



The five systems of a fruitful parish



Healthy things grow and produce fruit. Acts 2:42–47 describes an ‘ideal’ Christian community, a ‘body’ that is healthy and growing.

In 1 Samuel 17, we read the story of David—young, inexperienced and seemingly ill-equipped—standing before a huge giant, Goliath. Beginning the process of changing the culture of your parish can also feel like taking on a giant. There are two possible attitudes when facing a giant. One is to say, ‘It’s too big. There’s nothing I can do.’ The other is to say, ‘It’s so big I can’t miss!’ The five-systems framework outlined here is a great way to make an effective start on the ‘giant’ of growing a more missionary and fruitful parish.

A healthy body is made up of a number of different systems: the skeletal system, the circulatory system and so on. When one of the systems in our body fails to function correctly, it affects the health of the whole body. We become sick, and our entire body feels it. This is also true of parishes.

Healthy things grow and produce fruit. [Acts 2:42–47](#) describes an ‘ideal’ Christian community, a ‘body’ that is healthy and growing. From this passage we can identify five interdependent systems: worship, evangelisation, discipleship, fellowship and service. In a healthy parish, each of these systems functions well. A malfunctioning system makes the whole parish ‘sick’, inhibiting its ongoing fruitfulness.

A health check for your parish

Your parish leadership team might consider performing a ‘health check’ on your parish, identifying systems that are not working optimally so that you can plan to bring the ‘body’, your parish, to better health.

1. Worship

‘... as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread’ (Acts 2:46)

Is your celebration of the Eucharist a moving and transformative experience that brings people into an intimate encounter with Jesus and with the community around them? As Catholics, our main act of worship is the Sunday Eucharist. Parishes can greatly improve the quality of their worship by paying attention to:

- **hospitality.** Don’t assume that ‘everyone here is a practising Catholic’. As people arrive, ensure a warm welcome, with clear signage, an uncluttered foyer, smiling faces, a clean bathroom and nappy-change facilities. Make sure everyone has what they need to participate: words for hymns and responses,

explanations of key liturgical moments, clear instructions on receiving Communion, access to a children’s liturgy. Consider asking a ‘mystery shopper’, preferably a non-Catholic, to attend your Sunday Mass and give you feedback on their experience of being welcomed (or not)

- **hymns.** Provide the best music your parish can afford, aiming for encounter, not performance. Offer music in a style, key and volume that invites the congregation to open their mouths and sing. It also greatly aids prayerful worship when at least one hymn is addressed directly to God, as a prayer
- **homilies.** In *Evangelii Gaudium* (§135), Pope Francis quips that both the laity and ‘their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them, and the clergy from having to preach them.’ Sadly this is too often true. The homily is there to feed and nurture the ‘flock’ and benefits from careful attention to style and kerygmatic content.

2. Evangelisation

‘And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.’ (Acts 2:47)

Does your parish have an intentional process that explicitly proclaims the kerygma and brings adults into a personal relationship with Jesus? Healthy things grow and produce ‘babies’. A clear sign of a healthy parish is that new adult Christians are being ‘born’. Opinions differ about what evangelisation is. It is frequently confused with discipleship. Your team needs a shared understanding of what evangelisation is—and isn’t—before you do a ‘health check’ of this system:

- Evangelisation always includes an explicit proclamation of the kerygma. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (§163), Pope Francis describes the content of kerygma as ‘Jesus Christ loves you, he gave his life to save you and now he is living by your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.’
- It is primarily directed at those outside the church.
- Effective evangelisation is invitational, involving a radically welcoming, non-judgemental and listening stance.
- Evangelisation is the system that is most frequently unhealthy in a Catholic parish and is often the best place to start when working towards better parish health.

