

Rebuilt – the Story of a Catholic Parish
Michael White and Tom Corcoran
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The authors write with humor and their style holds ones interest. The book has frequent sidebars of comments by each of the authors reflecting upon their experiences. This book is about Holy Nativity Roman Catholic Church in Timonium MD. The authors give a brief background of American Catholicism which resulted in what they call “cafeteria” Catholics or demanding consumers. This was the challenge of Holy Nativity. Both Father Michael and Tom came to Holy Nativity “unexpectedly, unenthusiastically, and without any intention of staying very long.” Neither knew anything about running a parish. They had little training and even less interest.

In a survey of parishioners 96% said that what drew them to Holy Nativity was convenient parking. Kids hated the religious education program; teachers were almost impossible to find. There was no youth ministry. The music was beyond awful. Rotating preachers resulted in disparate messages. Mass was depressing. (The authors say they would not have attended if they had not worked there.) Giving was below par resulting in frequent deficits. Deferred maintenance was the maintenance plan. Grounds were neglected and overgrown. The small staff was divided and deeply dysfunctional. No one read the weekly bulletin. Volunteers answered to no one but themselves. Clergy and staff were treated as employees with hostility and often with indifference. Complaint was the standard form of communication. The church was irrelevant and unknown in the community. The parish was dying.

Father Michael and Tom went to seminars, learned what was working in other places and tried all the standard programs and gimmicks to turn parishes around. They updated the religious education curriculum and developed creative and engaging seasonal events for children. They started a youth ministry (entertainment) program. They recruited musical talent to provide professional quality music in a variety of styles for worship services. They offered all kinds of fellowship opportunities. It was all a waste of time and effort. The more they provided, the more was demanded. They were dealing with a consumer culture.

They tried this approach for five years and the process was unsustainable. They felt burned out and used up. They felt sad and sorry for themselves that their efforts were not working. They felt embarrassed that they felt sad and sorry for themselves. They list the following ten things that they got wrong:

- We assumed that if we did more and did it better, people would grow in their maturity and commitment – they did not.
- We thought that if we did more and did it better, people would automatically give more (money) – they did not.
- If we did more and did it better, we took it for granted that people would automatically get involved and help out – they did not.
- We looked to our stalwart church-goers (senior citizens) as our natural allies as we tried to move forward – that was a major mistake.
- Little did we appreciate how detached the second and third generations of demanding consumers had grown.
- Beyond this basic consumption, we didn’t understand how marginalized the whole enterprise of faith and religion had become in the lives of our “parishioners”.
- Despite our best efforts, we really were not reaching our student population.
- We didn’t understand how profoundly uninterested the non-church-going population had grown, how distrustful of any outreach efforts we made, and how cynical they could be about all organized religion.

- We were not turned toward God. We were not relying on His leadership. And we were not looking to go where He was blessing.
- We thought this would be easy – we were wrong.

Father Michael lists these additional mistakes:

- Controlling everything
- Trying to be perfect
- Spending too much time on details
- Fixing problems instead of systems
- Trying to please everyone
- Putting projects before people
- Hiring too quickly and firing too slowly
- Wasting time and money
- Fearing to lead
- Leading without humility

The failure caused a great deal of introspection and pondering. They began to ask whether they were focusing on the system and culture rather than on God's will for His Church. Their conclusion was, "God's will is growth; God expects us to be fruitful. So if we're not fruitful, don't we have to stop and consider if we're really being faithful? If we're not being fruitful, don't we need to evaluate what we're doing wrong, learn more about where God wants us to go, and if necessary, do things differently?" They decided they needed to swallow their pride and seek help from others, even (gasp) Protestants.

The first step forward was to discover the mission of the Church (Jesus did give His Church a mission!) They discovered that the mission was to make disciples. "Lost people aren't evil or immoral or even bad. They're just mixed up about God." The problem with Holy Nativity was that it was no place for the lost. It was a convenient outlet for demanding religious consumers (many examples are given by the authors).

