

# WHAT IS A *Vibrant Parish?*



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What pops into your mind when you hear the word *vibrant*? Maybe it's bright colors that really make an impact. Perhaps it is the sound of brass instruments playing on a football field. It could be a room filled with party-goers or even a stadium filled for a concert. Whatever picture comes to mind, it's hard sometimes to really explain a word like *vibrant*. However, we know for sure what vibrant does *not* look like: the color gray, a single brass instrument, a quiet library, or an empty concert hall. When speaking about vibrant churches, we might not know exactly what that looks like, but we know for sure what it does *not* look like.

When looking up antonyms for the word vibrant, you will find words like listless and dull. Listless is another one of the words we might have a hard time describing, but we all pretty much understand dull. It could be offensive to some, or be a cause for a theological debate, to ever say one's local parish is dull. However, let's get real. Even if I am to assert every parish that has Jesus Christ present in the Holy Eucharist cannot by definition be considered dull, then we would have to agree that some parishes are more or less vibrant than others. Some parishes seem to be more alive, happier, or dynamic than others. Some communities seem to be thriving and attracting

or retaining more people than others. Some parishes seem to be clearer reflections of the Kingdom of God than others.

## THE 4 QUADRANTS OF A VIBRANT PARISH

Each parish is a unique community made up of people with varied experiences. The character and personality exhibited in your community is different than that of my community. The experiences of the inner-city church, the rural church, the newly-formed community, and the historical parish are quite different. Where we are in our journey may differ, but we should all be striving toward the same goal: introducing people to Jesus Christ and assisting them in growing their relationship with him and the Body of Christ. It is the tools and methods available to assist us that we have in common.

When looking to improve your parish, focusing on LPI's 4 Quadrants of a Vibrant Parish can be of great assistance to you. The 4 areas of focus are discipleship, identity, communication, and formation. Working on these 4 areas is not the only path toward vibrancy, but it does provide an excellent framework from which your parish can engage more people and create a community where parishioners and seekers alike can grow in their discipleship.

## 1. DISCIPLESHIP (PLANNING & STEWARDSHIP)

How we choose to live as disciples matters. We are communities of individuals called and chosen by Christ, seeking to follow his commands and growing in relationship with him. Too often, we fail to take seriously our responsibility as disciples.

This quadrant is divided into 2 key areas: having a plan and living a stewardship way of life. Our focus here is on how we live out our lives responsibly as disciples. If we are who we say we are, then we will respond to God's daily call in a thoughtful and intentional manner.

The great Yankee legend, Yogi Berra, said, "If you do not know where you are going, you will end up someplace else." My experience is that too many parishes end up someplace else due to a lack of vision and concrete goals. Planning takes many different forms: long-range, short-term, financial budgeting, etc. All forms of planning and visioning processes can yield fruit at different times and are essential for moving a community forward. Parishes also need to be serious about organizing their data to identify trends, needs, and talents in the community. How can a parish be a good steward of all the gifts provided to them by their parishioners if they have no plan and analysis of the state of the community?

Stewardship living is the response of the mature disciple to all the gifts God has given them. Parishes are not only called to teach their parishioners about stewardship, but the parish itself is called to stewardship living. The individual apostolate we are all called to as disciples is mirrored in the communal apostolate of the community. How does the parish share its resources with the world around them? What example does the parish give to each of us of the transformative power of good stewardship?

The necessity of good planning and fruitful stewardship is most profoundly understood when a parish understands *why* it does these things at all: *to lead people to heaven*. You could have as the primary goals more people doing stuff and more money in the collection, but over time, those goals will not sustain a vision and growth. When a parish has the goal of leading people to Jesus at the center of its vision, their labor will bear the greatest fruit and people will be drawn to the mission.

## 2. IDENTITY (HOSPITALITY & BRAND)

The late Archbishop Thomas Murphy said, "Belonging leads to belief." The Church's current discussions of how evangelization works puts emphasis on the fact that trust

is inherent in any meaningful and lasting conversion process. Trust is necessary to a sense of belonging to something bigger than yourself. Paying attention to how we bring about initial trust in people, and how we foster a sense of belonging and ownership of their community, is essential to building a vibrant parish.

The ways in which we welcome the visitor, the seeker, and the disciple must be intentional but also sincere. Going through the motions of shaking hands at the entrance to the church, hosting newcomer dinners, and greeting callers on the parish office phone only bear fruit if they come from a welcoming heart. A parish can implement all the ideas from all the workshops in the world, but without a welcoming heart, those who come to be welcomed will suspect an ulterior motive. Hospitality is not something we do — it is something *we are*.