3. Fellowship

‘They devoted themselves ... to fellowship ... All who believed were together and had all things in common.’ (Acts 2:42, 44)

Is your parish a meaningful community where people are known and loved and are supported in their call to holiness? Healthy parishes are like a family and have a

strong, welcoming community life. Many parishes are socially active, with sports clubs, dancing, barbecues, concerts and the like. But this is not necessarily fellowship. Fellowship may include socialising but cannot be reduced to it. It occurs in a community formed around the Gospel, and its purpose is to love and support each other on the Christian journey to holiness. Ask yourself: Is everyone in your parish known by name, loved and cared for? Does fellowship only extend to certain kinds of people? Are people with disabilities or different ethnicities or different socioeconomic situations somehow implicitly excluded?

4. Discipleship

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.'
(Acts 2:42)

Is your parish a place where enthusiastic followers of Jesus are supported in a lifelong process of growing in their loving and serving of God? Discipleship is about nurturing people who already love Jesus and who want more. Discipleship includes catechesis but cannot be reduced to it. People can take courses but not live transformed lives; they can know about God but not *know* God. Research tells us that the majority of baptised Catholics are not disciples; they have been sacramentalised but not evangelised. Parishes that nurture discipleship expect that conversion is a lifelong journey of ever-deepening relationship with Jesus. The parish can assist disciples by supporting their growth in faith, knowledge and prayer through a range of experiences of catechesis, Scripture study and so on.

5. Service

'All who believed were together and had all things in common, they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.'
(Acts 2:44–45)

Does your parish have a missionary culture that calls its members to service both within the parish and outwards to those who do not yet belong?

- Does your parish support people to discern their God-given giftedness, and then call them to service in areas into which they are being called? Or does your parish look to fill 'gaps' with anyone who is prepared to do the job?
- Are most of your parish ministries and services focussed internally (for example, lectors, special ministers, children's liturgy, altar serving and other rostered opportunities to serve)? Or does your parish have a substantial focus on service and care beyond the people who belong to the parish?
- Is the main role of the parish priest and staff to 'serve' those coming to the parish in need of help and support? Or is the main focus to grow and equip disciples who go out into the world to evangelise and serve?

Using the five systems as a framework for your parish strategy

Analysing the overall health of your parish through a thorough and honest evaluation of each of these systems is a great starting point for developing a parish-renewal strategy.

- **Get clear consensus on system definitions.** What people mean by 'discipleship', 'evangelisation', 'catechesis' and 'discipleship' varies widely, and your team needs to be clear and united on the distinctions.
- **Small groups have many faces.** Parishes can have small groups for evangelisation (to come and see), discipleship (to grow), ministry (to serve) and fellowship (to welcome and support). Carefully consider which system each parish group fits into.
- **Mend broken bones first.** As you evaluate your parish health, you will discover one or more 'broken' or unhealthy systems, and your strategy should focus on these first. If you have a broken bone, it needs to heal before you can begin training to run a marathon.
- **Make your strategy sustainable.** In the first year, start with one system, beginning work on your 'broken bone' (usually evangelisation). Prioritise hospitality, invitation and witness (all central to effective evangelisation). Don't spread yourself too thin and risk burnout.
- **Leadership is the essential element.** The missionary effectiveness of the parish begins with the leadership of the parish priest, but missionary leadership cannot be done alone. Effective strategic action requires a team and unanimity of vision within that team.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Talk about your vision constantly. When everyone knows about it, communicate again ... and again. Vision 'leaks'. Test every decision and pastoral action through the lens of your missionary vision: will this grow missionary disciples who love, follow and serve Jesus?
- **Have fun.**

Used as a diagnostic and planning tool, the five systems from Acts 2:42–47 can help you to grow a healthier and more fruitful parish. This might seem like a giant goal, but with the Holy Spirit—and with time, effort, effective leadership and strong teamwork—you can't miss!



Fellowship may include socialising but cannot be reduced to it. It occurs in a community formed around the Gospel, and its purpose is to love and support each other on the Christian journey to holiness.

The Archdiocesan Animation Team is available to discuss strategies with you and/or your team and to facilitate sessions (remotely) on many topics and issues. Just ask!

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NEXT WEEK: 'Balancing holiness and mission'