

Best Practices in Inclusivity

A Report from the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council September, 2011

Introduction

The Archdiocesan Pastoral Council (APC) is an advisory body to the Archbishop. Its membership reflects a cross section of the 205,000 Catholics in the Archdiocese of Dubuque. One of its purposes is “to assess needs and to recommend priorities, goals and objectives for the Archdiocese.” With that purpose in mind, the APC chose to gather and communicate “best practices” as one of its goals. During the 2010 – 2011 year, the APC focused on gathering best practices in “inclusivity”, seeking to find what works to make parishes welcoming communities with all of its members participating. The primary tool for collecting best practices was a survey, open to all members of the Archdiocese, asking them to describe their community’s inclusivity efforts. In addition to the survey results, a subcommittee of the APC gathered best practice information from other resources and drew upon their own experience to create the recommendations below.

General Comments

Efforts at inclusivity can take many forms. The core of any successful effort, is the realization that inclusivity is not a project or a program. Inclusivity is an attitude. If the members of a community truly believe that “all are welcome” their actions will reflect that. When members truly believe everyone belongs, they will act inclusively and find ways for everyone to participate and make inclusion happen. On the other hand, if members are protective of their long established circles, any efforts towards becoming a more inclusive parish community will be greatly diminished.

A culture of welcome is necessary for inclusivity to flourish. When a faith community is able to welcome and include all of its members, the benefits affect the entire community. New friendships emerge, leaders step forward, the sense of community and belonging increases for everyone, and members feel a stronger tie to their faith. The impact of parish inclusion can be summarized as being as simple as ABC: **Attitudes** of inclusion create **Best Practices** that result in a **Culture of Belonging**.

Benefits of Inclusion

An inclusive community enjoys many benefits, including:

- Affords everyone a sense of belonging to the diverse human family.
- Develops an appreciation for everyone’s unique abilities.
- Develops respect for all diverse characteristics.
- Provides opportunities for persons with disabilities to offer their skills and expertise which are often overlooked, undervalued, and underutilized.

- Provides opportunities for all to learn and grow in mutual understanding and respect.
- Builds a strong community in which full inclusion assures every person's gifts and talents can be fully realized and fully contributed.

Profile of Respondents

Eighty Eight surveys were completed. Some respondents indicated they were completing the survey on behalf of their parish pastoral council. Others completed the survey as individuals. Optional demographic information was requested. The information gathered from those who chose to respond, revealed the following profile:

- Gender: Male – 36%, Female – 64%
- Age:
 - Under 21: 0%
 - 21-40: 11%
 - 41 – 60: 49%
 - Over 60: 40%
- Ethnic Background:
 - Caucasian: 99%
 - Other: 1%
 - Additional options were African American, Hispanic, Non-Hispanic Immigrant. None of these options were chosen.
- Council/Committee Membership:
 - Parish Pastoral Council: 26%
 - Faith Formation/School Board: 5%
 - Finance Council: 6%
 - Liturgy Committee: 6%
 - Parish Life Committee: 5%
 - Social Justice Committee: 0%
 - Stewardship Committee: 3%
 - Other: 11%
 - None: 38%

The APC is grateful to those who shared their best practices and ideas through the survey. The pool, while small, generated a wealth of practical and effective ideas. It is disappointing to note the lack of diversity in the pool of respondents. Nearly 100% of the respondents were Caucasian and nearly 90% were over the age of 40. While not a valid indication of inclusivity overall, it is a clear indicator that, collectively, we have much to do in increasing **participation** of all members of our community.

Barriers to Inclusivity

To move toward an inclusive community, it is often necessary to identify and eliminate barriers to inclusivity. Barriers come in many forms but all tend to result from a lack of knowledge or education on the issue. For example, long standing members may resist welcoming members of a different ethnic group because of

fear of the unknown. Once learning that all people have more similarities than differences, barriers are often removed. Survey respondents reported the following as barriers most frequently found in Archdiocesan parishes:

- Resistance to change
- Intolerance
- Long standing cliques
- Size of community...both large and small
 - Too large to get to know people
 - Small communities can be suspicious of newcomers
- Indifference, lack of involvement, too busy to care

In communities where these barriers exist, it is recommended that the barrier is first acknowledged, then a plan of action established to minimize and overcome the barrier.

Recommendations

The recommended best practices below are organized into categories. Each category is divided into “good” and “best” practices. The good practices are those that, at a minimum, most parishes could achieve. The best practices are offered as potential ideas that could lead a parish from good to best.

General

Good

Communication is the key to success in all areas of parish life. The parish should explore various methods of communication from the traditional Mass announcements and parish bulletins to e-mail and websites. If communicating via e-mail, arrange for alternate ways of getting information for those who do not have an e-mail account.