When churches say "all are welcome" they often mean, "All are welcome on our terms. All are welcome to be present as we meet our needs. All are welcome if you dress like us and like the same style music we like and worship according to the same rules we observe (which, by the way, we mostly made up to suit ourselves)." Nativity was never in the business of reaching the lost. Nativity was irrelevant to the lost – and they wanted it to remain that way. They blamed the lost for being lost. The congregation needed to repent and return to the purpose given by the Lord to reach the lost and help them to become disciples and then help the disciples become growing disciples. "In other words, a church of sinners for sinners on the path to sainthood."

All of this was an introduction to what happened at Holy Nativity. When Father Michael and Tom began to work to make the congregation "seeker friendly" war (not just conflict) erupted. The authors list multiple reasons why congregations don't do evangelism. They then observe that congregations don't get criticized by the lost for not doing evangelism, but there are many complaints from members when evangelism is attempted. The authors visited Saddleback to learn what Rick Warren was doing. They attempted to adapt some of these approaches to ministry at Holy Nativity. Some things worked, others did not. They developed values and other written documents. Conflict did not come with what was written, but did when the documents resulted in action. "Our dissatisfied demanding consumers" waged war against us through indirect assault, direct assault, e-mail, letters, letter writing campaigns, threats, threats of legal action and complaints to the diocese. Spiritual warfare was clearly in evidence.

When Father Michael and Tom came to Holy Nativity the church was sinking into irrelevance because it had no vision for reaching the lost and no plan for spiritual growth and maturity of the members. They determined that the "purpose of Nativity is to challenge church people and seek lost people in order to help all of them become a community of growing disciples. Disciples are students who are growing to love God and love others as Jesus taught us.

- It's not about place; it's about a person.
- It's not about fulfilling obligations or simply supplying the sacraments; it's about following a person on a path.
- It's not about programs or services, or even service; it's about steps along that path of growth"

(Pretty amazing observations coming from a Roman Catholic.)

They conclude that Disciples love God. Disciples love people. Disciples make disciples. They began with these steps: 1. Define your mission field. 2. Describe the "lost" in your mission field. (They described "Timonium Tim".) 3. Design a simple, specific invitation strategy.

They found that there are a number of things that do not make disciples:

- Just showing up
- Looking for magic
- Knowing stuff
- Obeying rules and fulfilling obligations
- Hanging around church
- Self-serving service
- Trading money for influence
- Making the donuts
- Building pretty churches

"Okay, so how do you reach lost people and set them on the path to disciples? That's what the rest of this book is about."

The authors state, "We just decided to stop doing a lot of things we had been doing and instead concentrate on the weekend." They needed to look at the worship service from the perspective of lost people. They decided to focus on two key elements. The first was music. They decided that "the weekend experience should be a form of transportation, taking the participant on an emotional, intellectual and ultimate spiritual journey to the higher things of God." On some weekends the most popular mass was the one without music (that's how bad it was). A big problem with church music was the musicians themselves. "The musical battles were all about personal preferences with consumers and suppliers fighting over the product lines each preferred. The point isn't about building a music program anyway. It's about moving the congregation beyond the position of musical consumers, who are either delighted or comforted or bored or offended by the music and helping them become worshippers." Singing and discipleship go together. "Disciples are moved to worship and then motivated to service particularly and powerfully through their sung participation in worship." Music that matches the culture is a powerful and effective missional tool. (With each thing that the authors did that worked, they have a section "You can do this! Steps you can take in your parish.") They state that they are convinced that churches will remain consumer-driven as long as people are not singing.

Another important part of the weekend experience is to make it accessible and attractive. To do this Holy Nativity developed parking teams, host teams, information teams, café teams, operation teams, and tea teams. Each of these and their roles are described in the text.

