

Der Zauber des Anfangs: How we started

Fr. Michael White and Brian Crook
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Brian Crook

We are just two simple guys working in a local church, but we have seen God accomplish some great things and bring a transformation in our community. There has been an increase in volunteerism as several hundreds have gotten involved in volunteer ministry, we have seen a great increase in financial support of the parish, and we have seen an improved spirit and momentum at the parish.

Over the next few minutes, we want to tell you a little about our story and the key strategies that have driven this transformation.

Fr. White

Did you ever have an experience where suddenly you ask, “*Why am I here?*” or “*Why am I doing this?*”

Sometimes it can happen at a party where we don’t know many people and we feel out of place. Or we step into a situation and it’s not what we thought it was going to be. It’s a little uncomfortable. It happens in school a lot, you’re sitting in class saying, “I will never need this information”, but it’s not really a big deal, until... it is. And of course we also have that feeling about more significant things in our life.

In the busyness of life, the “*why*” question usually doesn’t get asked soon enough, and often enough. We are usually running around and just trying to get through a day or complete our to-do lists. But answering the question, “*why*” is vitally important.

It provides purpose and meaning and adds value; it will get us through the difficult times and make the good times far more enjoyable. Knowing why you do what you do matters.

So why does the Church exist? Why does the local church exist? Why do we do what we do?

When we first began working in the Church we thought our job was to provide better service to church people. We came to a parish that did not have a lot of activities or programs running. We thought the problem with the parish was the low energy, lack of programs and that if we invested energy into programs and services for parish members then we would be a successful parish.

In other words we fell into a consumer mentality, that the people in the pews should be thought of as consumers. The people in the pews are here to consume religion and it was our job to help them consume.

And so both my associate Tom and I, who, for a while were pretty much it when it came to staff, set about trying to do that with as much energy as we had. We expanded kids and student programs. Tom put together all kinds of activities to try and get students involved.

We launched new musical programs, and offered concerts and all kinds of fellowship programs, receptions, bus trips, lectures. We expanded member care as far as we could dream up ways to take it from hosting complimentary lunches following funerals to coffee service following daily Mass

It was a waste of time.

In hindsight, the situation was reminiscent of the Red Queen's race in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. The Queen says to Alice:

Now here you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place, if you want to get anywhere, you'll have to run at least twice as fast as that.

The more we provided, the faster we had to run just to stay in the same place. But, the more was provided the more was demanded. Just like Alice, who didn't pause to reflect on why she was running an absurd race for the insatiable Queen, we hadn't considered why we were doing what we were doing or what we were accomplishing.

The net effect of our efforts was creating consumers in which nothing was different after then before. We spent our energy for nothing except creating demanding consumers.

This all came crashing in on me during a program we ran for about 5 years, during Lent. There was Mass and Stations of the Cross and a featured speaker, but the draw was dinner, which was free; we also had childcare and a student program. And hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people came.

It was called "Family Friendly Friday" but it wasn't really that friendly, at least for our staff. We piled this program on top of everything else we were trying to do.

Well, it was the sixth and final evening, and by the time we got to that point it had seemed like we had been doing it forever and the staff was burnt out.

Anyway I was serving dinner (yep, that's what I did) and a lady approached me to complain about the food (that would be the *free* food). Not only did she complain but she was nasty about it. And she was quickly joined by a chorus of like-minded friends who all wanted to complain about the **free** food.

Something snapped, some artery exploded: I knew in an instant (if you didn't count the previous five years) that I could no longer do this. I was wasting my time... this was my life and I was wasting my time. It wasn't the ingratitude but the lack of purpose and lack of impact we were having.

Why am I doing this?

When we lose our why and lose our purpose, we are adrift on a dangerous sea of disillusion and disappointment that can lead to depression (as it did in my case) and even despair.

Brian Crook

So when it comes to a parish, what is our “why”?

If you are working in parish ministry, how do you know if you are succeeding? As we have found it isn't necessarily getting more people to come to your programs. We had succeeded in getting more people to programs, but that only burnt us out.

When Jesus left this earth, he was very clear about what he wanted the Church to accomplish and do. In Matthew 28, He said, “All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus through his work on the cross had won authority over heaven and earth. So now that he won it back he passed on that authority to the apostles and said, “All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and know I am with you until the end of the age.”

Jesus tells us the purpose of all we do. We are to go and make disciples. And if we are wondering how many disciples Jesus wants us to make, he says, “Make disciples of all nations.”

That's our mission. That's why we exist as a Church. We exist to make disciples. That's it. As a parish we don't have a responsibility for making disciples everywhere, our job is specifically to make disciples in our zip code. If you work in a parish, you exist to make disciples of Jesus Christ of the people in your zip code.

As a parish, it means we don't exist just for the people in our church nor have responsibility for the people in the pews, but a parish means we have care for all people in our geographical boundaries, seeking to bring everyone in our parish boundaries into a relationship with Christ.

The Church exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The why of this parish is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is why we exist. That's it.

So, what exactly are disciples? Students, just students.