In many of the recommended practices, food seems key to fostering community. The need for and enjoyment of good food is shared by all people and is a natural way to bring people together.

Best

Personal contact from the pastor, parish leaders, and active volunteers may be the single best practice for demonstrating that each parishioner is important to the community. Proactively encouraging involvement through personal invitations, developing relationships and following up on commitments helps members integrate their gifts in the community and become a more fully active person.

When planning activities, it is best to include representatives from the target group to assist with the planning. For example, when planning an activity for families with small children, one or more young families should assist with the planning.

A seemingly obvious best practice is often neglected or forgotten. Nearly all activities of a parish require the selfless contributions of volunteers. It is very important to extend a thank you to volunteers for their service. The thank you

can be a simple phone call or card or something more elaborate like a volunteer appreciation night. Whatever form it takes, showing volunteers appreciation for their efforts is an inclusive best practice that should not be forgotten.

New Members

Good

Most parishes have some standard procedure for welcoming new members. A welcome packet, new members breakfast, introduction at Mass, highlight in newsletter, orientation meeting, photo on the bulletin board, and a phone call are all good practices for welcoming new members.

Best

Parishes that report best practices in welcoming new members include a variety of extra efforts including:

- proactively encouraging participation in activities of interest,
- assigning a sponsor individual or family to help the new member or family get settled in,
- scheduling a two month follow up phone call to see how its going,
- introductions to other individual or family parish members who live nearby or who may have similar interests,
- providing a welcome gift,
- sending a welcome card during the first month of membership,
- a personal phone call or visit from the pastor,
- making it a priority to include new members in Mass participation, such as bringing up gifts.

Accessibility

Good

Most parishes have taken action to make facilities more accessible to those with physical limitations. Church facilities and restrooms should be accessible by wheelchair. Seating opportunities should be convenient for those with physical limitations. Many parishes provide assistance to those with sight and hearing impairments including large print missalettes and hearing aids.

Best

In addition to providing opportunities to attend Mass and parish events, parishes that exhibit best practices find creative ways for people who might need adaptations to participate, not just simply attend. A ramp to enable a scooter to access the sanctuary, assistance from a fellow parishioner, arranging the ambo to enable a person in a wheelchair to proclaim the Word are all best practices to include members with physical or other disabilities.

Providing the opportunity for people to sit anywhere they want, not only in a specially designated area in the front, back or side of church sends a message of welcome. Most people don't want to be told where they must sit. Providing alternatives gives those with accessibility challenges the option to choose, just

like everyone else. When these opportunities exist, ushers should be proactive in pointing out what the options are.

Homebound

Good

Ministry to homebound members is a long standing tradition in most parishes. Personal visits and delivery of the Eucharist are good practices that can be found in most parishes. Some parishes make it a practice to send get well cards from parish council to those who are ill, letting the homebound know that they are still valued even if they can't be present as often as they would like.

Best

An excellent best practice, in addition to ministering to the homebound, is to invite the homebound to participate in ministries of their own. Parishes have been successful in engaging the homebound in praying for others, participating in calling trees, and crocheting or knitting items for others, for examples caps for newborn infants of member families.

Volunteer Involvement

Good

Many parishes maintain a time and talent listing to identify ways that members can be of service to the church. A good practice that is often neglected is use of the information in the list. Consistent follow up with those who volunteer ensures members have the opportunity to get involved.

Best

Best practice parishes also provide opportunities for non-Catholic family members to participate as much as possible. Music ministry and carrying offertory gifts can be carried out by all members of a family whether or not they are baptized Catholics. Outside of Mass, there are a multitude of activities that a non-Catholic family member can participate in as an active member of the community.

Age Groups

Good

The combination of activities for various age groups across the Archdiocese is nearly endless. Some good practices, specific to children are:

- Conduct a children's liturgy,
- Affirm parents who bring their children to Mass, even the noisy ones,
- Invite children to come forward to personally deliver their offertory gift,
- Perform baptisms during Mass,
- If a Catholic school exists, promote its benefits to the students and the community.

Best

Best practice parishes continually look for ways to engage members of all ages in community activities. Some particularly successful best practices are:

- Actively involving children before Confirmation...as greeters, servers etc.
- Inviting youth to take on liturgical ministries shortly after Confirmation
- Enabling families - adults and children to serve Mass together
- Delivering meals to families with new babies
- Writing cards to college students while they are away
- Offering Generations of Faith to bring the very young and senior members together for learning,
- Offering Theology on Tap, Wine and Wisdom, YACHT (Young Adult Catholics Hanging Together) club and other formation/social opportunities to specific age groups
- Offering presentations on end of life issues
- At conclusion of funerals, entering deceased's name in the parish book of eternal life, a visible sign of inclusiveness even beyond the grave.