A point of conflict is what to do with children, especially noisy babies. The authors describe and discuss their children's ministry. Their suggestions are:

- Build your children's program
- Make your youth minister high profile
- Make your youth programs accessible
- Make your programs excellent and attractive
- Keep turning the flywheel – don't give up if it does not work immediately

Focusing on the Word is critical. This happens primarily through the "message". The authors list the following sermon styles that were typical at Holy Nativity (listed here for instructive (and humorous) reasons):

- Bible study for believers
- Church chat for church ladies
- Sermons for seminarians
- Convincing the convinced (yep, “preaching to the choir”)
- Nagging the uninterested
- Boys’ club banter
- Hamming it up
- Canned ham
- Dishing leftovers
- Let’s pretend (I have a message)
- Public confession/public boasting
- Let’s just be friends

The message is the number one place where the lost get connected and members are challenged to change. When you are faithful to the Word of God, you get to see the power of God at work in your life. The authors give these suggestions as a path to better preaching:

- Preach to yourself
- Preach to your community
- Preach one message
- Preach messages in series
- Preach the purpose of the message. Preach life change.
- Preach the outcomes of the message
- Preach the announcements
- Preach other people’s messages (not plagiarism)
- Preach prepared
- Preach God’s Word

The authors address the importance of fellowship. To do this they focus on small groups. Their suggestions for this ministry are:

- Small groups are small
- Small groups are integrated into the life of the parish
- Small groups are the delivery system for pastoral care
- Small groups are about life change
- Small groups are the school for discipleship

The authors also address stewardship. They maintain that giving is incredibly important. After describing the mess that giving was at Nativity, they move to their stewardship education program. They began with the third chapter of Malachi with the goal of raising givers rather than fund raising, which only raises funds, not givers. They emphasized the tither, but realized they needed to start with themselves.

The next area to be addressed was the importance of service. The emphasis was on every member a minister. In addition to describing how to get people to volunteer and how to appreciate them, the authors explain that ministry in the church is not enough; people need to be ministers for the church in the world.

A false dichotomy developed in the American church – socialism and fundamentalism. “The choice between saving the world and changing the world is a false one. They are intimately related – the work of redemption and the work of restoration. Our parishioners should be serving and our parishes should be models of service in our communities and beyond. Service needs to be integrated into the mainstream life of the parish, rooted in prayer, and flowing from the Eucharist as an essential response

to what we have received. It should be an essential part of how we are and who we are.” Steps that the authors are using:

- Have a purpose; plan a partnership (with others beyond the parish)
- Find a leader; build a team
- Focus efforts for the greatest impact
- Get everyone involved
- Celebrate success

There is a chapter that deals with staffing. The title is “Fall in Love”. As with most chapters, the authors begin by describing the dysfunctional status they were dealing with at Holy Nativity. (The description does not sound very “holy”.) After describing the hiring strategies they used, they focus on how to invest in staff. These are their priorities:

- Prayer
- Respect and trust
- Consistent communication
- Fun
- Growth
- Compensation

Leadership is important. Everything rises or falls on leadership. The authors list leadership charges:

- Be a servant leader
- Be a wise leader
- Be a leader who learns
- Be a leader of courage
- Be a leader of faithfulness

The authors conclude with a chapter, “You Can Do This!” They point out that it does not make any difference what size the parish is or where it is located, the approach they took will work they claim. They also maintain that change can begin with others, besides the pastor, even the lowly layperson in the pew. They maintain that each person has a mission and God has placed that person where he or she is to fulfill that mission. You are not alone- God is with you!

There are three appendices. The first is a detailed example of changing our culture. This describes their approach to change. The second appendix is a compendium of a few of the (many) things we still don’t know. They point out that they are not experts; they are still learning. The third appendix is “Naming the Change: Mission, Vision and Strategy”. Here they list Our Faith, Our Mission, Our Vision, Our Strategy, and Our Values.

Comments from Rev. Tim Fangmeier:

I am recommending the book every chance I get. The catholic sacramental perspective is refreshing as well as the emphasis on evangelism. Three concepts jump out and are peppered with good humor:

That change is going to produce conflict that must be managed

The critical importance of pastoral leadership

The role of great music in creating the flow for worship

They have a great mission/vision

Inspiring the faithful

Reaching the lost

Making church matter

And the church is in the SED - Timonium MD