



## The Sunday Experience

### The Most Important 90 Minutes of the Week

#### Introduction

*The Disciple Maker Index* survey can offer you valuable insight about your parishioner's faith habits and perception of the parish. A critical component of individuals recommending their parish or agreeing that the parish helps them grow in their faith is the overall Sunday experience. This document provides an overview of what that experience means and should include. For strategies about how to make a plan to address these areas, please refer to other resources, including the "Sunday Experience Planning Guide," the "Sunday Experience Assessment," and our full Planning Resources page.

#### Background

Parish life has evolved significantly over the last century. Many parishes in the United States were founded by immigrants who congregated by ethnicity and language – the local German, Irish, or Italian parish – and parish life and community occurred naturally in ethnic neighborhoods and towns. The parish was more than where one attended Mass, it was often a community hub. Based on language and culture, it was the center of social life, school life, and sacramental life. It was often where one was baptized, where one went to school, where one met their spouse, where they were married, and where they baptized their own children. Priests and religious were more plentiful, more visible, and had the time to be more personal with people. Undoubtedly, the local parish was a significant part of the life of Catholics on a daily basis.

Today, parish life is much different. Over the last 40 years, populations have moved away from small towns and urban neighborhoods to sprawling suburban centers. Family life is more dispersed, people are driving further to work and school, and there are unlimited opportunities for sports, recreation, arts and entertainment – all of which are outside of the local parish. What used to be natural hubs for community, belonging, and engagement, parishes today are more disconnected with people coming and going each weekend, at various times, and often with little connection to one another. Most families are two generations removed for the ethnic roots that once characterized parish life and fostered community around cultural traditions and identity.

How do we recapture the community that once existed naturally in parish life? How do we foster greater parish engagement while competing with endless activities and opportunities that vie for the attention of parishioners? We must focus on the limited time when parishioners are at the parish – the "Sunday Experience" – and utilize this short time each week to welcome, invite, engage, and draw parishioners into parish life and into a deeper encounter with Christ.

#### What is the "Sunday Experience?"

The Sunday Experience is characterized as the 90 minutes each week that parishioners spend at the parish at any weekend Mass. This time starts **once parishioners pull into the parking lot until they leave after Mass on any given weekend**. The Sunday Experience makes or breaks parishioners' experiences with the Church and with their local parish making these 90 minutes the most important hour-and-a-half of the week. How parishes take advantage of these great moments of opportunity determines a lot about parish life. So – let's take a moment to visualize what the Sunday Experience entails:



- **What is the experience of a parishioner pulling into the parking lot?** Is it too crowded, muddy, or bumpy? Or is there a volunteer managing the flow of traffic and directing cars to parking spots and a clear sidewalk to the church door?
- **Upon entering the church, how are parishioners greeted, if at all?** Is there someone there with a smile who knows their name, or are they left to enter on their own and proceed to a pew?
- **Are parishioners seated by an usher who hands them a bulletin or other information about the Mass or about upcoming events?** Or are they on their own to sit in the same pew as the week before?
- **Is the environment warm and welcoming?** Are worship spaces sacred and reverent, inviting parishioners to prepare their hearts and minds for an encounter with Christ in the Mass? Or are they busy and noisy offering further distraction from the liturgy? Is the temperature too cold or too hot? Are the lights too bright or too dim? Are the pews neat and clean? Does the sound system amplify the words and music of the liturgy or does it distract with outages, scratches, or muffled voices?
- **Is there a welcoming space for young families with babies or toddlers?**
- **Are parishioners informed of upcoming activities, events, and opportunities to engage in parish life in ways that are friendly, relevant, and attractive** (no, a bulletin or pulpit announcement does not count!)? Are opportunities provided before or after Mass for parishioners to engage with one another, share lives, and cultivate friendships?
- **Are clergy available to be “with” parishioners outside of Mass times to get to know them, talk with them, and engage with them on a personal level?**
- **Is information accessible and displayed appropriately?** Are there greeters or ushers in the narthex to answer questions?
- **Are parishioners given a reason to return throughout the week – a motivating reason to return and not just out of obligation?** Are they leaving with a sense of belonging to their parish and with a desire to be a part of parish life? Would parishioners call their church their “parish home” or just the place where they attend Mass?

These are just some of the factors which make up parish life and impact the way Catholics experience their faith. These 90 minutes each week are critical to truly engaging parishioners, inviting them into something deeper, and drawing them closer to Christ. The Sunday Experience requires more than just planning for Mass; it requires strategic thinking and creativity about how to be deliberate throughout each weekend to ensure that parishioners are given opportunities for engagement and encounter with one another and with Christ.