

GENESIS

COMPASS



The Third Theme

(RE)Plant Evangelization Initiative

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Current Parish Reality

Introduction

In God's blueprint for the 're-creation' of the parish, his Spirit hovers over the water, after which God creates the light by which we can see. On day three, dry land is created, which starts to yield plants and vegetation. In our parish's renewal journey, this is where we start to see the seeds of the Gospel taking root and bearing fruit.

In Day Three, we will consider,

- the current parish experience of evangelisation,
- a theological reflection on this reality, based on Genesis 1,
- practical application suggestions as your parish takes concrete steps.

Reality Check: Evangelisation

It barely needs to be stated that we are seeing decline in Christianity across the west. To take just one western country as an example: in Britain in 1999, typical weekly Mass attendance was 1,264,000. By 2022, it was 594,000.¹ This is a decrease of over half in the space of 23 years. To place this figure in stark comparison, the average weekly live attendance at a football match is 830,000.² Your own country will have similar statistics.

This often amounts to many empty pews and many empty buildings.

Yet, the reason we evangelise is not to fill our pews back up on a Sunday! Rather, we want people to know and experience the most important news the world has ever heard: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 164). In the words of Nicky Gumbel, the pioneer of Alpha, "the greatest injustice in the world is that people do not know Jesus."

Yet, as western culture and society become increasingly post-Christian, falling away from the values that have given meaning for centuries, people are experiencing the absence, and are longing for something more.

Easter 2024 saw a surge in Baptisms and Mass attendance, with one US parish receiving 82 people into the Church.³ An astonishing 7000 adults were baptised in France at Easter 2024, a 31%

¹ Kinnear, T., "Statistical Appendices", in Harris, A. ed., *The Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism*, Vol. 5: *Recapturing the Apostolate of the Laity, 1914-2021*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 357-376.

² In 2021-22, the average attendance at a live football match from one of England's top six tiers was 834,724.

³ <https://adoremus.org/2024/05/catholic-baptisms-mass-attendance-surge-worldwide-for-easter-2024/>

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increase on the previous year.⁴ In London, Westminster Cathedral reported having to turn worshippers away on Good Friday 2024 as the building reached its 3000-person capacity.⁵

Signs of spiritual hunger in the culture are also seen in high profile interest in Christianity among those who would have classed themselves as ‘nones’, including historian Tom Holland, academic Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and psychologist Jordan Peterson, among others. A common thread seems to be the search for assurance in the midst of growing disillusionment and anxiety. The Christian commentator, Justin Brierley, author of *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*, says,

I still see the values we have inherited from the Christian story bubbling away subconsciously in our moral instincts for compassion, equality and freedom. I still see people searching for justice, beauty and meaning in their lives, often in quasi-religious ways. The Christian story has not been buried so deep that it cannot surface again in our country. I see hopeful signs that it will.⁶

There is no reason why these public signs of interest in Christianity – however slight – might not be reflected too in the unspoken hearts of countless individuals. We know that, in Britain, 61% of those who class themselves ‘nones’ are former Christians, 11% lapsed Catholics.⁷ We learn some fascinating facts about ‘nones’ in Professor Stephen Bullivant’s 2017 study. On a scale of 0-10 where 0 is ‘not at all religious’ and 10 is ‘very religious’, 15.3% of Nones remarkably ranked themselves between 7-10. 10.6% said they attended religious services at least once a month or more frequently. 9% said they prayed at least once a month, with 4% saying they prayed every day! All of this proves the author Sherry Weddell’s oft-repeated maxim, ‘never accept a label in place of a story.’ A self-professed ‘none’ may pray daily, while a weekly church-going Catholic may rarely consider their relationship with God.

Spiritual hunger is likely stirring beneath the surface of thousands of people in our neighbourhoods who would never consider going anywhere near our churches.

One of 10 young adults who became Catholic at St Elizabeth’s in Richmond, London, UK in the space of two years commented,

⁴ <https://international.la-croix.com/religion/france-reports-boom-in-new-catholics-over-7000-adults-to-be-baptized-at-easter>

⁵ Thomas Colsy, ‘Westminster Cathedral forced to turn people away due to unprecedented numbers attending Easter Triduum’, *Catholic Herald*, 2 April 2024, <<https://catholicherald.co.uk/westminster-cathedral-forced-to-turn-people-away-due-to-surge-of-attendees-for-easter-triduum/>>.

⁶ ‘Is the UK a Christian Country?’, *Theos*, 6 September 2023, <<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2023/09/06/is-the-uk-a-christian-country>>.

⁷ Bullivant, S. (2017). *The “no religion” population of Britain*. Catholic Research Forum Reports 3: 12. [online] London: Benedict XVI Centre. Available at: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2017-may-no-religion-report.pdf> [Accessed 28 Jul. 2018].

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I'd explored spirituality previously, had felt that lightning bolt start of God's love at a dark hour, had meditated, prayed, read sacred texts. I was nervous of someone trying to bundle up and bind my infinite, boundary-defying God in the name of organised religion. And yet, I had a feeling Catholicism might offer me a way to know God in a deeper, more intimate way.

Many, like this young woman, long for faith.

As we turn to consider the Church's most vital calling – evangelisation – in Genesis Compass Day 3, we do so knowing that souls are at stake. People who are desperate for meaning, belonging, truth, and love – but would never consider it might be found in their local Catholic parish – long for something that we could share with them.

As we begin this module, we pray for the Holy Spirit to stir in our hearts some of the Father's own longing for these people – that we would grow in our sense of urgency to seek them and help them find their way home.

a. Thorns and Thistles

If your parish is on the journey towards mission, you are in no doubt about the mandate to evangelise. Indeed, this call has become unmistakably clear since the Second Vatican Council, frequently repeated in magisterial documents and encyclicals. As Fr James Mallon puts it in *Divine Renovation*, the parish's purpose is,

“...to make disciples. That's it! This is the heart of the matter and the lens through which we are to evaluate all activities of the Church – all pastoral programs, all expenditures and all use of our buildings.”⁸

We might think that nearly 70 years of Church teaching would engender an enormous sea-change in the life of the Church. Yet, we all know that, while there are remarkable signs of new evangelistic life in other quarters of the Church (new ministries, ecclesial movements, communities), our parishes seem to remain stubbornly unevangelistic, entrenched in Christendom culture of a previous era, and frustratingly difficult to change.

Our parishes feel like fields where the soil will not allow crops to grow.

We could go so far as to say that the soil in our parishes is 'anti-evangelistic'. Not only do our parishes not attract the postmodern, nonreligious onlooker, they are successful at repelling them.

A delicate new plant in the field, if it is able to sprout, soon gets choked by thorns and thistles.

⁸ *Divine Renovation*, p. 22.

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Like a farmer cultivating his field, bitter years of experience may have convinced you that what is needed to change this situation needs to be more powerful than a single, quick-fix solution – a new program or tool.

What is required is a deep overhaul of the whole field – weeding all the ‘anti-evangelistic’ elements in the culture, the ‘thorns’ and the ‘thistles’, if you will.

We have identified five thorns or thistles that create unhealthy, anti-evangelistic culture in your parish. But first, we will explore the power of the culture – the soil – itself.

b. The Power of Culture

If you’ve been in an unfamiliar situation that left you feeling like a fish out of water – uncomfortable and vulnerable – you will know what a powerful force culture is. Culture has been defined in hundreds of different ways by sociologists.

At Divine Renovation, we use the following definition: ***“The patterns of behaviour that reflect our deeply held assumptions about what we create, allow, celebrate, and tolerate.”***

Your own parish church is likely a place where you feel comfortable, where you understand the patterns of behaviour expected – what is allowed, celebrated, and tolerated.

But in a cultural environment where you are completely unfamiliar, where the deeply-held assumptions of those around you differ from yours, you experience discomfort. In this environment, it is more likely you will misperceive and misinterpret the actions of others because you do not share their deeply-held assumptions.

The reality is that, for the person who does not know Jesus and who has no or little experience of the Church, your parish will likely be that place of extreme discomfort (that is, it is *anti*-evangelistic, unlikely to bring them into relationship with Jesus).

Our desire for others to know Jesus and to bring them into the parish motivates us to start addressing our culture: **How do we shift our culture, so it is *as comfortable as possible for the person who does not know Christ?*** After all, that person is precisely the person for whom our parish exists! And therefore, we want to shape culture for their sake, not our own.

This shift towards becoming a missional parish is so tough because culture has such a strong, gravitational pull. For many parishioners, this cultural shift will be deeply unsettling, and they will resist with determination. Sociologists tell us that when we try to learn something new, it requires us to change stable portions of our cognitive structure – it’s a process called ‘double-loop learning’ or ‘frame-breaking’. Destabilising our deeply held assumptions even temporarily shake our cognitive, interpersonal world, releasing anxiety. So, you know that when you get pushback from parishioners (and it’s a question of when, not if!) they are likely experiencing anxiety as their deeply held assumptions about their parish are destabilised.

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What are some of the deeply held assumptions that are part of the air we breathe as Catholics?

We assume a generally shared worldview and values: maybe certain religious or political outlooks, beliefs on moral issues, values around family life and sexuality.

We assume that those in our pews generally have enough certainty about their faith, that they worship and live their faith unproblematically.

We assume a certain level of Catholic knowledge: what the Mass is, how to behave in the church, how to pray, the role of a priest.

We assume familiarity with Catholic terminology and acronyms: 'catechesis', 'sanctuary', 'Blessed Sacrament', 'Confession', 'OCIA'.

We assume an understanding of Catholic processes and procedures: how and when to take Baptism classes or other sacramental preparation, the expectation around financial giving to the parish and how that is set up, why you might want to get involved in groups or ministries, and how to do so.

For decades, we have been driven by the most deeply held assumption of all:

That if your behaviour in the areas listed above conforms to the way everyone else in our parish behaves...

...then you must also share our beliefs...

...and if you share our beliefs, then you belong here.

Do you see any of this mentality in your own parish?!

These assumptions were probably not particularly valid even 75 years ago when Christendom culture still existed, but today – when the culture outside our parishes has changed unrecognisably, when people are falling away from our parishes at ten times the speed they are coming in – such assumptions verge on madness!

And yet, how powerful they are. And incredibly hard to shift!

Fostering a more evangelistic culture in our parishes means repeatedly challenging and disrupting – over many years! – our deeply-held assumptions.

This introduction to culture may make you feel this change is impossible, and it is – in your own strength. But the power of the Holy Spirit is a force beyond any other – infinitely more powerful than culture – and cooperating with him, he will transform hearts and minds, gradually shaping a truly missional culture in your parish.

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c. Five 'Thorns' That Create 'Anti-Evangelistic' Soil

The culture or soil of your parish is unhealthy thanks to certain anti-evangelistic elements. We have identified five:

- A distorted understanding of evangelisation that doesn't lead people to encounter Jesus
- Overwhelming fear
- Pastor does not personally experience charism of evangelisation
- Preference for and comfort in catechesis
- Busyness

For each 'thorn', there are practical, uprooting strategies that work for parishes shifting towards evangelistic culture that we explore in Part 3.

Anti-Evangelistic Thorn #1: A distorted understanding of evangelisation that doesn't lead people to encounter Jesus.

When a person's deeply held assumptions are destabilised, they often react in a way that will help them regain their equilibrium. One way of doing this may be to 're-narrate' reality as they see it. Imagine someone being disturbed by a homily from their priest about how each of us has the responsibility to evangelise. Unable to accept that they are personally called to speak to others about Jesus, they regain their sense of balance by questioning whether "evangelise" truly means *speaking to people about Jesus*.

Many in the Church have at times reinterpreted the Great Commission in Matthew 28 to make it feel more personally comfortable. Even theological attempts are made to make Jesus' unmistakable command more palatable. In one of the greatest Church documents on evangelisation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI wrote that evangelisation is a "complex, rich and dynamic reality" (EN 17). When we think of people we know who have experienced conversion to Christ, their journeys involve countless unique experiences: friendship, witness, personal and corporate prayer, acts of service, discussion, learning, reading. Pope Paul VI attempted to capture this in his phrase, "complex, rich and dynamic reality". What has happened at times, though, is that this understanding of the breadth of evangelisation has been interpreted in another way: *everything the Church does is evangelisation*. If you are welcoming at the door of the church, that is evangelisation. If you are serving soup to the homeless, that is evangelisation. If you are serving in the sacristy, that is evangelisation.

This misinterpretation can in fact be fatal to moving your church onto a missionary footing. It has a subtle but real impact. If evangelisation is everything...

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- ... we may prioritise hospitality with a goal to help people belong – people can belong to and be engaged in our community but not have a relationship with Jesus. We might even have hundreds of new people in our church, without any of them having a relationship with Jesus.
- ... we may prioritise social justice – people will know we are Christians through our good works and there is no need necessarily to speak to people explicitly about Jesus. We ‘sow seeds’ through our good actions and works – it is up to God whether or not this bears fruit.
- ... surely there is little need to change. We are doing all we’ve been commanded, and it is up to God to change hearts, so why rock the boat by doing something new?

Surely successive popes since the 1960s have not had in mind that everything should remain the same. This is surely not the idea Pope John XXIII had in his mind when he opened the Vatican Council in 1962: “In order to respond to the Saviour’s command the whole Church must be put on a missionary footing!”

While evangelisation certainly is a “complex, rich and dynamic reality”, its most important “moment” – amid all its different “moments” including hospitality and social justice – is the primary proclamation of the Gospel. Just a few paragraphs later, Pope Paul VI wrote,

“There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.” (EN, 22)

Fr James Mallon expresses it this way in *Divine Renovation*:

“We know that ‘to evangelize’ literally means to announce good news, but what is this Good News?... Jesus. In Jesus we have the very embodiment of God’s salvation presence, love, mercy and life. We know in the Gospels that he who was the proclaimer of the Good News of the Kingdom becomes the Good News and the embodiment of that Kingdom. To receive this Good News, to be evangelized, is not only to hear these wonderful truths, to know about them, but to come to know him [Jesus]– to not just believe in him, but to love him and to be in love with him. Only then will our hearts sing and our song be heard. Only when we come to encounter him as alive and real, he who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, do we then desire to walk his way, hunger for his truth and seek to live his life.”⁹

John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, shared one of the clearest definitions of what the primary proclamation means and the response it is looking for:

⁹ *Divine Renovation*, p. 22.

