As some parishes begin to open up again, and others plan to do so in the next month or so, it’s a good time for pastors to do what they can to ensure that the “new normal” is better than the old one. And one of the most important realities that pastors must understand is that their parishes cannot improve if the people who work for the parish don’t grow first.

Unfortunately, too many pastors focus on how to reach the people who sit in the pews of the church, or even those who don’t come at all, without maximizing the goodness of the people they work with every single day. As a result, too many parish offices look and feel like generic insurance companies or dentists offices, with no compelling signs of evangelism, passion, or even, love.

Well, here are three simple, doable and undeniably important activities that pastors can do with the people who work in their offices – in the next week! – so that the parish looks and feels differently a month from now, and for years to come.

Step 1

Have a Zoom call with everyone who works in the parish office, whether they are paid staff or volunteers, and pray together. Not just any type of prayer. I’m talking about personal, vulnerable prayer. Start with you, the pastor, letting your people know what it is that you need prayers for in your life. Be real. And then have everyone else let the group know what is going on in their lives that needs prayer. And then pray. Together as a group.

Depending on the number of people in your office, this will take between thirty and ninety minutes, and it will be some of the best time you’ve ever spent with your people. For those who are reading this and thinking, “I’m sure pastors and the people who work for the parish already do this,” I can say with confidence that it is rare, and not regular. All too often we focus our collective praying on what happens during Mass and the Sacraments – which are paramount, of course – while doing little in the way of personal, relationship-building communal prayer. And it is nothing short of a tragedy and a wasted opportunity.

Now, if you’re wondering whether to include someone in this activity who is temporarily on furlough, or someone who isn’t a paid employee, or someone who… the answer is ‘yes’, include them. This is not a contractual relationship we’re talking about. It is a deep and supernatural activity for brothers and sisters who labor in the mission field to come together and practice what they are encouraging in others. There is no good excuse for avoiding this. Really.
A day or two later, schedule another Zoom call (if you don’t know how to do this, I’m certain that someone in your office can do it for you!), and this time focus on your staff members’ faith journeys. Start with you, the pastor, giving a brief summary of how you came to know Jesus, answered the call to serve Him, and where you are now in your personal story. I guarantee you that anyone who works in your parish will be glad to hear this story (and if they aren’t, you should really help them find a more appropriate place for them to work in the world.) And don’t assume that your staff knows this story. Most of them probably don’t. Really.

Then, have everyone else take five or ten minutes to share their story. Where they’ve come from where they are now, and where they hope to go. Will some people be more comfortable with this than others? Of course. Will everyone be able to do it? Yes, as long as you go first, set the tone, and assure people that this is important and that you want everyone to grow in their faith together, regardless of where they are today. And it will change the tone and tenor of your office. Trust me.

Consider that the staff at a library wouldn’t hesitate to ask people about their favorite books and where they developed a love for reading. And a restaurant staff would talk about their favorite foods and whether or not they knew how to cook. And the staff at a professional football team would talk about the games they watch and what is happening in the league. For people who work in a parish not to be involved in one another’s faith lives and stories is truly indefensible. And yet it’s common. Let’s change that in the next week. You’ll be so glad you did.

This activity might take a full two hours, or even more, but what in the world could be more important?
Step 3

Have yet another Zoom call, and have everyone in the office – beginning with you, the pastor – talk about how the work they do brings people closer to Jesus and His Church. Tell them what you do that has the greatest impact on people’s faith lives – that should be easy – and then ask them to do the same.

Yes, the DRE will have a relatively easy time, and the business manager might find it a bit harder. But they’re all ministers, and the more they can, collectively, talk about how they can do ministry in their roles, the more effective and engaged they will be. And again, if they don’t find this interesting, that’s a good sign that this isn’t the right job for them. I don’t make that claim lightly. Everyone should work in an organization, especially at a church, where they are passionate about what the organization does.

I recently heard a story about a finance manager at a parish taking part in this discussion and coming to the realization, “Hey, I actually interact with more parishioners than anyone else on the staff! I should be using my platform to encourage them in faith!” Have that conversation with your entire staff, and watch what happens. Some people will probably ask for ideas about how they can become better ministers, which will be gift to them. And no one in the world would deny that a parish would be better if everyone who worked there saw their role as ministry. Right?

I heard another story about a parish who did this with staff members, and for the first time, people who worked in different ministries had a chance to pray and engage with one another directly. Some of them did their work in the evenings, and never interacted with staff members during the day. After going through activities like this, they are now feeling more a part of the team, which will allow them to work together in the future.
For pastors who might be hearing all this and feeling that it sounds like a lot of work, let me tell you about two leaders I work with and what they’ve done lately.

Gary Kelly is the CEO of Southwest Airlines, and in the midst of what is a massive crisis in the airline industry, he did individual meetings with his top sixty leaders, spending more than thirty hours in the process. He simply wanted to encourage them, know their personal stories, and let them know that they were important to him and the company. The activities I propose here would take at most six hours.

Brian Tyler runs McKesson, a gigantic health care company that is as busy as they’ve ever been in the midst of this crisis. When the lockdown first happened, he spent a full three hours with this leaders, doing nothing but talking about their personal lives and what was happening in their homes. He continues to make that a big part of his job, even though he has tens of thousands of employees and hundreds of thousands of customers. If he can do that...

So what is the point here? Pastors are not just priests, but leaders. And leaders, to be effective, must have strong personal relationships with the people they lead, especially those closest to them. While every parish is different, the majority probably have between four and fifteen people who work there on a daily basis. Pastors need to know them, pray for them personally, shepherd them and help them understand how they’re work changes lives. To skip over those people in order to focus on parishioners or the unchurched, as tempting and understandable as that may be, is not wise.

Parishes that want to fulfill their potential as outposts of the Great Commission must have offices that ooze the love that comes from prayer, fellowship and wall-to-wall ministry. Is that your parish office? If not, take these simple steps, and watch what happens. When the parish opens again, you’ll actually be stronger and more prepared to help people find Jesus than you were before. May God give you the courage to take this step!

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