Not saints, not fully formed followers, not perfect people, just students of Jesus Christ.

People who are trying to live more like him and grow in him a little more today than yesterday.

When we define a disciple at our church we say that disciples: Love God, Love Others as themselves and Make Disciples.

In the Great Commandment, Jesus summed up the whole law when he said, “The greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

Disciples are students who love God with all their heart, soul and strength. As a church we try and help people love God with all they have through a few disciplines.

This begins with weekend worship at Mass. Mass should be an experience where people draw closer to their heavenly Father through music which helps them to lift up their hearts and soul

to God. Each week we want them to be challenged and encouraged to grow through the weekend message.

Aside from weekend worship, disciples love God through private disciplines, specifically prayer, fasting and giving.

To be helping people grow as disciples, it means they are developing their own personal relationship with him in prayer. They are reading the Bible and growing in his word. They are learning more to hear his voice. As Jesus says in John 10, the sheep hear his voice; they know the voice and the call of the shepherd. They fast at times so they can hear his voice more clearly and no more clearly his will.

Disciples love God with all they have by giving generously. Disciples see everything they have as a gift from God. They honor God with their money and resources by giving to his Church and by giving money to build his kingdom and to the poor.

Disciples are people who are learning more and more to love people as they love themselves. Loving people means valuing people as Jesus valued them.

Loving people means serving them.

Disciples love people as they love themselves. This means disciples know how to practice self-care. As Jesus modeled for us in the Scriptures, he often took time to get away and be with his heavenly Father because he knew he needed to care for himself, he knew he needed that time in order to minister to the crowds and crowds of people.

Disciples love God, love others as they love themselves and disciples make disciples of Jesus Christ. When Jesus called the first disciples, he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And we see throughout the Scriptures that Jesus makes disciples of people so that they will go out and make other disciples.

After Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac, the demoniac wants to go with Jesus in the boat. He asks to go and follow Jesus. Jesus though doesn't let him. Instead he tells the man to go and share with the people in his town what God has done for him. And the next time Jesus returns all the townspeople go out to greet him.

After Jesus speaks to the woman at the well, she gets the whole townspeople to come out and greet him.

So disciples love God, love others and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We are to be forming disciples of Jesus Christ. But if we are honest, many times our programs create more consumers than disciples. Rather than creating people who serve and mutually encourage one another, they create people who are less loving.

So the change in our church began when we realized we weren't creating disciples and that whatever it was we were doing wasn't really succeeding as Jesus called us to succeed.

Fr. White

Our journey took off when we humbled ourselves to learn from others. Eventually we did the obvious thing: we looked to successful churches, intentionally growing churches. So we set out to learn from growing, healthy churches what we could do. Even if that meant turning to Protestant Churches.

We started at a place called Saddleback Church in Orange County California. Which is Rick Warren's church, though nobody knew who he was at the time. We remember the first time we went out there, which was about 10 years ago now. We felt scared to go. We worried about being "outed" as Catholics in an Evangelical setting.

Being on their campus felt like being on a different planet, it was overwhelming. I remember parking the car and approaching what I assumed was the church building only to find out it was a nursery building. It was big and new and beautiful and totally dedicated to Sunday school for nursery students. On the other hand, when we finally made our way over to the church it was big, for sure, but entirely plain, a Walmart with chairs. In my experience of churchworld, big churches meant expensive churches, churches with fancy finishes. Nothing fancy here.

But it wasn't even primarily the buildings or the campus, it was the people. There was something different about the people of Saddleback than our Church. They were so friendly and happy and happy to see us. We walked through the front door and were so warmly greeted, I went out a side door and circled back around, to find out if it would happen again. It did. Why were these people so happy, what did they have to be happy about? I grew up in church, and have been in church my whole life, I lived in Rome, I'd never seen people actually happy to be in church, much less happy to see me.

Brian Crook

Along with Saddleback, we studied some other growing, healthy mega Churches including Willow Creek in Chicago, Fellowship Church in Dallas and North Point in Atlanta.

We learned several lessons from those Churches, but three most vital were:

One, change our focus from church people to unchurched people.

Two, prioritize the weekend above all our other efforts.

Three, move church people to action.

Let me repeat those.

One, change our focus from church people to unchurched people. We started trying to think of the Church experience from the perspective of the person NOT coming to Church instead of the person already attending.

Two, prioritize the weekend above all efforts. We have an axiom we borrowed from another pastor. It's about the weekend, stupid. The weekend experience has become our top priority.

Three, move church people to maturity and action. Challenge them to take ownership of the parish. So let's look at these in a few deeper ways.

Fr. White

FIRST – FOCUS ON UNCHURCHED PEOPLE

Change in our church came when we took the focus off the church people and thought about creating an environment unchurched people would want to be a part of. If you think about it, in your community there is a much bigger market for unchurched than church people. More people aren't going to church on a regular basis than are going to church.