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“The proclamation of the Word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith... Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple.” (RM, 46)

In other words, our evangelistic activity is not complete until there has been a response – “a personal decision” – an acceptance of Jesus Christ as one’s personal Lord and Saviour.

Another common distortion is the claim, “Do we really need to do this – people will go to Heaven anyway!” Universalism is a subtle yet heretical outlook harboured consciously or unconsciously by many Catholics. In Dr Ralph Martin’s *A Church in Crisis*, he writes,

“If I were to describe how many of our fellow Catholics view the world today, I would describe it like this: ‘Broad and wide is the way that leads to heaven, and almost everybody is going that way; narrow is the door that leads to hell, difficult is the path, and few there are who travel that way’.” (p. 67)

Of course, this is directly contradictory to Jesus’ teaching (Matt 7:13-14), and yet, if we were honest, many of us do not feel an urgency about others’ salvation: we are likely all influenced to some extent by a universalist outlook. Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium* frames this in a very helpful light: when we know Jesus, we are convinced that *he* is who people most need:

“Enthusiasm for evangelization is based on this conviction. We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach. Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love” (§ 265).

Anti-Evangelistic Thorn #2: Overwhelming Fear

Some people deal with their discomfort about evangelisation by denying that it is needed, or by claiming that the parish is already evangelising. Others will have heard the call to evangelise, and it may have paralysed them with fear. This is an intriguing reaction because sharing Jesus with others always flows from joy. The opening words of *Evangelii Gaudium* are, “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.” And, Pope Francis goes on to tell us that mission is “something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world” (EG, 273). So why would something that is deepest in my identity cause me to feel fear?

As our parishes set out in mission, we need to be open to the possibility that many parishioners, even leaders, in our parish do not experience the joy of encountering Jesus. Sherry Weddell, in *Forming Intentional Disciples*, outlines three journeys that parishioners may be on in parallel: the sacramental journey (i.e., receiving sacraments at certain milestones of life); the journey of active

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practice (i.e., serving in the Church, leading ministries); and the journey of discipleship. There are not necessarily causal links between these journeys: in other words, a person could conceivably be fully initiated sacramentally, leading multiple ministries very efficiently, and yet not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

When a person makes a personal response to Jesus Christ in faith, the sacramental graces in their soul are unleashed. It is only with these graces activated that one can be expected to evangelise. Inviting people to evangelise without the power of the Holy Spirit released into their souls is like expecting a car to run with a flat battery. In fact, it is unkind, even cruel, to lay this expectation upon someone. Maybe you have parishioners who will go to great lengths to avoid the topic of evangelisation, and will always have a good reason why they cannot invite anyone to an evangelistic church event? They instinctively know that they cannot do this, that there is no fire burning in them to share with others. We can feel frustrated with them, but when we understand that they are afraid, our compassion grows. It's possible that they themselves have not had a life-transforming encounter with Jesus.

The need to assume nothing becomes very clear. At the heart of every aspect of parish life needs to resound – again and again – the loving and saving call to draw close personally to Jesus. “Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple.” (RM, 46) Let's invite everyone to this “personal decision” and assume *nothing* about where someone is already in their personal journey of discipleship.

Anti-Evangelistic Thorn #3: Pastor does not personally experience charism of evangelisation.

In Day Two – Vision, we explored the importance of feeling something in your gut ('splankna') in order to lead change effectively (see Part 3, 'The Heart of the Pastor'). The reality is that: if you're not *feeling* it, you will struggle to *lead* it. We considered this question under the general topic of vision, but what about the area of evangelisation specifically?

In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes about five charisms central to the life of the Church:

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Ephesians 4:11-13

We recommend APEST to give you an indication of the charisms that you have personally received from the Holy Spirit. In our work with priests, we have found the many pastors tend to lead from charisms of *pastoring* (or *shepherding*) and *teaching* while leading from the charism of *evangelising* is less common.

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The leadership of a person with a charism of evangelising will be driven primarily by their desire to reach people who don't yet know Christ. This desire will burn in their bones!

On the other hand, the leadership of a person with a charism of shepherding will be driven primarily by their desire to nurture and care for those already in the congregation. And the leadership of a person with a charism of teaching will be driven primarily by their desire for people to know the fullness of the truth revealed to the Church.

Can you see the potential risks? If a parish is led by a pastor who leads from shepherding or teaching charisms, there is a strong risk that the parish will never get around to the work of reaching those outside the congregation who do not know Christ. The pastor is not necessarily *feeling* it in his bones, so he is not going to *lead* it!

Is this a hopeless cause? Maybe a parish led by a pastor without a charism for evangelising will never evangelise?

Of course not! The Holy Spirit has equipped the entire parish with the charisms and gifts needed for those who are lost to be reached. But, it requires some self-awareness and intentional leadership from the pastor.

Here's how we have seen parishes become fruitfully evangelistic, even without a pastor gifted in evangelism:

- i. **The pastor acknowledges this is not his charism.** This is the liberation of knowing that we are not solely responsible for the renewal of our parish. It is freeing because we know it is not all down to me. God has wired me in a unique way, and knowing and acknowledging this is a place of personal growth and freedom.
- ii. Knowing that he does not have a charism, **the pastor checks his heart to see if he has conviction.** We can have deep **conviction** about evangelisation, even if we do not have a **charism**. A deep conviction means we feel the urgency – even if we do not feel personally equipped to meet it. Pope Francis says, “Enthusiasm for evangelization is based on this conviction. We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 265).
- iii. If the pastor realises there is absence of **conviction** about the urgency of evangelisation, **he can spend time in prayer asking for the Holy Spirit to stoke a fire in his heart for those who do not know Christ.** He can dig deeper into his own heart to uncover whether there are obstacles named in this section holding him back: maybe fear; personal preferences and familiarity; or a busyness that has distracted him from thinking about the lost.
- iv. While building conviction, **the pastor can discern who is most gifted at evangelisation among those leaders around him.** This is a person who leads from a charism of evangelising – it is what wakes them up in the morning and keeps them up at night! Perhaps this passion makes the pastor uncomfortable initially, but he recognises this

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- is what is needed to make evangelisation a beachhead in the parish: something that is needed above anything else. The pastor with humility recognises how God has equipped this person. He empowers, frees them up, and resources them so they can lead on evangelisation in the parish.
- v. Sometimes a pastor and his team will realise that their conviction levels are low. Neither can they identify someone with this charism of evangelising who they feel comfortable about empowering to lead. We have worked with parishes that have reached their own conclusion that **they need to go deeper into their own experience of encountering Jesus and being evangelised themselves** before they are convicted to lead others to do so. Getting out of our box can help in this area: Go and visit a church where high numbers of new disciples are being made. What does it look like, feel like? How does it affect you? Go and experience Alpha or something similar yourself in a church (not necessarily a Catholic one) that is experiencing abundant fruit. Go to a conference on parish evangelisation and ask God to help you feel in your gut – your *splankna* – a strong desire for those who do not know Christ.

One thing is for sure: being honest about conviction and charisms for evangelisation is one of the most significant ‘reality checks’ you can undertake in your parish. What is at stake is large numbers of people with whom Christ longs to spend eternity.

Anti-Evangelistic Thorn #4: Preference and comfort in catechesis

Think back to the deeply-held assumptions that are deeply ingrained in many of us Catholics, listed in point b above. When these assumptions are the air we breathe, they have many practical implications for the programs we run in the parish.

We assume that, because everyone behaves according to our parish norms and values, then they must believe the same as us. We assume that, because someone attends Mass regularly, they must have a relationship with God.

We recommend reading Sherry Weddell’s *Forming Intentional Disciples* who outlines that this is simply not the case. Weddell has a helpful maxim, ‘Never accept a label in place of a story.’ A *label* might be ‘a devout Catholic’ because the person in question attends Mass every Sunday without fail. But what is that person’s *story*? Are they aware of or open to the reality that the living God would like a passionate relationship with them which would change their whole experience of life?!

On the other hand, think of the person referenced in the introduction, who classes themselves as non-religious – who would never darken the door of your parish – but who prays every day! Another of Weddell’s maxims is that, ‘everyone is in spiritual motion.’

All of this means that, pouring so many of our human and financial resources into catechetical programs makes little sense for two reasons.

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First, those who come to receive catechesis before receiving a sacrament are often unaware even of the possibility of a life-changing relationship with Jesus. Pope St John Paul II said,

“Many of the baptized live as if Christ did not exist: the gestures and signs of faith are repeated, especially in devotional practices, but they fail to correspond to a real acceptance of the content of the faith and fidelity to the person of Jesus. The great certainties of the faith are being undermined in many people by a vague religiosity lacking real commitment” (*Ecclesia in Europa*, 47).

Yet, our catechesis presumes this relationship with Jesus exists, and fills them with knowledge about the faith. This knowledge would be devoured by a person who is aware of a relationship with God and spiritually seeking. But to someone without that awareness, what they receive remains interesting information in the person’s mind. They jump through the hoops the parish requires to receive a sacrament.

In Fr James Mallon’s words,

“We must labour to create spaces for people to come to know Jesus as the living Lord, awaken the hunger and then begin to form them, to make them disciples.”¹⁰

If we fail to do this, what a devastating reality! Here is an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to transform a person’s life, but, misunderstanding what they need, we short-change them with interesting information. We think of St Paul’s words to the Corinthians, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Corinthians 1:17). Perhaps, at times, our parish catechetical programs have “emptied the Cross of its power”. Perhaps we have shared “eloquent wisdom” – reasonable and interesting information – but have failed to offer the person an opportunity to enter into a life-giving relationship with God.

Why do we do this? There are many reasons, including those already shared above: we are afraid, or we don’t have a sense of the urgency of salvation, or we don’t experience a charism of evangelisation.

We also fail to offer people this opportunity simply because we love and are attracted to the Church’s rich treasure trove of deep theology! Many of us even experience conversion through an intellectual journey. And undoubtedly, this is a great gift since the truths of our faith nourish our souls.

But for many, the intellectual journey will come later. First, they need to know the saving love of Jesus Christ before they become curious about the intricacies of Catholic theology.

¹⁰ Divine Renovation, p. 23.

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Here is another area where we need to make ourselves uncomfortable for the sake of the unreached: will we sacrifice our own preferences for programmes or studies, and instead consider what people most need to become disciples?

There is a second reason why pouring so many of our human and financial resources into catechetical programs makes little sense. Your calendar and your budget will show you what your parish prioritises. If you were to look at the parish calendar over the last month, roughly what percentages of the activities directly invite people – especially those who don't yet attend church – into a personal relationship with Jesus? If you examined your parish credit card statement of the last month, roughly what percentage of your funds have gone directly towards making disciples?

Most parishes realise that these proportions are abysmally low. When we compare the proportions with those poured into catechetical programs, we start to see the imbalance. We prioritise feeding sheep, and neglect catching fish. The fact that many of the sheep we are feeding do not even want to be fed make the situation even more absurd.

Anti-Evangelistic Thorn #5: Busyness

If you were honest, to what extent is the soil in your parish field anti-evangelistic because of your own busyness as pastors and leaders? We tend to keep ourselves extremely busy planting and watering crops, without facing up to the hard reality that few are surviving. There is a lot of activity in the field, but few signs of new life.

The reality is that the Holy Spirit wants to get to work uprooting and restoring the field to health so that abundant life can grow. But, in order for this to happen, we need to change our approach. Preacher AW Tozer said,

“If the Holy Spirit were withdrawn from the church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95% of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”

In the early Church, everything relied upon the Holy Spirit. Through the early disciples and apostles, he created 'fields' (or churches) full of abundant new life: new baptisms, miracles, healings, conversions, numerous disciples.

But today, we have got used to our Catholic parishes being fairly barren fields for comfortable Catholics. We are so used to this it would shock us if we saw a cultivated field full of the abundance, life, and harvest of the Holy Spirit.

The early Church reality is available and possible today! If only we'd pause the 'whirlwind' of activity that takes us away from the work of cultivation the Holy Spirit wants to do through us.

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Undoubtedly, it is a hard decision because it will involve us changing. Changing how we spend our time, our money, and the types of activities we do. Nobody enjoys change. But, is it worth it for a 'field' brimming over with new life and health?

When you think about the soil of your field, do you feel overwhelmed at what it will take to uproot all the thorns?! If so, that is good, because you alone cannot restore the field to its full health. Only Christ can do that. St. Macarius shares some encouraging words. This is true for your whole parish as it is true for the individual soul.

“When a farmer sets out to till the ground he has to take proper tools and clothing for work in the fields: so when Christ, the heavenly king and the true husbandman, came to humanity laid waste by sin, he clothed himself in a body and carried the cross as his implement and cultivated the deserted soul. He pulled up the thorns and thistles of evil spirits and tore up the weeds of sin. With fire he burnt up all the harvest of its sins. When thus he had tilled the ground of the soul with the wooden plough of his cross, he planted in it a lovely garden of the Spirit; a garden which brings forth for God as its master the sweetest and most delightful fruits of every sort.”¹¹

Are you ready to get cultivating?!

Theological Reflection

We have considered the great potential in contemporary culture to evangelize, and the many ways in which our parishes are not equipped to meet this opportunity. It seems, in many ways, a lamentable situation, so we turn to sacred scripture to cast supernatural light upon this reality. As always, we encourage your own *lectio divina* on Genesis 1:9-13. The Holy Spirit will shed unexpected light on our unique situations.

