when something is wrong. Sometimes we may not want to hear the truth, or be the one speaking it, but a healthy community finds a way to do so nonetheless. Thriving congregations navigate conflict by keeping the conflict between those involved, making sure that gossip doesn't arise, and insisting that members speak directly to leadership about their issues and concerns. Triangulation, gossip, grumbling, or passive-aggressive behaviours can do significant harm in a community. As well, healthy communities take advantage of external support, such as the territorial Archdeacon, or representative from the Bishop's office, when conflict reaches a level that is too difficult to manage “in house”.

Finally, thriving communities practice hospitality. Most parishes will describe themselves as hospitable, but what they really mean is that they are friendly and kind. Hospitality is an ancient Christian practice, and in its earliest days was the thing that made Christianity stand out compared to other religions. Where many religions and cultures practiced hospitality as a means of survival or as a chance to connect with those of equal or greater status, the early Christians intentionally offered hospitality to those who would never be able to repay the favour. Christian hospitality, when at its best, is always extended to the strangers or “the other” in our midst, and it is done with no expectation that “the other” will repay us in any way, shape, or form. Thriving parishes do not reach out to increase their numbers or finances. They do so because it is what God calls us to do. Full stop.

Hospitality has four criteria. Healthy practitioners of hospitality are well rooted in their tradition (they are emotionally mature, healthy, and knowledgeable), they are respectful of others (they give up their need to convert others to their way of thinking or doing things), they intentionally invite and accept invitations from those different than them or with those they disagree with, and finally, they are open to change and transformation (they understand that they may be changed by an encounter with the other). While this may seem counter-intuitive to parishes that are used to saying things like, “that's not how we do things here” or, “this is how we've always done it”, the research is clear: parishes that are open to change, transformation, and who actively seek out and serve “the other” find ways to thrive. Those that are insular and protect themselves first do not.



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The School for Parish Ministry

Now that you have an idea of what a thriving parish looks like, it's time to look at how parishes become truly welcoming. The School for Parish Ministry [link] suggests there are four steps to effective welcoming when it comes to visitors and potential new members: invitation, greeting, orienting, and incorporating.

Invitation needs to be approached from many different angles, depending on who you are hoping to attract. It will also look different depending on your location, parish size, and your target demographic. For example, rural parishes might find personal invitations more successful than only having advertising on their website. By invitation, we mean all the things you would do before someone comes through the door of your church. The School for Parish Ministry lists them in descending levels of success, remembering to consider local context and culture:

Buildings and Signs - Your building and signage are probably the easiest and most obvious ways to announce your presence to the community. Making sure your building is accessible, noticeable and attractive and that your signage is up to date and visible is essential if you hope to grab the attention of the community around you.

Community Relationship - The relationship that your parish has with the wider community is also an important form of invitation. Do you offer events or programming based on the needs of those around you? Do you invite the community in for things other than fundraising? How does your church participate in the good work of the wider community?

Parishioner Invitations - You may be surprised to learn that one of the most successful ways to get someone to come to church is to have one of the congregation members invite them! In the appropriate situation, a simple invitation to come to church with you can be an easy first foot through the door. As mentioned earlier, the "buzz about town" is also an easy way to attract new people. If you're often talking about all the interesting things your community is doing, you may find people want to come and check it out.

Electronic Outreach - More and more people use the internet to do their "church shopping". People will often look at parish websites to see what is going on or look up service times. Having an up-to-date and well-curated website and social media presence is essential. It is actually better to have no website at all than it is to have one that isn't maintained or poorly done.

Print Advertising - Newspapers, brochures, and regular PR and advertising still matter. It's never a bad idea to have the local news and communications options telling people where you are and what you're doing.

Special Inquiries - These are those moments when people contact the church to find out what time the Christmas Eve service is or if they would like to have a child baptized. Making sure



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people can easily access that information, and that it is accurate, is a solid way to make sure people feel invited.

Sustaining Engagement

A word about invitation and levels of engagement: Our churches will always have people connected at different levels of engagement. Some are mature practitioners who attend every week, give generously to the parish, and take their place in the councils and ministries of the church. Others may show up on Sunday mornings, make their offering week after week, but are less involved in the overall work. Some may show up at Christmas and Easter, but not really darken the door the rest of the year, but if they were asked, they would happily say, “yes, St. Swithins has been my family church for years!” And you may even have people who use your church building for programming or rentals, but you’d never see them on a Sunday morning. It is important to note that all of these levels of membership and engagement are of worth the way they are, and their needs, hopes and expectations need to be understood and respected. It is not about how you get everyone to suddenly become mature practitioners, rather, it is about how you meet everyone where they are and understand and respect their needs, desires, and boundaries. Nurture them where they are. Invite them to consider a next step. Respect their answer to that invitation, and love them no matter what the answer is.

Once people have shown up to the church it is important that they are greeted well. As church developer Thom Rainer points out, the first 10 minutes a new person spends in your church will have a major impact on whether they come back or not. From the moment people arrive at your parking lot they should be able to easily find the entrance. Once inside, the church should be brightly lit with good signage letting people know where the worship space and washrooms are. It is good practice to have a “Welcome Centre” where newcomers can sign a guest book, pick up a brochure about the parish, and have their first contact with someone who can answer questions, let them know where everything is, and help them understand the service and expectations during worship. A good greeter or sides person may even offer to sit with the visitor to help them through the service if they are unfamiliar with service books, when to stand, when to sit, and how to participate. After worship there should be a hospitable coffee hour where designated people take on the ministry of engaging with visitors and have the ability to “read” how much socializing the visitor is hoping for. It’s never good to ignore visitors, and even worse to steamroll them!

After the Sunday visit, the work of engaging visitors continues. The orienting process involves follow up contact with visitors, as well as hosting annual “orientation” and teaching opportunities for new members and visitors. It gives visitors and potential new members the opportunity to learn what is going on at the church, how it operates, and get a sense of the community as a whole. This process can, in some cases, take up to a year before the person decides if they will become a member or not. Be patient. It’s better to do this well than urgently.



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Finally, your “visitor” may be ready to fully join the parish, or in other words, be fully incorporated. This is the stage when you might work with them to get a sense as to how they would like to participate within the life of the community. What are their expectations of the community? What gifts can they lend? Are there parish ministries or councils they can join? Where do they fit within the parish? Your parish may have a special course on “Anglicanism 101”, or maybe they’re ready to be baptized. It is also a good time to discuss financial offerings to the church. Letting them know what all of the options for giving are, and making it something easy for them to do is an important step.

Final thoughts

In conclusion, building and maintaining a thriving community is hard but necessary work. Thriving parishes are committed to managing conflict in a timely way, through gratitude, promise keeping, truth telling, and hospitality. Healthy parishes know that recognizing the efforts of volunteers is essential and that reaching out to the people around them in ways that meet their needs is key to success.