We began to focus on the quintessential unchurched person, and we began by describing him. Being in Timonium, we call him Timonium Tim. Tim is a good guy. He grew up catholic, was probably confirmed catholic but once his parents stopped making him go to Church he stopped going. What he knows from Catholicism is a muddled mess of what he thinks he remembers from Confirmation classes and what he learned from the Da Vinci code.

Tim has a stressful life, especially during the week. He's got a long commute. And he often finds himself driving his three kids in three different directions. He's racked up a bunch of debt because he is living beyond his means.

So on Sunday mornings, Tim wants to relax or do what he wants to do, which means Tim usually finds himself at a Baltimore Ravens game or playing golf, or running around for his kids sports or just staying home, but it does not find him at church because for him Church is boring and bad.

When we evaluated our church we realized it wasn't very welcoming toward Tim. We didn't have a great experience. As a church we are competing with the NFL and golf courses and the mall for people's free time.

As a church we are still under the impression that if we open the doors people will come. We are expecting people to come out of obligation or guilt or habit. But those days are dead and gone.

So if we want to be attractive to be people who are not going to Church, we need to make sure we create a welcoming environment on the weekend for people to be a part of. We have to have provide excellence and put our very best energies into the time Tim comes to church, which is on the weekend.

Brian Crook

SECOND– PRIORITIZE THE WEEKEND EXPERIENCE

The weekend is the greatest opportunity to make an impact on people. Most people are on our campus on a weekend. Even when you run other programs you never get as many people gathered as you do on the weekend. In those Family Friendly Fridays, we worked so hard to get 600 or so people to come out on a Friday night, which was only a little more than a third of our weekend attendance at the time. How much smarter is it to invest more and more of our energy on weekend experiences than on events where we get far fewer people attending.

If people have a bad or mediocre experience on the weekend then they assume the Church has nothing to say to them otherwise.

Think about it - If you go to a restaurant that has bad service, poor food, you don't care how well they keep their books and do their accounting. You aren't going to go there again. Your experience has ruined you. If people come to a church and it isn't a great experience then they assume we don't have anything to say to them. On the other hand if we create an excellent experience then they believe we have something to offer them.

The Mass is the source and summit of our faith so it deserves our very best efforts, so that people come to see the importance of the Mass. It is important to note that the unchurched don't see the inherent value of the Eucharist. If the Eucharist was enough, then every Catholic Church would be full. We help people to see the value the Eucharist by bringing our efforts to it. The three elements we bring to the Mass are music, message and ministers.

So to maximize the weekend, we need music, message and ministers working together. Right now we will focus on our ministers.

Ministers create the energy of the Church. We have a whole set of ministries that are put in place to help create a welcoming environment: parking team, greeters and host ministers. Parking ministers help people find a parking spot. This sets the tone right from the beginning. Then there are greeters at the door to open the door and smile and people. Then there are host team members who help people to find a seat.

Information ministers help with information. Café ministers serve coffee and doughnuts and other food after Mass. All this has to do with creating an irresistible environment people want to be a part of.

Aside from the ministries that support the guest experience has been our children's programs. One of the important things to note about our children's programs is that they are available at most Masses. We have our Kidzone which is for kids 3 and under, All Stars is from 4-6 and we have a program we call Time Travelers which is our children's liturgy of the word program.

So often it is kids that bring their parents to church and if you can create a great environment for kids, they will beg their parents to come to church. Also, if you give parents a break so that church becomes an opportunity where they are nourished and able to look forward to that time, they will keep coming back.

THIRD: MOTIVATE CHURCH PEOPLE TO MOVE AND ACT

The book of the Bible that describes the life of the Church's early exuberance and fruitfulness and momentum is called Acts of the Apostles. They got moving, they did something. The core church people need to be challenged beyond simply consuming to creating an environment unchurched people want to be a part of as well as to caring for one another.

However, so often we challenge unchurched people and comfort insiders or church people. We get it exactly backwards.

Fr. White

I believe God has a great vision for our parishes. People are leaving the Catholic Church in droves in the United States. Largest group is Catholics, second largest is baptists, third is former Catholics. They have given up on connecting to God through the Church.

You and I are here because that bothers us. A growing number of Catholics see this and it bothers them and they want to do something about it, but they have no vision. They don't have a vision for what a modern day parish can engage the culture. And so their parishes continue to languish.

The Book of Esther takes place during the heartbreaking exile of the Jews. At this point in the story they've lost their homeland and their freedom, but worse still is in store for them. An evil counselor to the ruler of the land, the king of Persia, plots the extermination of the entire Jewish people.

Meanwhile, God raises up a simple Jewish girl and places her in the unlikely position of queen of Persia. And then he plants a vision in Esther, to save his people. It comes in the words of a friend who tells her she must go to the king and intercede (a dangerous thing for even the queen to do). Her friend tells her:

*If you remain silent at this time,
relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place,
but you and your father's family will perish.
And who knows but that you have come to royal position
for such a time as this?*

Esther 4:14

Of course, she gets to work and literally saves the day. God placed her in a position of influence and gave her a vision for exactly the time and the circumstances she was in.

Who knows if God hasn't placed you in your parish for such a time as this.