⁹And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. Genesis 1:9-13

¹¹ St Macarius, Homily 28.

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“Let the waters ... be gathered together in one place” (Genesis 1:9)

In Day 1, we considered how the raw material created by God was an amorphous mass of land submerged in water. On the third day, God calls the waters to gather together, and the land beneath the water is revealed. The waters that symbolise chaos are contained, they are brought under control. We think of the line of the psalm: “You set a bound which they should not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth” (Psalm 104:9). The divine work of bringing order does not eliminate chaos altogether, but it puts boundaries around it. It limits its destructive potential.

Cooperating with God’s work, we humans also instinctively place limits around chaos. If you are clearing out a house, you might place all the junk in one room to deal with last of all.

As we start working on the renewal of the parish, there are likely to be areas of “chaos” where the reality does not align with the new God-given vision for the parish. This “chaos” is the “whirlwind” of busyness and activity that does not help the parish become missional. It is “chaos” because it not only takes time away from mission, but it also even thwarts the mission itself.

Part of the work of renewal is to circumscribe these areas: we know they exist, but we cannot bring order to everything all at once, so we tolerate their existence. Like a section of a field overrun with thistles, we need to keep watch over these areas: what detrimental impact is it having on parish culture? How long can we get away with leaving this area before its negative impact is greater than the difficulty involved with tackling it? As we make progress, the wild areas become fewer and smaller.

The new mission-focused reality, however seemingly vulnerable, is more powerful than whatever still exists in the parish that is not ordered to mission.

*I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,
a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;
though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,
though they roar, they cannot pass over it. Jeremiah 5:22*

St. Basil of Caesarea reflects on this verse: “A grain of sand, the weakest thing possible, curbs the violence of the ocean.”¹²

Do you believe that the small and fragile new shoots of mission contain the power of God? That they are even more powerful than the chaos?

“Let the dry land appear” (Genesis 1:9)

As humans, we love the experience of standing on dry land after a long time at sea. We are made to live on land, to build safe and warm habitations for ourselves. “Dry land” represents

¹² St Basil. *Hexaemeron (Homily 4)*. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 8. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895.)

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order and stability. It also represents the “space” we need to clear before we can start to build. It is like clearing overgrowth and weeds before planting a new garden. We need to see the land stripped back, levelled, and cleared of wilderness, before we can imagine the space in a different light. What is its potential? What could it look like? A vision starts to form in our hearts and minds. Vision – “a God-given picture of the future” – precedes reality.

Church Father, Tertullian, makes an observation about the dry land which is helpful to us: “‘Appear,’ says He, not ‘be made.’ It had been already made, only in its invisible condition it was then waiting to appear.” The dry land does not need to be created by us: it is beneath the waters of chaos. In other words, there is a foundation of order and solid ground that already exists: we need to allow it to appear. Order is the fundamental reality in God’s world, not chaos.

We could also add that this dry land is not completely ‘virgin’ land. Like land we clear of overgrowth, there may be old bulbs and seeds within the soil. When we think of the parish in the post-Christian context, this is certainly true. A parish may be depleted of much life, activity, and people. But in this state, we can more easily see the authentic, mission-focused foundations on which earlier parish communities have been built.

There is a parallel in the Old Testament, where Nehemiah sets out to rebuild the Temple from the original foundations. When what remains are only the ruins of a building, we can more clearly see the stripped-back shape and structure of the original edifice. The Lord prophesies through the prophet Haggai,

³ ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’⁴ ... Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the Lord, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the Lord Almighty.⁵ ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’⁶ “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. ⁷ I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty. ... ⁹ ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty. Haggai 2: 3-7, 9

Uncovering the former foundations does not mean rebuilding exactly what was there before. What is needed now is different, because the people who the parish is called to reach are affected differently by the culture. And we might even expect that, ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house’ (v9) if more people’s lives are being transformed by Jesus.

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The Parish as Territory and Land

In 2020, the Congregation of the Clergy's Instruction on the pastoral conversion of the parish noted that,

“...the Parish territory is no longer a geographical space only, but also the context in which people express their lives in terms of relationships, reciprocal service and ancient traditions. It is in this “existential territory” where the challenges facing the Church in the midst of the community are played out. As a result, any pastoral action that is limited to the territory of the Parish is outdated, which is something the parishioners themselves observe when their Parish appears to be more interested in preserving a nostalgia of former times as opposed to looking to the future with courage.” §16

“Existential territory” means, in practice, that people will travel to the parish church that best serves their needs, or that they connect digitally and receive inspiration from the parish's online ministry.

And yet, as physical beings for whom place and flesh-and-blood communities will always be vital, the real locations and people who live, work in, and walk the streets of our parish territory matter. For the neighbours in our communities who do not yet know Jesus, this “land” is where the “lamp” – the Gospel message – needs to shine brightly from the “lampstand” (Mark 4:21) for all to see, “a beacon that radiates the light of the faith and thus responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart, giving meaning and hope to the lives of individuals and families” (Pope Benedict XVI).¹³

“Let the earth put forth vegetation” (Genesis 1:11)

In verse 11, we see, for the first time, the growth of new life *not* directly caused by God. The earth *itself* puts forth vegetation! God has created the earth as itself a life-giving source; the land contains within itself the potentiality of growth. While God is ever-creative, holding all things in being, he designs creation in such a way that life begets life.

Or, perhaps we should say, *healthy* life begets life. The condition of the earth's soil is critical when we think about its potentiality for vegetation. When it is healthy, seeds grow with no help. Jesus uses this concept as he preaches about the kingdom of God: “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear” (Mark 4: 26-28). (If the “soil” of our parishes is healthy, it “produces” disciples as we sleep!)

But the soil is not always conducive to growth, and this is what Jesus addresses in his parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9). Where there is not healthy soil for the seed (the word of

¹³ Homily during the pastoral visit to Our Lady Star of Evangelisation Parish of Rome (10 December 2006)

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God) to fall into, it may be eaten by birds (v4), soon die because of a lack of soil depth (v5), be scorched by the sun (v6), or be choked by thorns (v7).

Each of these realities have resonances in the “earth” or “land” that is our parish. In Part 1, we explored the powerful force of culture, using the metaphor of “soil” to reflect on our parish’s culture.

Healthy soil is alive! It is dark, moist, and teeming with diverse microorganisms, breaking down nutrients for plants to use and thrive. Pockets in the soil contain air and water, allowing plants and animals to breathe. Water is absorbed easily.

On the other hand, unhealthy soil feels dense, hard, and solid. It is compacted with little air, and water cannot be absorbed, running across the surface of the soil. Loose soil on the top flows away with the water, which is erosion. Little organic matter exists to create nutrients for plants whose roots struggle to find space to grow, and the soil’s density limits the movement of plants and animals.

Just as plants thrive (breathe, drink, and move) in healthy soil, full of abundant and diverse life, so do people thrive in healthy culture where, spiritually, they can breathe, drink, and move. In airless, God-deprived secular cultures, people desperately seek and long for such healthy culture.

Imagine your parish culture as soil gradually becoming healthy over time. Just as organic matter is needed in the soil to break down nutrients and create air pockets, so do growing numbers of new disciples in the ‘soil’ of your parish create spiritual ‘air pockets’ where people can breathe and receive the spiritual nutrients they need. The water of the Holy Spirit is received into the ground, penetrating deeper and deeper, rather than running off the hard surface of the soil. Space is created, and roots grow deeper.

The transformation of your parish ‘soil’ happens incrementally, and how this happens will be explored in Part 3.

Before turning to consider the “seed” that falls into the soil, it is worth remarking on a spiritual insight from a homily of Cardinal Ratzinger in 1979. Preaching to the German bishops on the verse “My word shall not return to me empty” (Isaiah 55:11), he alluded to an insight from early Church Fathers who spoke of the “maternal mystery of the soil.” As healthy soil gives life, it has a maternal quality, and in the tradition of the Church, Mary has been seen as the fruitful soil of the Church, the mother of disciples and new life (cf. John 19:27).

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“Plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it” (Genesis 1:11)

It is only by the seeds that are sown in the soil that plants take root. Pope Benedict XVI reflects deeply on the reality of the seed noting that, “[Jesus] is the seed that bears fruit through the centuries, the fruitful answer in which God’s speech has taken living root in this world.”¹⁴

Mary is the first disciple, the one who shows us what happens in healthy soil when the word of the seed falls upon it.

In Ratzinger’s words, “The mystery of Mary means precisely that God’s word did not remain alone; rather, it assimilated the other – the soil – into itself, became man in the ‘soil’ of his Mother, and then, fused with the soil of the whole of humanity, returned to God in a new form.”

Ratzinger finds that an extraordinary reality in nature finds a parallel in the spiritual realm. The plant that grows in the earth is the result of a dynamic interpenetration of soil and seed, resulting in a new reality. “...The seed actually sinks into the earth, assimilates the earth’s energies, and changes them into itself,” he notes. “It thus brings about something truly new, for now it carries the earth in itself and turns the earth into fruit.”

In the spiritual realm, Jesus the seed sinks into the “earth” of people’s lives in your parish. The power flowing from his Paschal Mystery takes the “earth” of a person’s life into his own reality. It changes the person’s life into something new, and at the same time, in that person’s humanity is a new re-presentation of Christ, he or she reveals him anew in an utterly unrepeatable way.

Disciples in your parish who receive the “word” or “seed” of Jesus assimilate it into themselves and are transformed. They become “a word formed by the penetration of the Word”. Like the “plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it” (v12), they bear the “seed” of Jesus within them to be planted in others they meet. Planted in the “soil” of the parish, these “seeds” or “words” generate new life in other disciples: other parts of the “earth” are transformed by the “seed” falling into it.

The model of Mary’s discipleship shows us that the seed of Jesus taking root in the soil of a person’s heart is only the beginning of discipleship. There is a long transformation ahead where each disciple is invited to be soil that is completely available to the Lord, who transforms us to be fruit-bearing in the earth of the Church. Ratzinger writes,

“To be soil for the Word means that the soil must allow itself to be absorbed by the seed, to be assimilated by the seed, to surrender itself for the sake of transforming

¹⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “*My word shall not return to me empty!*” Homily preached at the opening liturgy of the spring plenum of the German Bishops’ Conference in Stapelfeld, Germany, March 6, 1979.

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the seed into life. Mary's maternity means that she willingly places her own substance, body, and soul, into the seed so that new life can grow. When Luke says that a sword shall pierce her soul (Lk 2:35), he means much more than some kind of torment. He means something much more profound and much greater: Mary makes herself entirely available as soil; she lets herself be used [*brauchen*] and used up, in order to be transformed into the One who needs [*braucht*] us in order to become the fruit of the earth.”

The Soil Needs to be Renewed

When we consider the realities of Part 1 in the light of this reflection on the seed and the soil, we realise just how unprepared is the soil for the reception of the seed in recent decades. We have underestimated the profound impact of the cultural realities in our parishes – the fear of evangelisation, the insider mentalities, the busyness – that have acidified the soil, rendering it incapable of receiving the seed. It is dense, hard, dry, and solid. When the rain of the Holy Spirit falls, it flows off the hard, dry surface.

It is clear that the soil needs to be loosened, for air and water to flow through it before it can be fit to receive the seed.

The Church calls this process, pre-evangelisation. It is the stage of evangelisation that precedes the initial proclamation of the Gospel message.

Pre-evangelisation is where the Church (that is us!) “...draws near to all humanity with attitudes of solidarity, fellowship, and dialogue, thus bearing witness to the Christians’ newness of life, so that those who meet them may be prompted to wonder about the meaning of life and the reasons for their brotherhood and hope” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 31). It is a time of witness which,

“...involves openness of heart, the capacity for dialogue and for relationships of reciprocity, the willingness to recognise the signs of goodness and of God's presence in the people one meets. God, in fact, comes towards us from within the very hearts of those to whom the Gospel is communicated: he is always the first to arrive. Recognition of the primacy of grace is fundamental in evangelisation, right from the first moment. The disciples of Jesus, therefore, sharing life with all, bear witness even without words to the joy of the Gospel that elicits questions. Witness, which is also expressed as respectful dialogue, at the appropriate time, becomes proclamation” (GDC, 33).

What do solidarity, fellowship, dialogue, witness look like in your parish? These are the activities that prepare the soil. We will consider the more practical implications in part 3, but for now, we offer a framework in which we understand the process in which a person matures as a disciple of Christ.

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Remember in part 1 the most deeply-held assumption driving Catholic parishes:
*That if your behaviour conforms to the way everyone else in our parish behaves...
...then you must also share our beliefs...
...and if you share our beliefs, then you belong here.*

We have seen how antithetical this is to disciple-making. Instead, we propose the following framework for disciple-making in the 21st century:

Belonging – Believing – Behaving

Belonging is the process by which the soil is prepared through all the activities described above. *Belonging* is for the purpose of *Believing* (when the person hears and accepts for him or herself the Gospel message) which is for the purpose of *Behaving* (maturing into a fully-fledged disciple of Jesus Christ).

