

Quintessentials

Top 5 insights for ministry from our team in the field



Catholic Leadership
INSTITUTE

5 Steps to Implementing Effective Parish Programs

Anyone serving in the Church today has heard the common refrain of dread: “not another program!” We have trained ourselves never to utter the word “program” again lest we be relegated to memories of wasted energy, low turnout, and unfulfilled promises. This applies to us all, from priests and parish staff to our most trusted volunteers. Now, we call things “movements” or “experiences,” or sometimes we describe programs as a “journey” or “partnership.” In reality, there is nothing wrong with a program when we enter into it with intentionality and reasonable expectations.

Not all programs are created equally, and while parish leaders should expect program providers to embrace the responsibility of creating effective programs, they also have an important role and can leave program potential on the table by not doing their part. Here are five steps to ensure that any program that is adopted by your parish or ministry is fulfilling God’s call and aligning with your vision and mission.

ONLY 28% of parishioners strongly agree their parish equips them to talk about faith by providing high-quality events to which they can invite others.

1. Consider Who is Over-Programmed and Who is Under-Programmed

You and your faithful attendees might be tired of programs. However, 87% of weekly Mass attendees say they do hardly anything outside of attending Sunday Mass and 83% of Catholics aren’t coming to Mass at all. That’s a significant number of potential participants. Before agreeing to or declining another program, think about the segment of your community you are trying to reach and reflect intentionally on what programs or initiatives are already geared toward them.





RETHINKING THE PARISH PROGRAM

The definition of a “program” for one parish community might be different for another. Some parishes introduce third-party program providers to their communities (such as Dynamic Catholic, Evangelical Catholic, or Many Parts Ministries) while others implement programs that are diocesan or parish-led (such as grief support groups, Bible studies, men’s groups, etc.). Regardless of how programs are defined, all parishes have a unique opportunity to meet the spiritual needs of their people in the midst of an increasingly secular society. Challenge yourself and other parish leaders to get creative, try new things, and be willing to let other things go. It is also helpful to consider that some programs might be more accurately defined as formation opportunities, ministries, or small groups.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What else does the parish offer exclusively for this segment of our population?
- What percentage of our Mass-going population does this segment represent? What percentage of our larger non-worshipping community does this segment represent? (If the percentage is small, further discernment might be needed.)
- What is this audience looking for in programming? For example, if the program is meant for young men, does it meet young men in your community’s expectations around content or approach? (If not, consider adjusting.)

KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

If you want to learn and understand more about the demographics, beliefs, practices, and other influences to your parish and local community, consider using tools such as Mission Insite or the Disciple Maker Index survey tool. These resources can tell you more about the people who live in your parish’s boundaries so that you can make informed discernment and decisions. Scan the QR code to learn more about data collection from Catholic Leadership Institute.



2. Define Goals and Level-Set Expectations

Despite program providers’ marketing, there is no silver bullet in ministry. When evaluating a program, start with reasonable expectations about the impact it might have in a particular area of ministry rather than assuming it will fix all the parish’s problems. Your team should consider not only whether to do the program, but also articulate what you expect to achieve, especially in the initial phase. Perhaps your goal is simply to conduct a pilot or to recruit 10-12 new participants from a certain segment of your community. Discuss what’s important to you and be hopeful and realistic at the same time.

Here are some important steps to set expectations from the start:

- Determine a purpose and desired outcomes for the program. Then, contrast them to the needs of the segment and the existing resources available within the parish or diocese.
- Set some initial goals based on what you imagine as the “first fruits” of the program and identify appropriate milestones and the timelines to track them.
- Identify key stakeholders and their responsibilities. Who are those stakeholders most in favor of this program and who are those most concerned or skeptical? What are their expectations for this program? Are they realistic?
- Imagine this program at its completion: What’s different? What has happened? What could you point to or report on that would make you feel proud? Does it meet the purpose and desired outcome?
- Assess how long the parish is willing to invest in the program and how that aligns with what the program requires in order to be successful. For instance, does the program provider ask for a three-year commitment while the parish is only willing to make a one-year commitment?



DID YOU KNOW?

More than half of parishioners strongly believe their parish makes information easy to access.

3. Properly Till the Soil

When considering implementing a program you know is bearing fruit in other parishes, be sure to explore what infrastructure or support needs to be in place for the program to be most fruitful. Ask the program provider for a list of other parishes and contacts in your community that you could network with to surface additional considerations and perspectives. This can be a great task to delegate to parish volunteers, provided they use the same template to gather and report information. Ask the following questions to understand important conditions for success and cultivate fertile soil for the program to bear fruit:



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- Does the program require a point person?
- How did the timelines play out? Which parts felt rushed or needed more time? Which aspects took too long?
- What virtual or physical space requirements are present?
- What communication methods are important for the program to be fruitful in the ramp-up and ongoing execution of the program?
- What's the most effective way to communicate the rationale or "why" for the program to inspire participation?
- What do other parishes wish they had done differently or wish they had known about the process in advance?



DID YOU KNOW?

More than two-thirds of parishioners invite someone to a parish activity only once a year.

4. Engage Your "Influencers"

The influencers who participate in a program often have a significant impact on its overall result. When brainstorming your target audience for a particular program, identify individuals who may be influencers among their peers. Personally invite them to a conversation and share your hopes and goals for the program, why you'd like them to participate, and ask them to recruit a certain number of peers to join. If they are willing to send a text or an email with the words, "I am going, and I want you to come!" the effect on generating interest can be significant. This is particularly important when trying to expand circles beyond those parishioners who faithfully attend everything. Other things to consider when engaging influencers:

- Ensure they can sit or congregate with those they know or bring. This may sound counter-intuitive but for those coming to something for the first time, the comfort of coming and being able to stick with those they know is important. Take a long view and don't be too quick to mix everyone up.
- When appropriate, consider having something concrete like a magnet, keychain, or prayer card that people can take with them to help build identity and community within the program.
- At the appropriate part of the program, encourage people to take photos and post on their favorite social media platforms to show their presence and to spread the word. This also serves to attract interest in the program by prospective participants.
- Share updates and cross-reference learnings, activities, and fruits of programs with the greater community.





5. Have the Next Thing Ready

One of the ways to leverage investment in a program and level-set expectations is to think of it and plan for it as one step in a series of steps. When planning to initiate a new program, think about what happens the week after it ends. Remember, your parishioners are at different stages of their faith journey. Having a variety of next steps will help to keep the momentum going from a fruitful program experience. During all of your planning for the upcoming program, don't forget to think beyond the program's completion by asking these questions:

- What leadership positions might be available for parishioners to consider in another ministry after participating in this program?
- What other ministries have existing projects or needs that you could advertise during this program?
- What next steps exist for parishioners at different phases of their Catholic journey?

Final Thoughts

“Another program” does not have to be another source of frustration or disappointment if we clearly define who we are looking to serve and what we want to achieve. We can help create the best conditions for a program’s success if we remind ourselves and others that ministry efforts are never finished, and that programs are not the end of the journey. It is also healthy to remember that programs may come and go as needs change; they are tools to serve people, not possessions we must keep alive through personal investment or attachment. It’s okay to let them go with gratitude when the time is right. We know the ultimate secret that needs to be revealed: if a program creates a space for someone to encounter Jesus, it is worth doing.

All quantitative data shared in this document is from the Disciple Maker Index survey responses from around 1 million individuals.