Just as we are always seeking to be welcomed at our parish no matter how long we have been there, we also are always seeking a greater sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves. Too many parishes disregard the value of creating a brand, thinking things like logos and a consistent color palette are for businesses and civil organizations alone. They also fail to understand just how branding works.

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My wife loves the Baltimore Ravens. After Mass on Sunday, she comes home and goes upstairs. When she descends, she is wearing a Ravens cap, Ravens earrings, Ravens socks, and a Ravens jersey. She then places herself in a Ravens Snuggie that makes her look like a football player and sits down, ready for the game. Make no mistake: my wife is not just a fan. She is a part of something bigger than herself.

I have seen parishes foster this type of belonging by using branding that speaks to the real mission and character of the community. To be able to wear your parish brand, or to place it on your car and bear witness to who you are and where you belong, is very powerful. It aids us in evangelizing others, and it serves as a constant reminder to whom we belong. If the parish has already taken very seriously the first quadrant above, then a person is able to see in a brand that they not only belong to a parish community, but also to the One who has called them by name to that community: Jesus.



### 3. COMMUNICATION (DIGITAL & PRINT)

After working for over 25 years in the Church, I have come to realize several truths, one of which is that every organization could use better communication. Communication consists of the message itself and how we deliver that message. Too often in a parish, we fall short in both areas. We do not proficiently utilize all the tools available, and we often offer a message that does not inspire or move the hearts of anyone.

Before focusing on how you will communicate, it is essential to understand clearly what it is you need to communicate. If the parish is serious about becoming mission-oriented and introducing people to Jesus Christ, the Gospel must be the center point of our communication strategy. Too many parishes give more time and effort to communicating the spaghetti dinner fundraiser than the Good News. What you consistently choose to communicate will make it clear what you stand for and why you exist. Imagine a website, bulletin, or Facebook page that consistently tells people about Jesus!

With your communication vision set, it becomes crucial to have a plan of how you will communicate that vision. If the Gospel is at the center of your communication strategy, the quality and accessibility of your methods becomes even more crucial. You have a message more important than any corporation. Think about how a business uses social media, websites, smartphone apps, and e-mail. They want you to buy something. That pales in comparison to your goal of preaching the Good News to the ends of the earth.

Great care is needed in putting together your website and other digital communications. The temptation is to only communicate the essentials: Mass times, contact information, how to donate online. However, how and what you communicate will go a long way in influencing how parishioners and seekers alike view your community. Thinking about quadrants 1 and 2, does your digital communication have a welcoming tone? Does the receiver feel called to or included in a mission? Have you helped to support a stewardship way of life?

In our live Building a Vibrant Parish Seminars, we discuss print communication in the fourth quadrant as a means of catechesis and evangelization, but it is, of course, a key part of our overall parish communication strategy. Parish bulletins and newsletters continue to be key ways of communicating, even in a digital age. Nearly 75% of people continue to see their bulletin as a reliable source, and much of its importance lies in the fact that it is something a Mass-goer can take away from their church experience. Taking seriously how you draw people into the pages with color, graphics, and a willingness to include words that speak to the reality of their lives is paramount. If no one reads your bulletin, then ask yourself if there is actually anything to read in it. Like a “Field of Dreams,” I have found time and time again that if you build it correctly, they will come and read it.

### 4. FORMATION (EVANGELIZATION & CATECHESIS)

The reason why we discuss print communication in this quadrant in the live seminar is to hammer home the point that the most important things in our communication strategy are evangelization and catechesis. It speaks to who we are as Church, and it is more important than any other message. St. Pope John Paul II reminded us that “there is no separation between catechesis and evangelization.” If you are doing one well, than you are also engaged in the other.

For practical purposes, this quadrant is fourth, but if you see the four quadrants as a wheel, it becomes both the first and the last. It rests at the foundation of any vibrant parish. However, it is an area neglected and under-resourced for too long. Evangelization and catechesis are not to be confined to classes or committees. They should permeate our plans, be the key components of our identity, and dictate how and what we communicate.

We are called to share our faith and the love of God with others. However, we cannot share what we do not have. We ask so much of those sitting in the pews, but many of them are not intentional disciples. We urge people to be more mindful of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, but we have failed to introduce them to the real person of Jesus. He is not a theological construct or a topic for discussion — he is alive and real! Jesus rests at the center of any vibrant parish community.

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When looking to build a vibrant parish, there is so much more to say and elaborate on than can fit into this article. So please join us at a live seminar near you or online for our Building a Vibrant Parish webinar series. **Visit [www.4lpi.com](http://www.4lpi.com) for more information.**