The Soil – Seed – Fruit Cycle

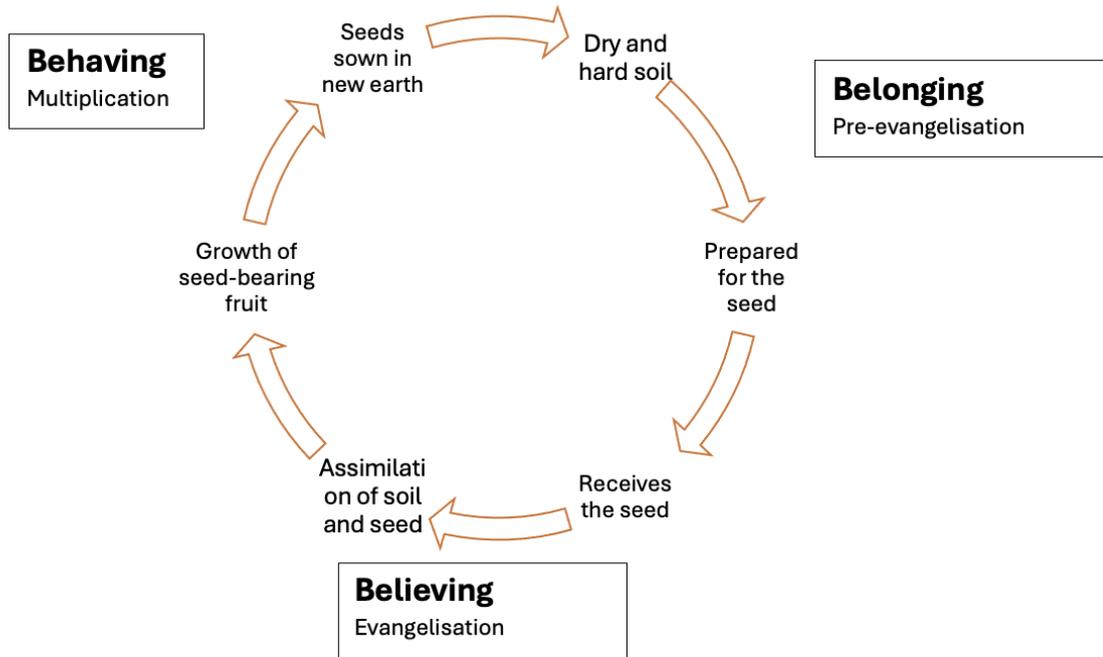
There is an ongoing relationship between soil and seed – the human heart and Jesus – which is the work of evangelisation (belonging – believing – behaving). It is progressive and does not happen in one instant. As the soil is assimilated into the seed, not only is the soil transformed, but new plants grow, themselves growing seed-bearing fruit. The seeds of this fruit fall into new earth – these seeds themselves transform new soil.

A *disciple* is one who makes a personal decision to live under the saving sovereignty of Christ (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 46). A *multiplier disciple* is one sent to others: “A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others” (EG, 272). They know that, “My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing” (EG, 273).

We can identify stages through which a person eventually becomes a *multiplier disciple* – that is, one who, like Mary, has placed their whole substance – body and soul – into Jesus the seed so that new life can grow. A multiplier disciple is one who is available to be used by the Lord and “used up”, “transformed into the One who needs us in order to become the fruit of the earth.”

What are the stages through which a person moves from “dry soil” to “seed-bearing fruit”?

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Fr James Mallon notes in *Divine Renovation* that, “The Church is at her best when she experiences this kind of cycle. She evangelizes and makes disciples and sends them out as missionaries to go and evangelize, to make more disciples who can be baptized and taught, and eventually sent out.”¹⁵

We will see that this is the cycle taking place in which a person becomes a multiplying disciple.

Belonging – The Soil is Tilled

The soil is prepared for the reception of the seed (pre-evangelisation).

Believing – The Seed is Planted

The seed takes root in the soil (evangelisation).

Think for a moment about the long and gradual journey this person has engaged in before being ready to hear the Gospel message!

¹⁵ Divine Renovation, p. 25.

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There is an enormous amount of spiritual work that has been taking place in the person's heart. That spiritual work needs a great deal of accompaniment from Christians: witness, prayer, conversation, service, and friendship.

And yet, how quick we are to engage people immediately in our catechetical programs! We tend to treat programs like a 'one size fits all' when they can in fact endanger the early preparation of the "soil" for the "seed".

The fourth threshold of conversion is the moment when a person is truly thirsty for the Gospel message, and so we shall consider this proclamation before returning to the fifth threshold of conversion.

Sowing the Seed: What must be proclaimed?

We have recalled Pope Paul VI's words in Part 1 that, "There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed." (EN, 22)

In Fr James Mallon's words, "we must avoid the temptation of thinking that the witness of our lives alone is sufficient to evangelize."¹⁶

To this point, we have considered how a person's heart becomes ready to receive and be progressively transformed by the "seed" or Word. But here, we ask what the seed or Word precisely is.

Pope Paul VI specifies "the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus" in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. We summarise this reality in the Greek word, *kerygma*. Kerygma is defined by John Paul II as, "the initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and brought to the decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith" (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 25).

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul reflects on the need to call on the Lord to be saved, but then asks himself,

"But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (Romans 10:14)

We might ask these questions with urgency of so many in our neighborhoods whose hearts would be open to the message of Jesus, if only they had someone to tell them!

From earliest Christianity, Christ has been *proclaimed with words*. In the Acts of Apostles, the apostle Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch who is reading the Old Testament

¹⁶ Divine Renovation, p. 29.

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scriptures. He doesn't understand what he is reading (Acts 8:31) and invites Philip to explain to him:

“Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:35-38).

Contained within the *kerygma* is the whole reality of revelation. The Ethiopian eunuch heard the *kerygma* – not the entire unfolding of revelation – and this was enough to “overwhelm” him and “bring him to the decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith” (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 25). It is enough for him to receive the saving grace of Baptism.

As the seed assimilates into the soil of a person's heart and gradually transforms their humanity, the full implications of the *kerygma* unfold.

The Church's wisdom since earliest Christianity has been to proclaim first the essential kernel of the Gospel message to the spiritually seeking, before allowing this essential kernel to unfold: subsequent catechesis reveals its full implications.

In other words, when we speak of sowing the seed, we are focussed here just on the initial proclamation, or the *kerygma*, in which all the other truths are contained.

In 1979, John Paul II described this interplay between the initial proclamation and the unfolding catechesis that follows it: “through catechesis the Gospel *kerygma* (the initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and brought to the decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith) is gradually deepened, developed in its implicit consequences, explained in language that includes an appeal to reason, and channeled towards Christian practice in the Church and the world (*Catechesis Tradendae*, 25).

Pope Francis has emphasized, too, that,

“We must not think that in catechesis the *kerygma* gives way to a supposedly more “solid” formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful, and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the *kerygma*, which is reflected in and constantly illumines, the work of catechesis, thereby enabling us to understand more fully the significance of every subject which the latter treats. It is the message capable of responding to the desire for the infinite which abides in every human heart. The centrality of the *kerygma* calls for stressing those elements which are most needed today: it has to express God's saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part; it should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy,

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encouragement, liveliness and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at times more philosophical than evangelical. All this demands on the part of the evangelizer certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 165).

The characteristics of the *kerygma* outlined here will be a helpful measure for us to evaluate the initial proclamation in our parishes: Is the proclamation marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness, and harmonious balance? Does it appeal to freedom? Do we embody approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, warmth, and welcome?

Three Examples of the Kerygma

Every person will proclaim the kerygma differently, and yet the truths proclaimed are the same. Here are three examples:

1) St Peter’s speech at Solomon’s Portico (Acts 3)

“When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Acts 3:12-21)

2) The Five Act Drama (Bishop Robert Barron)¹⁷

Bishop Barron summarizes the parts of the *kerygma* from Creation to the Church in five acts.

Act 1: Creation – God made the world and everything in it and found it good. We are meant to be in right relationship with Creation, with each other, and with God.

Act 2: The Fall – Something went wrong. Through a prideful and fearful grasp at divinity, we caused brokenness and division in the world.

Act 3: God Forms a Special People – God forms a special people to share the light of God with all nations and to draw all people back into righteousness and harmony. God creates a covenant with Israel and gives them his law by which they should live and leaders to guide

¹⁷ See more here: <https://www.wordonfire.org/videos/sermons/the-five-act-drama/>

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them. However, they fail again and again to live up to their identity and purpose. They did not fulfill their mission to re-gather all people to God.

Act 4: God Becomes Man – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16). God sends his only Son Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the law. What was lost in the Fall is now restored in Jesus. God becomes man so that man can become God. How? By conquering the darkness of the world on the Cross.

Act 5: The Emergence of the Church – The Holy Spirit at Pentecost makes the apostles into Christ’s mystical body, how Christ’s salvation will be carried to all people. As baptized Christians, we participate in this mission. It is integral to our baptismal call and is how we participate in the Great Story.

Read through St Peter’s speech again and see if you can identify each of the five acts in what he shares.

3) The Ultimate Relationship (Catholic Christian Outreach)¹⁸

The third example, rather than using the perspective of salvation history (the Great Story), uses the perspective of my own experience (my story) through which salvation history is revealed. Both objective and subjective perspectives are needed when we share the *kerygma* with someone.

1. We are created for relationship
2. Our relationship is broken
3. Our broken relationship can be restored
4. Jesus restores our relationship
5. We can experience this restored relationship
6. Jesus desires to be at the center of your life
7. Would you like to invite Jesus to be at the center of your life?
8. Seal that commitment through Reconciliation.

The Kerygma Leads to a Decision

It should be clear from the first and third examples of the kerygma that the whole purpose of proclaiming the kerygma is to *bring a person to a decision to entrust him or herself to Jesus Christ by faith*. This leads us to the fifth threshold of conversion.

Behaving – The Fruit Ripens

The life of the new disciple is transformed by the seed. Fruit is produced, which bears seed for others (multiplication).

¹⁸ See more here: <https://cco.ca/resources/ultimate-relationship/>

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“The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.” Genesis 1:12

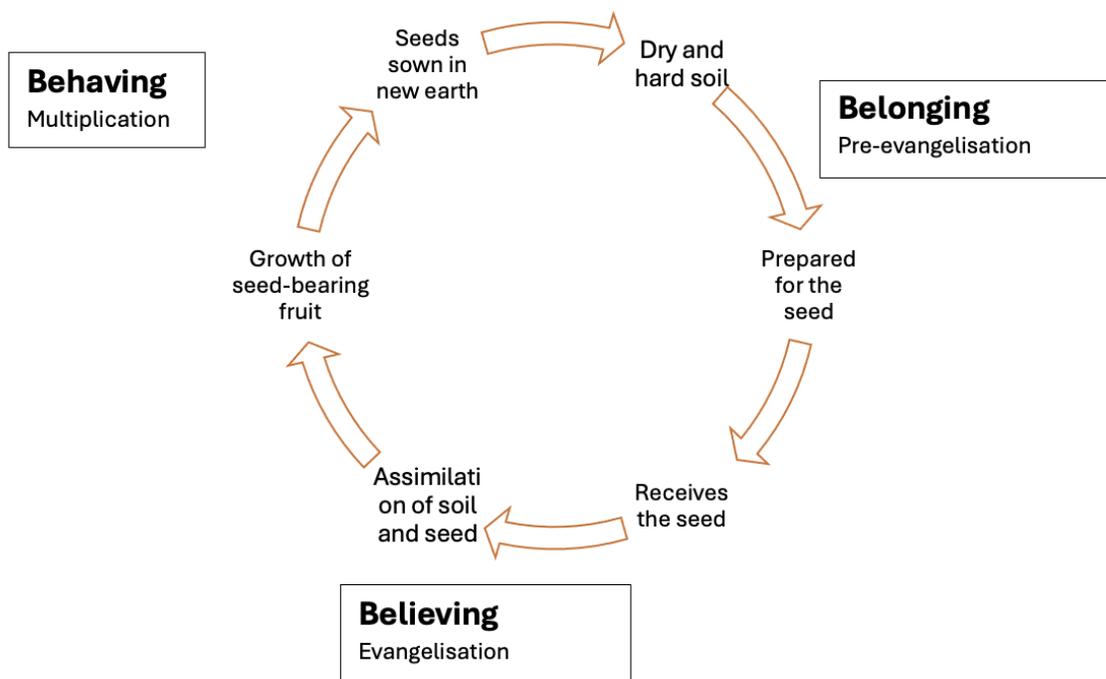
Let’s make no mistake. You will only see a changed parish when you start seeing changed lives. A parish is *missional* when it is full of *missionary disciples* – individuals who have encountered God and allowed him to change their lives. We can invest time in learning from the best of leadership principles – and that is good – but healthy leadership alone will not change your parish. Your parish may operate at a higher level of maintenance, but it will not be missional. The three keys of parish renewal are all needed together.

There is so much at stake. Fr James Mallon expresses it in this way,

“We must rediscover our identity and place the heart of the Lord’s mandate for his Church at the heart of everything we do, so that at the heart of every parish there will be a community of growing, maturing believers who are committed to a lifelong process of disciplined learning, who are discovering their God-given talents, who are prepared to serve and eventually become apostles.”¹⁹

There is a deep interconnection between people coming alive in Christ, and your parish coming alive.

In fact, the interconnection is so close that, just as the Soil – Seed – Fruit cycle can be seen in the transformation of a single person, so can it be seen in the transformation of a parish.



¹⁹ Divine Renovation, p. 23.

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One individual's life changing will not profoundly impact the culture in your parish, but 20 people's lives changing will. As the number of people who have experienced a transforming encounter with the Lord grows, so the culture of the parish starts to feel different.

The Patience of Nurturing New Life

“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.”

James 5:7-8

Of course, we would like to see a transformed parish immediately. Just like a farmer who patiently waits and watches for his crops to grow, so do evangelists, leaders and pastors need to develop patience, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, for new disciples to be formed.

Throughout their growth as a disciple, a person most of all needs an accompanier, someone who will enter what the Church calls the “laboratory of dialogue” (Directory of Catechesis, 53) with them. This person has their good at heart above all and is “able to remove [their] sandals before the sacred ground of the other” (EG, 169).

Accompaniers discover that the journey to discipleship can be slow, that God works imperceptibly in the heart of another, and that the Holy Spirit (not us) is the agent at work, preparing the “soil” in their heart to receive the “seed” of Jesus.

It can feel a little like this in any activity where we are nurturing life. A parent may feel like they are pouring into their child – nurturing their mind, character, virtues, and emotional life – and maybe feeling some days like they see little growth. But when, one day, they catch a glimpse of the fruits of their work, it makes the worry, perseverance, and patience seem worth it.