Ethnic Groups

Good

Many parishes have welcomed and embraced Hispanic members through Spanish language Masses and services. Other parishes have welcomed non-Hispanic immigrants as well. The parishes offer printed materials and make announcements in languages other than English. These are good practices that send the message that all are welcome.

Best

Some parishes have developed best practices with the goal that all ethnic communities can become one church. One parish is pursuing federal grants to assist immigrants to locate to better housing. Another parish collects and distributes furniture, school supplies and other necessities to immigrant families. Another excellent example of a creative best practice is one parish's program called, "My Home is Your Home" or "Mi Casa es tu Casa". The parishioners sign up to be a host or a guest. Singles, married couples, the Hispanic community, and children are invited to participate. Both Hispanic and Anglo serve as hosts with 8-10 people sharing a meal in a member's home. Each person is assigned a food item to share and the host(s) provide the meat dish. In the words of one participant, "This has been a great way for parishioners to meet people they may have never met before. Also, it helps Anglos and Hispanics to visit each other's homes."

Special Needs

Good

Those who require a gluten free diet face a dilemma when participating in the Eucharist. Many parishes offer gluten free hosts. For those with hearing, vision, or mobility challenges, various aids are offered. These are good practices that make all members feel valued and welcome.

Best

Some recommended best practices to serve those with special needs include:

- Rather than quietly providing gluten free hosts, make it widely known that the parish is accommodating a gluten free diet.
- Affirm family members whose disability might cause them to be more vocal that they are welcome and encouraged to participate
- Proactively providing service to the marginalized in response to Catholic social teaching. Visibly proclaiming that those in mixed faith marriages, divorced/remarried, gay/lesbian, lapsed Catholics, and those rejected by society are all welcome to join the community of faith.
- Some parishes maintain an active jail & prison ministry. Those who exhibit best practices continue their ministries after release by accepting and supporting these members as they transition back into the community.

Outreach

Good

A good practice in any parish is to reach out to members and non-members alike through one or more communication tools. One example is, in addition to sending the parish newsletters to members, sending it to neighborhood homes, apartments and condos to build awareness that a welcoming faith community is nearby.

Best

Today there are virtually an infinite number of ways to reach out to current and potential members. A few best practices already in use include:

- Placing a large banner outside of church, welcoming everyone,
- Participating in cooperative efforts with churches of other faiths,
- An internet radio station delivering programming originating in the parish. To increase awareness and usage, the parish coordinated the purchase of computers at a discount and offered internet classes for beginners.
- Conducting a door to door campaign to introduce and invite,
- Exploring other uses of technology for communicating, including social media such as Facebook and Twitter,
- Setting aside 7% of parish income to assist those in need,
- Living by the phrase, "You belong to us because you belong to Christ."

SUMMARY

Several survey respondents commented that parish leadership has an important impact on the perceived inclusivity of the community. Leadership from the ordained, parish staff, and influential volunteers can strongly influence the membership to embrace or ignore inclusivity. But inclusivity is not the sole responsibility of parish leadership. And it would be "poor practice" for members not to embrace inclusivity simply because someone in parish leadership did not. Individual community members can be inclusive, regardless of the actions or attitudes of parish leaders.

After responding to the questions of the survey, respondents were asked to consider their responses and rate their community on its level of inclusiveness. The ratings revealed the following:

- Above Average/High/Excellent: 48%
- Low/Poor/Needs Improvement: 52%

It is encouraging to see that nearly half of the respondents see their communities as doing well at being inclusive. The APC is hopeful that the best practices outlined here enable all parishes to move toward that goal.

As stated above, inclusivity is an attitude that is influenced by knowledge and education. It is not enough to know the “hows” of being inclusive. Members must have the desire to be inclusive by understanding the “whys”. To move more parish communities into the “Above Average” category, formation opportunities are needed to help members understand the importance and value of being an inclusive community. Seeking and/or providing formation on inclusivity topics is a characteristic of a best practices parish.

In *Seasons of Grace: Wisdom from the Cloister*, Mother Gail Fitzpatrick, OCSO speaks about the opportunities parishes have to build community and offers beatitudes for community life. One beatitude states:

“Blessed is the community
in which each individual
is respected and loved in his or her uniqueness
and in which each member
is involved personally in the life of the whole.”

As Catholics, we believe that all are created in the image and likeness of God. Inclusivity is not a program or project. It is the essence of who we are. As such, the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council enthusiastically endorses the best practices outlined in this report and calls on all faithful Catholics to embrace the vision that “everyone belongs and all are welcome”.

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