Nurturing new life that might not even be visible requires self-gift where we are able to put our own desires for speedy transformation aside, to attend more carefully to what the Holy Spirit is doing, to what is most needed by the person, which might be very different from our own ideas, or what we in their shoes would need. St Teresa of Calcutta reminds us that, “The trees, the flowers, the plants grow in silence.” In accompanying others to discipleship, we need patient, pondering, contemplative hearts of silence to perceive what God is doing in someone. Growth can never be forced.

That is why this Day 3 module on evangelisation cannot be viewed independently from Day 1 on missional prayer where we consider the apostolic labouring work of prayer.

This reflection on nurturing disciples has many implications for the renewal of our parishes:

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- Because only the Holy Spirit can bring about a person's conversion, the authentic renewal of our parish goes at the Holy Spirit's pace. While extremely tempting, *there is absolutely nothing to be gained by going at a pace faster than the Holy Spirit.*
- As leaders, we need to invite people into ministry and leadership roles in obedience to what the Holy Spirit is doing in them.

(Read more on the implications in part 3, in the section, 'Introduction to Discipleship Pathways and Culture'.)

To end Part 2, we turn again to the 1979 homily of Cardinal Ratzinger.

“In my opinion, the connection between the mystery of Christ and the mystery of Mary ... is very important in our age of activism, in which the Western mentality has evolved to the extreme.”

We could say that generating groups, programs, and ministries before we have people ready to lead them is *activism*. This ultimately ignores the principle by which true growth is nurtured. He goes on:

“For in today's intellectual climate, only the masculine principle counts. And that means doing, achieving results, actively planning, and producing the world oneself, refusing to wait for anything upon which one would thereby become dependent, relying rather, solely on one's own abilities.”

If we are honest, in our parish renewal efforts, do we find it uncomfortable to be “dependent” on people's authentic growth as disciples?

“It is, I believe, no coincidence, given our Western, masculine mentality, that we have increasingly separated Christ from his Mother, without grasping that Mary's motherhood might have some significance for theology and faith. This attitude characterizes our whole approach to the Church. We treat the Church almost like some technological device that we plan and make with enormous cleverness and expenditure of energy. Then we are surprised when we experience the truth of what Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort once remarked, paraphrasing the words of the prophet Haggai, when he said, ‘You do much, but nothing comes of it’ (Hag 1:6)! When making becomes autonomous, the things we cannot make but that are alive and need time to mature can no longer survive.”

Have we found ourselves at doing “doing much”, from which little comes? Cardinal Ratzinger concludes,

“What we need, then, is to abandon this one-sided, Western activist outlook, lest we degrade the Church to a product of our creation and design. The Church is not a manufactured item; she is, rather, the living seed of God that must be allowed to grow

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and ripen. This is why the Church needs the Marian mystery; this is why the Church herself is a Marian mystery. There can be fruitfulness in the Church only when she has this character, when she becomes holy soil for the Word. We must retrieve the symbol of the fruitful soil; we must once more become waiting, inwardly recollected people who in the depth of prayer, longing, and faith give the Word room to grow.”

How can you, as a parish leader, make space for the “maternal” reality of evangelising? How can our parish become a place of fruitful, Marian soil, where life is nurtured and silently, slowly grows? How can we form ourselves as waiting, praying, longing companions of souls?

Practical Parish Application

Day 3 is concerned both with three essential aspects of evangelisation in your parish:

- **Soil:** Engendering the “belonging” culture where evangelisation can flourish.
- **Seed:** Planting (or replanting) the evangelisation initiative which will proclaim the Gospel, lead a person to “believe”, and, at the same time, cultivate the soil.
- **Fruit:** Helping people in their “behaving” journey as new disciples.

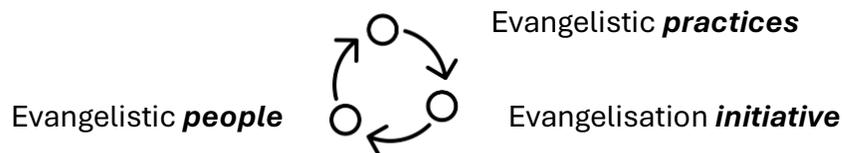
We will consider each of these in turn.

Belonging – The Soil is Tilled

The soil is prepared for the reception of the seed (pre-evangelisation).

How do we transform soil from dry, hard, and lifeless, to soil that is prepared for the seed? How do we loosen it with air and water?

Three interrelated realities contribute towards restoring the culture in your parish to health...



They are all interrelated and eventually all are needed. These factors become a virtuous and interdependent circle.

Some parishes will start by introducing evangelistic practices. Others will start by introducing an evangelistic initiative. Both are valid, but sooner or later, both are needed: the tool needs to be upheld by the practices; the practices need the substance (the kerygma) brought by the evangelisation initiative.

They bring about culture change that happens both ‘outside-in’ and ‘inside-out’.

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‘Outside-in’ culture change is brought about through *evangelistic practices*. People adopt practices and these new patterns of behaviour over time influence and form their interior world, their deeply-held assumptions, and beliefs.

‘Inside-out’ culture change happens through the *evangelisation initiative*. This makes possible an inner, transformational experience that changes a person’s heart, from which starts to flow new, external behaviour. ‘Inside-out’ culture change might also be an intellectual conversion – for example, an eye-opening realisation about what evangelisation means – that, likewise, causes them intentionally to change their patterns of behaviour.

Nothing changes us ‘inside-out’, exposing our deeply-held assumptions more, than intentionally placing ourselves in cultures that are unfamiliar to us.

This is what is happening to parishes all over the world as they go to visit other parishes – perhaps even in different countries – where they are making missionary disciples. They begin to see the possible impact of making evangelisation primary in their parish.

When we place ourselves into a different church context, we begin to see the eccentricities, blind spots, and quirkiness of our home environments – and begin to perceive what others might experience.

Immerse yourself in the culture of a parish where Divine Renovation principles are already bearing a lot of fruit. How does it feel? What is different here from an immersive experience in your own parish? If you are new to Alpha (and even if you’re not!) go to experience it done to a very high standard – maybe at a fruitful non-Catholic church. All of these experiences will start to dislodge your deeply-held assumptions.

Evangelistic Practices Uproot the Anti-Evangelistic ‘Thorns’

We have seen how deeply powerful culture is, and how deeply-held assumptions drive automatic behaviour. Imagine uprooting some of the anti-evangelistic ‘thorns’ we considered in part 1. Imagine what it would look like if a new set of assumptions started driving people’s behaviour at your parish.

- that outsiders are the reason for the parish’s existence...
- that non-churchgoers are even more welcomed and rejoiced over than churchgoers...
- that every element of our parish culture is designed to make a non-churchgoer feel as comfortable as possible...
- that we want people to experience *belonging* at our parish, so that their heart might be ready to *believe* in Jesus, and that they might gradually *become* a multiplying disciple.

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Here are examples of evangelistic practices which will start to impact people's patterns of behaviour and deeply-held assumptions. They will form an environment that is hospitable towards your evangelisation initiative. In a mutually-reinforcing, 'virtuous circle', these evangelistic practices will make your evangelisation initiative even more fruitful.

10 Evangelistic Practices to Renew the 'Soil' of Your Parish's Culture

Evangelistic Practice #1: Missional Prayer. It seems too obvious to state, but that's exactly why we should pay attention to prayer first! If you want to see abundant evangelistic fruit, *begin with missional prayer*. Everything begins and ends with this. If your parish has not yet undertaken the Day 1 module, Missional Prayer, we highly recommend it. Do not set out on evangelistic practices without a deep rooting in intentional, missional prayer for the renewal of the parish!

Evangelistic Practice #2: Name Dropping. "There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed" (EN, 22). Sherry Weddell, in *Forming Intentional Disciples*, encourages Catholics to "drop the name" of Jesus. Referring to him explicitly, speaking of him, talking about parish matters in such a way that the Name of Jesus is intentionally and frequently referenced, is a way to elevate him at the centre of all we do, since his Name is the only one that "contains the presence it signifies."

"...the one name that contains everything is the one that the Son of God received in his incarnation: JESUS. The divine name may not be spoken by human lips, but by assuming our humanity The Word of God hands it over to us and we can invoke it: 'Jesus,' 'YHWH saves.' The name 'Jesus' contains all: God and man and the whole economy of creation and salvation. To pray 'Jesus' is to invoke him and to call him within us. His name is the only one that contains the presence it signifies. Jesus is the Risen One, and whoever invokes the name of Jesus is welcoming the Son of God who loved him and who gave himself up for him" (CCC 2666).

Even speaking the Name of Jesus can carry evangelistic power. It can change the spiritual atmosphere. It can awaken in hearers' hearts curiosity about a relationship with him. To speak of him as a real Person, present with us, interested in us, can break through the atmospheres of cultural Catholicism.

Evangelistic Practice #3: Radical Hospitality: Do you want to make a bold statement that things are changing in your parish? One way to signal this powerfully is an experience of radical hospitality. Giving those who arrive at Sunday Mass a dramatically different experience of being welcomed can be disarming... in a good way! It signals that changes are afoot. Imagine parishioners arriving at church to find a smiling and joyful team of hospitality

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ministers outside the church, engaging them, welcoming them and glad to see them there. They may initially feel perturbed (remember that destabilising deeply-held assumptions releases anxiety!), but they will unmistakably recognise that something different is happening here – and after a few weeks, may actually appreciate it. Hospitality that is radical is different from someone handing you a hymn book as you walk into the church. Radical means going out of our way; it means treating those who arrive as honoured guests. It is a radical way of showing love. In the Day 5 module, Enhance your Sunday Experience, your team can go deeper into what this looks like.

Evangelistic Practice #4: Sharing Testimony. Normalising the sharing of our stories of encounter with Jesus is essential to building evangelistic culture in our parishes. What would it look like to have parishioner testimonies regularly at Sunday Masses? These testimonies are most powerful when they refer directly and clearly to relationship with Jesus, rather than simply belonging to the community of the parish. These testimonies gradually give a clear and concrete picture to parishioners of what it looks like to accept, “by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and become his disciple.” How else can you share testimonies? In the parish’s communications, in other programs? Sharing testimony (relentlessly!) in every sphere possible clearly messages that making disciples is the most important thing we can do. (*See ‘Seven Steps to Get Alpha Going’ below for more ideas on sharing Alpha testimonies in your parish.*)

Evangelistic Practice #5: Calendar and Budget Review. As a team, take your parish calendar from the last month, and your parish credit card statement. How we use time and money will give us the clearest indication of where the ‘anti-evangelistic thorns’ are that need to be uprooted. If you had to estimate, what percentage of parish activities over the last month have directly been evangelistic (e.g., proclaiming the kerygma and drawing people into relationship with Jesus)? What percentage of the parish’s spending has been directly related to evangelisation?

Under this evangelistic practice, one of the most important things you can do is *decide what to stop doing*. Leading your parish into its missional identity involves *stopping* or *reimagining* anti-evangelistic activity, too. This is one of the most challenging but one of the most important practices you will undertake. And perhaps above anything else, it will free up some of the time and money you will need for your new focus on mission.

Evangelistic Practice #6: Preaching. Preaching is one of the best vehicles for shifting the parish into a missional gear. What would it look like to ensure that the kerygma is proclaimed simply and directly in every single homily? What would it look like to invite the congregation to respond concretely over the next week?

The homily is also an opportunity to address those subtle yet pernicious lies that enter the thought-worlds of Catholics. What would it look like to preach clearly Catholic teaching on salvation, enthusing and motivating parishioners that sharing the Gospel, bringing a friend

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to know Jesus, is the most precious and valuable thing they have to share? Where do we subtly reinforce messaging that all or most people are going to heaven anyway? What other subtle demotivators to evangelisation exist in your parish's communications, in what you as a community celebrate or tolerate?

There is much more detail on evangelistic preaching in *Preaching on Purpose*, pages 94-115, which we invite you to read to go into greater depth. We also recommend our preaching workshop for pastors: this opportunity coaches you in evangelistic preaching and helps you embed practices into your parish such as building a coaching team.

Evangelistic Practice #7: Celebrate Invitation and Invite Together. As we explored the manifold reasons why Catholics find it hard to evangelise in part 1, we recognised that it would take much cultural change to make inviting a friend to Alpha as normal behaviour. Like any new habits (especially difficult ones), we need to incentivise them. How can we make this new habit as attractive and light-lifting as possible?

How might we celebrate the new assumptions and values we are trying to introduce? How can we celebrate invitation? Testimonies of parishioners who have been inviting can be shared. We can celebrate taking risks. In other words, what is celebrated is not how many people say yes to an invitation to Alpha, but how many people *are asked*.

At Saint Benedict Parish, Halifax, Fr James Mallon and Ron Huntley cooked dinner for the parishioner who made the most invitations to Alpha. What other ways could you celebrate invitation?

Another way of overcoming the reluctance of Catholics to evangelise is to emphasise doing it together. Like any new habit, you are more likely to do it if those around you are also doing it: social pressure helps us!

What about providing wallet-sized cards with details of Alpha that people can have easy access to in their pocket or bag? The pastor preaching about his own experiences of inviting (positive and negative) will be a powerful statement that we are all in this together. Have a visible reminder in your church of the people who are being prayed for and invited: some churches will dedicate an area to writing the first names of these people visibly so everyone can pray for them. (See 'Seven Steps to Get Alpha Going' below for more ideas on building *invitational culture in your parish*.)

Evangelistic Practice #8: Return to your Vision. Our practices of missional prayer will remind us that as humans we have to constantly "stoke the fires" of our passion and vision. "Vision leaks" – and that is true of ourselves as much as for our congregations. Evangelisation is *hard*, and like any hard thing, we will be frequently tempted to return to what is familiar, like catechesis, or Bible studies. As a team, practise returning to your vision for the parish to come alive. Whose lives will be changed? Who in the neighbourhood will be

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affected? What do you need to do to increase hunger and desire to seek the lost? What signals within you tell you when the fire is starting to go out?

Allow yourself to dream again and see how God is developing and growing your dreams. Dreams never remain static. As you make some progress with a first Alpha, maybe your dream is different or bigger than previously? Make sure you schedule time for personal and collective praying and dreaming – asking God to show us his heart and compassion for our neighbourhoods. Never feel that this time is less productive than time spent executing on tasks.

Evangelistic Practice #9: Review the Externals. What we see and experience is powerfully culture-forming. After all, ‘the medium is the message.’ What does your church porch look like through the eyes of a newcomer? When someone reads your newsletter, is it littered with insider language (“OCIA”, “catechesis”, “exposition”)? How does your website present your parish? What is someone’s experience when they phone, email, or drop into the parish office? Those who are responsible for noticeboards, newsletters, websites, and the parish office are likely entrenched in the deeply-held, insider assumptions of the parish. Undertaking a thorough review with a non-believer’s perspective is critical in the move towards becoming a fresh, engaging, outsider-centred parish.

Evangelistic Practice #10: Review the Five Systems of the Church. As a team, make a list of all the ministries and groups currently taking place in your parish. Now, categorise these ministries and activities according to the five systems of the Church: worship, evangelisation, discipleship, fellowship, and service. What percentage of the activities fall under the heading of evangelisation? What would you *like* that percentage to be?²⁰

Interpenetration of ‘Soil’ and ‘Seed’

You will see from the 10 Evangelistic Practices that there is much interdependency between the practices and the evangelisation initiative. As the seed both absorbs the soil and feeds some of its own essence into the soil, there is a mutual, symbiotic relationship between the two.

Some examples: You need people to have experienced conversion in Alpha in order to share testimonies (practice #4). Radical hospitality becomes more and more possible as more people experience hospitality in Alpha (practice #3). The calendar, the budget, and each of the five systems of the Church will incrementally become aligned with the vision for evangelisation after multiple seasons of Alpha (practices #5 and #10). All of this needs a deeply patient and persistent approach as culture gradually changes over time.

²⁰ See the *Divine Renovation Guidebook*, Chapter 5, for a planning guide according to the five systems of the Church.

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Which comes first, the evangelistic practices or the evangelisation initiative? Both are culture-shaping, so which should you start with?

On the whole, we would recommend starting with the evangelisation initiative. Even if you start with a small group of people, once this group has experienced the radical hospitality, the experience of belonging, new faith in Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, they will be desperate for others to experience this too. A spark will be lit, and they will experience passion to offer radical hospitality in your parish, and to share their testimonies.

But beware... You will soon need evangelistic practices in your parish to support the existence of the evangelisation initiative. The evangelisation initiative will be like a “foreign body” in the culture of your parish. It may be “rejected” by the rest of the system unless you start to build the hospitable environment around it. Parishes have introduced evangelisation initiatives that have gradually fizzled out thanks to this reality. After a few seasons, parishioners get weary. Eventually the tool runs its course and all those in the pews who are interested have attended. Through saturation or disinterest, it fizzles out. It becomes another of those many programs of which parishioners can say, “oh yes, we tried that.” And yet, it has not authentically been “tried”, in its identity as a tool of culture change.

Maybe you are a parish that needs to **Re-Plant** your evangelisation initiative. Only with intentionality and persistence will you build the systems, structures, team, resources, and culture to support the tool and allow it to thrive. But it is possible! It can change your parish into a spectacular, disciple-making, neighbourhood-changing community! There is no better time to start than today!

Believing – The Seed is Planted

The seed takes root in the soil (evangelisation).

We have seen that the evangelisation initiative and the evangelistic practices work symbiotically together. Both are culture-transforming realities. You can't have one without the other.

All our programs in the parish can (and should) be kerygmatic. Yet, not one of these can replace a tool that is solely dedicated to proclaiming the kerygma.

Five Principles for Choosing an Evangelisation Initiative

1. It is designed to be the gateway into parish life.

In our post-Christian milieu, Sunday Mass no longer serves as the ‘gateway’ into the parish. Since earliest Christianity, the Eucharist has been the gathering for fully initiated Christians. Our communities and neighbourhoods are full of people who are spiritually curious yet would be perplexed at a Sunday Mass. Inviting them on a Sunday might not

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be the best evangelistic tactic. But inviting them to an attractive course designed to help them explore the big questions of life could set them off on a spiritual journey.

2. It is attractive to the non-religious, who may be ‘far’ from the Church.

Think about the people you know in the early thresholds of conversation we explored in part 2. We want these people to experience ‘Belonging’ before we invite them to ‘Believe’. Therefore, our evangelisation initiative needs to emphasise hospitality, friendship, and witness before teaching. It needs to feel fun, light-hearted, and friendly. In the words of Nicky Gumbel, “Intensity is not a fruit of the Holy Spirit”!

3. It places evangelisation at the heart of a parish’s identity.

The evangelisation initiative plants the flag of evangelisation in a tangible way in your parish. It declares “this is what we are about”. Everything else is important, but *this* is why we exist. It concretises evangelisation. It shows and tells people, “*This* is what we mean when we speak and preach about evangelisation.” When parishioners start to hear the experiences of conversion and transformation of guests, they will start to *get* it. Without this concretisation, evangelisation remains mysterious and elusive. Being at the heart of parish life, parishioners need to see and experience that the pastor is driving this as the central strategy of the parish’s mission.

4. It attractively proclaims the kerygma.

Review what the *kerygma* is in part 2. The evangelisation initiative does not proclaim or teach the whole Christian faith. It is by definition the first step only. Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa explains, “In the ancient church, there was a clear distinction between the *kerygma* and the *didache* or the catechesis. The *kerygma* was the starting point of faith, and the catechesis was to form the faith, but faith in itself blossoms by hearing the *kerygma*.” In other words, the *kerygma* doesn’t exhaust all teaching and formation in the faith and should be followed by further offerings that continue to form each person in the completeness of the Catholic faith.

5. You place it at the heart of an evangelisation process or discipleship pathway.

Multiple overlapping and complementary kerygmatic experiences are needed to help people become fully-fledged, mature disciples of Christ. The evangelisation initiative is the central and indispensable component... but it cannot be expected to do everything and needs to be complemented and supplemented by other offerings. It will be a number of years before you will be able to build a full pathway of discipleship. But, from the beginning, this is the direction of travel you will likely want to have in mind.

Since the earliest days of Divine Renovation, whenever we have been asked, “What evangelisation initiative do you recommend?” we have consistently answered that, “In our experience, we have not seen an evangelisation initiative that does a better job than Alpha.” If another tool appeared and we saw the unchurched being more powerfully evangelised by

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this tool than by Alpha, we would start pointing it out to parishes. But for now, nothing beats Alpha in our eyes.

Fr James Mallon says, “Alpha is not a silver bullet; it’s a tool. When used as part of a larger pastoral strategy, it is the best tool that I’ve found for jump-starting and sustaining parish renewal.”

Why does Alpha work? ²¹

Analysing why Alpha is such a powerful tool, we have boiled it down to three main reasons.

- **Alpha is aimed at the non-believing, curious seeker.** It helps Catholic parishes reach the non-religious person, not just the fallen away Catholic. Bishop Eduardo Nevares comments, “Alpha provides a warm, welcoming environment where people can grapple with the deep questions of life: where do I come from; what difference can I make; where am I going; how can I find my purpose and meaning for my life, etc.? Since these questions are human questions, all people are welcomed.” Reaching out to those who are far from the Church is a fruitful evangelistic strategy. When you reach out further to the non-believer, you simultaneously draw in the fallen away Catholic too (who, after all, is asking themselves many of these same ‘human’ questions as the non-believer). You at the same time evangelize the pew-sitting Catholics!
- **Alpha models for Catholics how to have few (if any) assumptions about a person’s current spiritual experience, beliefs, or desire to join the Catholic Church.** Our exploration of the thresholds of conversion in part 2 revealed that we can ‘never accept a label in the place of a story.’ The most experienced evangelists *assume nothing* about a person’s beliefs or value-system. Alpha trains Catholics in these evangelistic stances. It encourages listening, open questions, curiosity, non-judgmentalism, and above all, *trains us to resist the urge to teach!* Alpha hosts soon become proficient at making use of the question, “That’s interesting. What does everyone else think?”
- **Alpha offers the best practical tools and training to help parishioners actually evangelise.** The training in hospitality, prayer and hosting small group conversation creates a powerful microcosm at the heart of the parish. It forms a micro-community through which parishioners can start to imagine concretely what this could look like when multiplied throughout the parish community. The evangelistic muscles that the Alpha team starts to build become reflexes that they can use in daily life, to talk to those in their lives about life and faith, and eventually, invite them to come to know Jesus.

²¹ Read *Unlocking Your Parish*, by Fr James Mallon and Ron Huntley, Chapter 2 for a deeper account about how Alpha works so successfully in the Catholic parish context.

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Seven Steps to Get Alpha Going

Based on experience of thousands of Catholic parishes introducing Alpha as their evangelisation initiative, here are Alpha and Divine Renovation's seven steps to get Alpha going.

1. Experience Alpha yourselves first

If nobody on your team has experienced Alpha before it is a good idea to try Alpha yourselves as guests before launching it in your parish. There are two ways you can do this:

- Go and try Alpha in another church that is running Alpha well. This can be either another Catholic parish or another Christian church who model a good quality Alpha. Many parishes try this option when getting started. This means you'll get the full guest experience and will be able to see things from the guests' perspective. If you go for this option, please contact your National Alpha Office for recommendations of where to try Alpha.
- Run an internal Alpha Pilot with people from the parish. At Fr James Mallon's parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Dartmouth, they call it 'A Taste of Alpha'. They strongly emphasize to the parishioners each week that *this is not really Alpha*. Only when guests come seeking to explore faith for themselves is Alpha truly taking place. But a pilot is often a way of helping you identify who might be good people to ask onto the Alpha team when you start your Alpha for real (with guests who don't go to church! More about that shortly).

2. Place Alpha as your primary engine for evangelization

For Alpha to bear long-lasting fruit and be sustainable over time it is essential that you make it **the** evangelisation initiative. It cannot be one program among many, it must be the central plank of your evangelization strategy. We would recommend running Alpha twice a year so you can build invitational momentum and embed the importance of Alpha in your parish's mission of evangelization. This vision will need to be communicated clearly and regularly by those in leadership so that everyone in the parish is clear about what your priorities are as a community. This is where the role of the priest, and the function of preaching (see Evangelistic Practices above) is critical. We would recommend preaching on evangelization several times a year, especially in the weeks leading up to the launch of Alpha. More on this in a moment.

Aim at non-churchgoers: Another essential element in placing Alpha as your primary engine for evangelization is to aim your Alpha *primarily* at those who don't go to church. To be clear when we say 'non-churchgoers' we mean anyone who doesn't go to church! The

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temptation for many parishes is to start by inviting parishioners to Alpha with a view to renewing the parish first, before being able to go out and reach those who don't go to church. We know from listening to many parishes' experiences that it is much more difficult to reach those outside if you start only with parishioners. As mentioned earlier, some parishes will do this when running an 'Alpha pilot' to help them identify people who could be the initial Alpha team, but when you come to run Alpha for real, focus it right from the beginning on reaching those who don't go to church. Invite strategically! Do you know a non-churchgoer with a great gift for influencing others? Imagine what an impact they could make as an evangelist if they encounter the Lord!

In practice, you may still get (you probably will get) most guests who will be parishioners, but even if you only get one person on your Alpha who doesn't normally go to church that will be a win. It will be a win because that person will know other people who don't go to church who can be invited to come on your next Alpha and so on it goes...

No 'Alpha-holics'! To help the process of inviting new guests on each Alpha be sure to only allow people to be a guest once. If you allow guests to come back again and again on Alpha, they become what we call 'Alpha-holics': they take up the space of others who could be exploring faith on Alpha. So, only allow people to be a guest once, but remember that they can come back to serve on the team lots of times. We'll say more about this shortly when we look at team building, but that's an important principle to grasp at this stage.

Invitational Culture:²² How do we get people to come on Alpha? In many parishes a very small number of people are prepared to invite in practice, and the vast majority rely on them heavily. What could we achieve if we mobilized the other 80%?

The short answer is its hard work. In Evangelistic Practice #7 above, we spoke about the importance of celebrating invitation and inviting together. With a good plan and a consistent approach, you can begin to see remarkable change. Here are the **4 'Ts'** to help you build invitational culture in the parish:

Teaching. Teach regularly during the Sunday homily about invitation. Your people need to see that Alpha really matters and it isn't just another option in your marketplace of programs. Teach from the Sunday Mass readings about invitation: there are so many accounts in the gospels of friends bringing friends to Jesus.

Our research shows that: 95% of guests on Alpha are personally invited and brought, roughly 1/6 invitations are successful, and the number one reason guests decline an invite is they don't know clearly what will happen at Alpha. This gives your people a clear picture of the need to make invitation their own responsibility, and not assume that posters or social media is doing it for them.

²² Read *Unlocking Your Parish*, Chapter 8, for further ideas on building an invitational culture to invite people to Alpha.

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Testimonies. What we celebrate, we will replicate. Many parishes tell stories from Alpha on Sundays at least twice a year, emphasizing the beauty of life-change and encounters with Jesus. If you can't find anyone, see many video stories you can access via the 'My Alpha' page, or reach out to your National Alpha Office. Stories have an amazing capacity to build faith.

Avoid intensity and Christian jargon and interview someone who can tell their story reasonably well with these questions:

1. What was your faith like/Would you have called yourself a Christian before Alpha?
2. What was your experience of Alpha like?
3. ***What difference has Jesus made in your life?*** (This is the most important question of them all!)

Tools. There are many promotional tools available to support invitation. The key is to remember that these support and raise awareness, but they don't do the inviting. On 'My Alpha' under 'Promote', and on the Alpha Shop, you can get fresh outdoor banners, indoor posters, postcards, business cards, pop-up banners, social media, and video content. Why don't you make a Hub in the church foyer where you can display this stuff year-round?

Time. It will be clear beyond doubt by this stage that changing a culture takes time. Nicky Gumbel often says Alpha will start to feel like Alpha the 9th time you run, which is in year 3 or 4. This is because it's like a bicycle, you must pedal to find some momentum, even if you initially have a very small Alpha. Don't pull back! Stay on the bike. Don't plan one single Alpha like an event; rather, figure out how you can sustainably run twice a year, every year. It's like a snowball – even a small number of guests can become amazing inviters, and great team members, who generate more guests, and so on...

3. Power your Alpha with Prayer

Alpha is designed to fail unless God shows up, so you need to surround your Alpha with intercessory prayer. First of all, commit to praying for Alpha yourself as an individual team member in your daily prayer. Commit to praying for each of the guests in your small group, at least on every day that Alpha is running.

Pray as a Team: It is crucial to pray together as a team before each session of Alpha, so be sure to gather together once you're all set up for the session to spend some time in prayer for the session that is about to take place. There are some helpful weekly team briefing

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videos available through the 'My Alpha' website which can help with focussing your prayer intentions each week.

Pray as a Parish: Prayer doesn't stop with the Alpha team though; you need the whole parish to get behind you in prayer. So, engage your congregation, release as many people in the parish to pray as possible. Invite every group that meets in the parish to pray for Alpha: the Rosary group, Mother's group, Altar Servers, Knights of St Columba etc.

Alpha's 11:02 prayer campaign draws on the prayer of Jesus in Luke 11:2 "Your kingdom come." Parishioners make a habit of setting an alarm at 11:02 every day to pray. A simple prayer card is available, enabling parishioners to think of three people they'd like to invite to Alpha and encouraging them to pray for them for 21 days before Alpha launches. They can then invite them to Alpha knowing that they have surrounded each person in prayer, and regardless of their response, the prayer has blessed them in some way. The 11.02 prayer cards are available on 'My Alpha' and are a great way to mobilise the whole congregation to pray. Everybody gets to play a part with Alpha!

Intercessory prayer team: Finally, many parishes have a specific group of people who gather to pray for Alpha each week while Alpha is running. One parish we heard of ran Alpha in their parish hall while next door in the church a group gathered in front of the Tabernacle to intercede for Alpha for one hour. This made a huge difference to the Alpha team who felt greatly supported by the prayers. *(See more ideas for Missional Prayer in the Genesis Compass Day 1 module.)*

4. Gather your Dream Team

Getting the right people on your Alpha team is vital to the success of your Alpha. Let's have a look at some of the essentials for building your team:

Training: This might seem obvious but be sure to train your team *every time you run Alpha*. Even if you have team members who have been trained before, encourage them to come back for training. There's always something new to learn and they can also share their experience with new team members. There are two training videos available through 'My Alpha': one on hosting small groups, which we'd suggest you run about a week or two before you start Alpha; the other on prayer ministry which we suggest you run about a week or so before your Alpha Day.

Your National Alpha Offices will also run a number of training events during the year in your country/region, so connect with them for more information about upcoming events so you can keep your team well trained and in touch with the latest resources from Alpha.

Hosts and helpers: Hosts and helpers make the Alpha small groups rise or fall. They are there to enable the guests to feel welcome and to have great conversations. Hosts will say

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very little in small group discussion time on Alpha, they will be good listeners and will ask questions to draw out conversation from the guests. Helpers will be very engaged as guests arrive with welcoming and making sure the guests have food and are settling into the group. Once discussion time comes, the helpers will say nothing unless the host draws them into the conversation. The helper staying silent is intentional so that they can model that it is OK to say nothing in a small group, which will encourage quieter guests. Even more importantly though, helpers can be quietly praying for the guests that their hearts will be opened to the Alpha talks and to the conversation in the small group.

You might be thinking, ‘how do I know if somebody is right for the role of host/helper?’ A simple question to ask to help you discern whether somebody is the right fit for the role of host or helper in a small group is, ‘would I want to leave my best non-Christian/churchgoing friend with this person?’ If the answer is ‘no’ then that person is probably not right to be a host or helper, but they may be able to serve in some other way where their strengths could be of greater help.

MC: Deciding on your MC(s) follows a similar process to deciding on host and helpers. You need to have the right people in the role. It might work best to have two people together, a male and a female, to share the MC role each week. You need people who are confident enough to stand in front of people and speak and be well prepared before each session. The MC needs to formally welcome people from the front each week and to know what they need to share. It’s also really important that they are good (enough) at cracking the obligatory Alpha joke! This doesn’t mean they have to be particularly extroverted or even experienced at MC-ing, just that they will be relaxed and able to help keep the Alpha session moving smoothly.

Tech: The question you need to ask yourself with the tech role is, ‘who is comfortable to ensure tech is set up and running well during the session?’ Even if your Alpha is smaller, for example, or if you run an Alpha during the day for a smaller group of people, you still need to ensure you have somebody on hand who is confident with the tech set up e.g., laptop, Alpha videos downloaded, wi-fi working, projection and sound system.

Hospitality: This is one of the key elements of Alpha, so much so that we will address it in more detail in a moment. For now, it is important to say that getting the right people for hospitality is vital. Of course, everyone on team is responsible for hospitality, but it is good to have a dedicated person/team ensuring that the space you’re using for Alpha looks welcoming and is comfortable for guests. Many parishes also have a team of people overseeing the food preparation and serving who also then take care of washing and clearing of dishes. However you approach it, be sure to have at least one person who is taking the lead on making the environment look good and the food simple but good quality.

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Leadership Pipeline:²³ Finally, you want to be on the lookout for future team members. In your small groups you will get to know the guests over the weeks of Alpha and from about week 6 onwards you will have a good idea of who might be good to invite onto the Alpha team the next time you run it. This is an essential part of developing a leadership pipeline on Alpha. Use the rule of thumb mentioned above when discerning who would be good to invite, would they work well with your best non-Christian/churchgoing friend? If that person is not yet Christian (not baptised) or has just returned to the Church after a long time then it is probably best that they come back as a helper next time. Once they have a little more grounding in living a Christian life then it will be appropriate for them to become a host. While we use our own pastoral judgment, it is important to beware of rushing newly forming Christians into more responsible leadership roles too soon as this could cause problems pastorally both for them and for those they'd be in a group with. You will want to keep this process of team building and leadership development going for every Alpha you run. Keep your best people on your Alpha team for as long as possible, until they have replaced themselves with other great leaders. They can then move on to other areas on the parish's life and continue to grow their leadership capacity.

5. *Belong before Believe*

We've seen how important the Belong – Believe – Behave paradigm is for evangelisation. This is why hospitality is so important for Alpha to thrive: hospitality is key to giving people an experience of belonging before they will even consider believing (let alone changing their lifestyle!). This is why hospitality is not just a role somebody has, but a culture you are developing through your Alpha. You will still need to find someone whose job it is to make the space where you host your Alpha feel warm and comfortable, but view that role from the wider perspective of developing a welcoming and hospitable space in the parish.

Food: On Alpha there is a high emphasis placed on gathering around food at the beginning of each Alpha session. This reflects the culture of hospitality you are trying to build in the parish. It is so important that we should insist on not skipping this part (as some parishes are tempted to do!). The food doesn't have to be fancy or expensive and you will know better than us what will work in your context. Whether you have a full meal, cake or popcorn, keep the food simple but good quality. If you feed people good stuff they are more likely to come back!

None of this has been invented by Alpha (or Divine Renovation!) but is straight out of the Scriptures. How many times in the Scriptures do we see significant moments accompanied by a meal? Think of Abraham entertaining three special guests in Genesis, or the Passover meal in the Exodus from Egypt. The epitome of this is Jesus in the Gospels, who shared a table with those whom others wouldn't want to spend any time with. Many of those 'outcasts' became disciples and look at where the Scriptures end – with a wedding banquet

²³ Read *Unlocking your Parish*, Chapter 5, for how Alpha can help you build leadership pipelines in your parish.

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in the Book of Revelation! So, food is a crucial part of helping people to belong on your Alpha, and hopefully then after Alpha in your parish.

6. Prioritize Encounter²⁴

If Alpha is about anything, it is about encounter with God. The very heart of Alpha is enabling people to experience an encounter with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – which leads them to decision about whether to follow Jesus. A culture of encounter is built on a theology of manifest presence. We believe in God’s omnipresence, but also that in certain places, at certain times, his presence is felt in a special way that transforms lives. It’s an encounter with transforming presence that we long for guests to experience.

There are three main ways you can create that kind of space.

Worship: You will be the best judge of your own context for this, but as a general principle introduce worship music gradually. You could start with a performance musician on the launch night and build over several weeks to having some led praise and worship from the front. With a small group, it may feel too intimate or intense, so do use music in a way that feels natural.

Alpha Day or Weekend Away: The Alpha Day is a non-negotiable! If you don’t do the Alpha Day and you don’t have prayer ministry on your Alpha Day, you have not done Alpha. It is that important! This is a great opportunity to go away for the day with your Alpha guests and team and spend more quality time together. Ensure this is pre-planned as a priority moment on the course. If you desire to see the supernatural things of God you must ensure you create spaces for encounter. So: Book the date! Book the venue! Book the team!

The heart behind time away for the Holy Spirit teaching sessions on Alpha is to create room for response and to have an opportunity to pray for your guests. You should be ready with an appropriate ministry time planned either as a whole group or in small groups following the talk ‘How Can I be Filled with the Holy Spirit?’ As we’ve already mentioned, be sure to train your team for prayer ministry using the second team training video available on ‘My Alpha’. For more help with training and growing in confidence with prayer ministry, connect with your National Alpha team, they will be happy to support you.

Getting people to come involves good timing. Ask too soon and you sound like a cult. Wait too long and people can’t put it in their diary. Normally introducing the idea of the day away around week 3 is sensible and you could ask people in your small group who you already know are coming if they’re in – this creates the impression everyone is coming.

²⁴ Read more in *Unlocking your Parish*, Chapter 9.

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Healing:²⁵ The session ‘Does God Heal Today?’ is another powerful moment for encounter on Alpha. In this session, instead of having the usual small group discussion after the Alpha talk there is the opportunity to pray with guests specifically for physical healing, but also to just pray with guests for whatever they might need. It is also a great way to pray with any guests who couldn’t make the Alpha Day. So again, don’t miss this out!

This session also involves your Alpha team praying in advance to see if God wants to reveal anything to them to pray for the guests. This are often referred to as receiving ‘words of knowledge’. We don’t have the scope here to go into this in detail now, but there is extra training and help available from your National Alpha team to help you grow in confidence in this area. In the meantime, ask your team to pray through the week beforehand and ask for words of knowledge. If any of the guests responds to those, lay hands on them, and pray for their healing.

7. Have a plan for what happens after Alpha – build the operating system.

The most important thing you can do as a parish to help people to grow after Alpha is to intentionally normalise lifelong discipleship formation. This can take lots of forms – groups, praise and worship events, one-to-one meet ups – but the key thing is to plan ahead and not to kill yourselves trying to do everything at once.

Keep Alpha Rolling: The temptation is to take your foot off the gas with Alpha in order to set up discipleship focussed groups, but this can negatively impact your overall parish renewal. Alpha is the pump for that renewal, so keep the pump going and don’t try to move to setting up post-Alpha groups too quickly. You need to be realistic about how many leaders you will need for subsequent groups, and it takes time to build leaders up.

Individual Pathways and Events: It is important to emphasize that people need to take personal responsibility for their own formation after Alpha, even when you are in a position to set up parish groups. There are multiple resources available to help guests to keep praying and reading the Bible after Alpha, so be sure to encourage them to pursue those. Hosting praise and worship nights with a social element afterwards once every term or every 6 weeks might also be an option while you are building capacity for parish groups and there is nothing to stop guests from meeting up themselves to do something as simple (and as powerful) as *lectio divina*.

OCIA (previously RCIA): For some Alpha guests who are not baptised or were baptised in other Christian communities, Alpha will be the beginning of a journey towards joining the Catholic Church on the OCIA. To help guests make as smooth a transition as possible from Alpha to the OCIA be sure to carry over the culture of Alpha as far as possible into the OCIA programme. It will be much more beneficial for the guests if they can move from inquiry to

²⁵ Read more in *Unlocking your Parish*, Chapter 10.

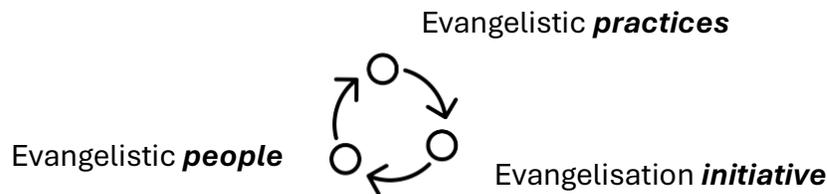
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more formal catechesis in a familiar environment of hospitality, openness, and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Behaving – The Fruit Ripens

The life of the new disciple is transformed by the seed. Fruit is produced, which bears seed for others (multiplication).

We have considered the three interrelated realities contributing towards new, evangelistic culture in your parish:



You will begin to see that multiple years of building your evangelisation initiative, supported by evangelising practices, will generate evangelistic people – or disciples. As people change, your parish will start to change. It will feel different. People will know something different is happening here.

Remember the advice that, “Alpha will start to feel like Alpha the 9th time you run it, which is in year 3 or 4.” Our experience coaching parishes is that it will take this long before the evangelization pump will be embedded, predictably bearing fruit in the parish.

What about all the ‘beginning disciples’ coming to new life through this ‘pump’? Or, what about the people who may be at a threshold of spiritual openness or seeking at the other side of Alpha? Alpha is what its name indicates: a beginning. This is where we need to focus on pathways in the parish to helping people continue to move through the thresholds to discipleship, and then, to multiplying discipleship.

Introduction to Discipleship Pathways and Culture

Yes, this is an “introduction”! In this Genesis Compass Day 3 module, we do not intend to take you through the steps of building a discipleship pathway and culture. Why? Because experience in hundreds of parishes around the world has shown that you will need several years of building your “evangelization pump” first, before you are ready to build your discipleship pathway. The reason for this is very simple: you will simply not have enough multiplying disciples – spiritually mature pastoral leaders – to lead the groups, initiatives, and ministries that a discipleship pathway will entail. What does this mean in practice?

- It means you are allowing growth to happen at its own pace (see part 2, ‘The Patience of Nurturing New Life’, above). Recall the growth and development that happens in

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people's minds, hearts, and lives at each stage of discipleship. Unfortunately, there is no way to 'hot-house' people and make them grow quicker!

- It means that we are ensuring that Alpha does not flounder. When we introduce a discipleship pathway too prematurely (maybe this includes a small group system or a discipleship program), it is likely led by the most spiritually mature leaders, who move on from Alpha. Less experienced leaders take over the running of Alpha. This can see Alpha fizzle out or get stuck, if those newer leaders do not have sufficient experience or pastoral discernment to make decisions about the overall leadership and development of Alpha.
- It means we are allowing *our church to grow our people*, rather forcing *our people to grow our church*. As well as jeopardising Alpha, introducing a discipleship pathway or program too soon risks the steady growth of the people themselves. When we place people into roles of leadership before they are ready, it is like exposing them to scorching sun in the parable of the Sower: they can easily wither. They don't yet have the interior strength or spiritual resources to withstand the pressure that will come. They will find themselves spread thin, or out of their depth. Their home life, relationships, or families might even suffer. *If 'parish renewal' is taking place at the expense of individuals' true growth in discipleship, it is not 'renewal' at all, but some counterfeit.*

The points above all mean that ***we will be living in a certain tension – sometimes for several years*** – as we see how desperately the new disciples or seekers emerging from Alpha need a discipleship pathway in which to be accompanied, and yet being obedient to the resources and capacity God is giving us, and not moving too hastily. This requires extreme patience, maturity, steadfastness, and pastoral judgement.

And yet, as with every best Catholic reality, this is a case of both/and. We cannot *completely* neglect any focus on discipleship. If we do that, the newly sprouting life will be choked by the thorns or eaten by the birds, as in the parable. How can we strike a balance?

Five Ways to Introduce Discipleship Culture while you're waiting to build a Pathway.

1. **Ensure there are multiple, overlapping opportunities to hear the kerygma.** The 10 Evangelistic Practices named above give the examples of preaching and testimonies at Mass, just to name two. We can proclaim the kerygma through our communications, our social media, and newsletters. We can ensure that the Gospel message is referred to frequently in the meetings we are a part of. Maybe we can encourage a Bible study that is already running, to do a study on the kerygma. Pope Francis' words are essential: "Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful, and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma..." (EG, 165).

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- 2. One-off Events, Missions, and Worship Nights.** One-off events are easier to pull off for a parish because they do not need the long-term commitment of leaders. A one-off 3-day mission with invited evangelistic speakers, for example, can go a long way in sustaining people on their growing discipleship journey. Many parishes find that a monthly Worship Night – where Alpha graduates and others gather for praise, Adoration, a short kerygmatic teaching, and prayer – is also sustaining for new disciples. We recommend the Catherine of Siena Institute’s Ananias accompaniment program which includes, “The Great Story of Jesus” – a beautiful retreat day that reinforces the Gospel message. It is intentional about giving people an opportunity to “drop their nets” and say yes. This is great for OCIA and inviting others in the parish to renew their faith.
- 3. Alpha Team.** New and emerging disciples continue to find growth on the Alpha team. Going through Alpha a second, third and even fourth time, maybe as a table helper, then a host, is never wasted. Alpha team members are entering more deeply into the kerygma each time. They are building skills in hosting, prayer, hospitality, and service. They are building the muscles of witnessing to others.
- 4. Disproportionately invest in the few.** This is a biblical principle that we see Jesus use: he invested in twelve Apostles, and of them, Peter, James, and John were the inner three. We can feel uncomfortable as pastors or parish leaders in not spreading ourselves ‘evenly’ between all who need us. We are afraid of showing favouritism. Yet, Jesus shows that there is great wisdom in investing in the few. In the early days of your parish’s renewal, you will want to invest disproportionately in the new and emerging disciples, especially those in whom you see signs of potential leadership capacity in the future. Spend time socially together. Go to conferences together. Visit other churches on the same journey. Pray together and share what is going on in your lives. In these ways, you can build informal community in miniature form – that you hope will eventually expand across the whole parish.
- 5. Never miss an opportunity to invite people to make a personal decision to follow Jesus.** We have seen in part 2 that there comes an important moment in the life of a seeker, where they make a personal, intentional decision to “drop their nets” and surrender their life to Jesus. This is why Alpha works so well because it facilitates that personal decision. But what would it look like if there were many diverse, overlapping opportunities for people to take a step to follow Jesus? Some parishes invite people once a year at Sunday Mass to take a step to make a personal decision, inviting them to come forward during the homily. This courageous, physical step corresponds to and solidifies the inner movement of the heart and can be very powerful. Worship Nights can also offer this opportunity, when people are explicitly invited to consider whether they are in, or want to begin explicitly, a personal relationship with Jesus.

And let us repeat again: *patience, patience... and more patience!* As long as you set your direction of travel – you know that eventually you will build a pathway for discipleship – and

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as long as you keep moving incrementally in that direction – allow the Holy Spirit space and time to do the work of growth in people’s lives.

Introduction to Aligning Catechesis and Sacramental Preparation to the Evangelistic Culture

Again, this is just an “introduction”, since this topic is large, and may take many years for a parish to work through. It is worth returning to Anti-Evangelistic ‘Thorn’ #4 in part 1. We identified that much of the knowledge and formation we share with people in catechesis and sacramental preparation remains as interesting information in their minds. It is like a seed that lands on soil but does not embed into or penetrate the soil.

We can now see that there is likely a mismatch between much of what we offer people in catechesis and sacramental preparation, and where they truly are in their lives of discipleship.

- ***Along the continuum below, where do most of your PEOPLE fall who come for sacramental preparation?***
- ***Where do your PROGRAMS fall?***

<i>Belonging</i>			<i>Believing</i>		<i>Behaving</i>	
Trust	Curiosity	Openness	Seeking	Beginning Disciple	Growing Disciple	Multiplying Disciple
<i>Till the Soil</i>			<i>Plant the Seed</i>		<i>Ripen the Fruit</i>	



Decision for missionary discipleship

Sacramental programs are one area of your parish’s life that you will not be able to pause while you prioritise building evangelistic culture. Likely this area may be one of the main drivers of maintenance mode in your parish. It is also an area when we can make some wins in aligning it to our parish’s vision and our commitment to the primacy of evangelisation. In *Divine Renovation – Bringing your Parish from Maintenance to Mission*, chapter 6, Fr James Mallon describes this as “our greatest pastoral opportunity.”

Some parishes find that working on the renewal of their sacramental preparation is one of the first things they do, to bring about the primacy of evangelisation in these programs. For other parishes, they will need to wait several years. So many different factors influence this decision: your diocese’s requirements, the size of your programs, the team and people involved, the other pressing priorities, the resources at your disposal. Discerning where to work first is one of the greatest skills that an evangelistic leader must develop.

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But we can build a conviction about where we are headed... even if it is a few years away. We want to build a conviction,

- that our sacramental preparation will consider **where a person truly is** in regard to their discipleship journey *not where we assume them to be*, and...
- that we will create a process **where sacraments can truly bear fruit in a person's life**, rather than being blocked dams where grace cannot flow.

Maybe this conviction is burning in your heart, or maybe you need to consider it a little more deeply.

If you need to consider it more deeply, we invite you to read this quote from *Divine Renovation*, and to return to chapter 6, where Fr James explains how sacraments can bear fruit in the life of the person who receives them only where there is active faith. If we can lead a person to an active faith response of discipleship, the sacraments will start to blossom in their lives.

“The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that liturgy and sacraments “must be preceded by evangelization, faith and conversion” (CCC 1072). No five-month or two-week program can produce these results. If we are to make disciples, we must have models that will move away from sacraments as an age-based reward system to being moments of celebration of authentic faith in the heart of the Christian community. This will take real courage to implement and will require us to overcome several theological biases that are deeply rooted in Catholic culture and consciousness” (*Divine Renovation*, p. 199).

Five Ways to Start Building Authentic Sacramental Preparation for Discipleship

What could a sacramental renewal look like in your parish, where sacraments are preceded by “evangelization, faith, and conversion”? The renewal of your sacramental processes will likely be the work of many years, however, here are five ways you may begin to make tentative steps, as you ponder how the Holy Spirit is calling you to reform this area of your parish.

1. Take stock of how your current sacramental preparation process prioritizes evangelization.

- a. *Describe each sacramental preparation process/program in place.* There is no judgment here. It is an opportunity to simply gain clarity around the current situation. Consider the structure (time frame, cadence of gathering, types of gathering, how parents are involved).
- b. *What content resources are used?* Many sacramental preparation programs, publications and other resources have solid content. However, where does it fall on the continuum described above?
- c. *What are the spiritual and communal experiences, as well as the formation?* What is the journey of a participant in the process like, from the moment a person (or

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parent) makes it know the sacrament is sought to what happens after the rite has been celebrated? What is asked of them (the requirements)? How are individuals prepared, not just for the ritual, but for a deeper integration into the life of the Church and growth as a disciple? This includes providing ongoing support and engagement, ensuring that individuals continue to grow in their faith and involvement in the parish.

- d. *How do we discern the disposition of those who come to us for the sacraments?* Can we offer different options for engaged disciples and for those who are not engaged or disciples, but who may be drawn to the sacraments for other personal, cultural, or social reasons?
- e. Most importantly of all, *How does the program proclaim the kerygma?* “God loves you and has a plan for your life. Sin separates us from God. Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection saved us from sin. By turning away from sin and toward God and his Son, we can live a new life as sons and daughters of the Father.” What intentional opportunities are there for the participants (as well as parents when they bring their children for the sacraments),
 - i. To encounter Jesus?
 - ii. To hear the Gospel message in a way that is appropriate for their age, maturity, context?
 - iii. To make a personal decision to follow Christ, whatever that might look like, given the person’s age/maturity/context?

2. Integrate Alpha into your sacramental preparation.

Many parishes spend a few years building Alpha as the gateway into the life of the parish, and then explore how it can be used as a foundation, too, for sacramental preparation. Here are some ways parishes have found that it can work:

- a. Alpha can be a great tool invite parents into when they present their child for Baptism, Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation (especially when it is at a young age in cases where the sacraments are now received according to the restored order). The friendly environment can be ideal for those at the earlier thresholds of conversion.
- b. For interdenominational or interfaith couples, Alpha can be a very helpful common experience. It offers no pressure but offers an opportunity for the non-Catholic spouse to experience the Church as a hospitable and attractive community.
- c. For young people seeking Confirmation and for OCIA candidates, Alpha can be an ideal starting point (pre-catechumenate or inquiry phase) before catechesis.
- d. Couples seeking marriage preparation could be invited to take part in Alpha as part of their preparation. Your parish might also look into running the Pre-Marriage course.
- e. Alpha offers an opportunity for all those approaching your parish for sacramental preparation to experiencing ‘belonging’ and open themselves to the possibility of ‘believing’. It connects them with other growing disciples in the parish.

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3. Invest in your catechists.

Your catechists are your greatest resource. They are the ‘soil tillers’, and the ‘seed planters’. It goes without saying that none of this is possible without themselves being at least growing disciples. This is why it can take many years to renew our sacramental preparation. We are waiting for enough mature disciples to grow into roles of ministry leadership. As we have emphasised many times, do not invite people into leading or teaching roles until they are ready. Invest in your catechists’ own growth in discipleship. Have they had an opportunity to encounter Jesus personally and decide to follow him? Are they growing in the five areas of a disciple – Relationship with God, Life in the Holy Spirit, Lifestyle, Ministry, and Leadership? Many ministries offer training in accompaniment which will likely be useful to catechists as they learn to accompany and recognise the thresholds of discipleship in others (two examples are Catherine of Siena Institute and Catholic Christian Outreach).

4. How might your sacramental preparation be an evangelistic experience for the whole family?

Fr James describes in *Divine Renovation* how his parish introduced a whole-family evangelistic experience called GIFT, ‘Growing in Faith Together’. Parishes from around the world have since adopted similar approaches. Again, this is a significant undertaking: why not hear from other parishes who have taken this approach and learn how they did it?

This third section on ‘Becoming – The Fruit Ripens’ may still be some years off in your parish. You may be eager to see the day when your parish has a mature pathway of discipleship and when your sacramental preparation is focussed completely on discipleship. But do not get ahead of yourselves! This will come. First, we need to lay the foundations in tilling the soil and planting the seed.

Staying the Course and Overcoming the Whirlwind

Finally, let us recall the Anti-Evangelistic ‘Thorn’ #5 from Part 1: *Busyness*. If there’s anything that will threaten the newly growing evangelistic culture in your parish, it is *busyness*. We need to fight the ‘whirlwind’ that threatens to encroach the new life *every day*. We need to stoke the fire in our hearts for the lost *every day*. We need to pray with hunger to the Holy Spirit *every day*. Pause for a moment and ask yourself:

- What do I need to do personally – every day – to fight the whirlwind? To stay the course?
- What do I need to add into my calendar?
- Who is going to hold me accountable?

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Inch by inch, the soil in your parish will become healthy, and new crops will be springing up as far as the eye can see – the earth itself will start to yield its fruit. People will stop and look at your parish and say,

“If the Holy Spirit were withdrawn from *X Parish*, 95% of what they do would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”

Come, Lord Jesus!