

Membership

At first, it may seem like a good idea to open up membership on your liturgy committee to anyone who happens to come forward, or who seems like a nice person, or who's new in the parish, or who did yeoman service in another parish organization. In this chapter, we hope to convince you otherwise, and to give you some ideas about how to get the people you *really* need.

Working on liturgy is different from the parish carnival, the community chest, or the altar society. Some parish activities, to be frank, require only physical labor, lots of time, and an enormous amount of good will. Liturgy evaluation and discussion, on the other hand, ideally require less time but a great deal of independent thinking.

Be honest. You have to admit that many parishioners are not the types to play a role that may require them to evaluate the parish's long-standing customs and staff members. The very idea is foreign to them. They may even be associated with the parish's volunteer activities simply because of their strong sense of territory — *my* parish. (Or, they may not have anything better to do.)

This is not to suggest that you are establishing a new hierarchy that systematically excludes certain groups. But we are saying that the ability to give honest, constructive criticism is not a gift shared by all — nor is musical talent, leadership, or the ability to give good homilies. Your liturgy committee needs these particular talents, not just hard or willing workers.

The Two Groups You Need

The easiest way to think of the people who will make up the membership of your parish committee may be to picture two groups, both of which need to be fully represented:

1. Those who already have a creative role in the liturgy

We've already suggested that your music director, and your coordinators of important ministries such as lectors and eucharistic ministers, may be involved with your committee from the start, and included as members right in your committee's charter. That's a good start, because at least half of your committee should be made up of people who are already, week after week, actively involved in some ministry at one or more of your parish's liturgies.

Why is this a good thing? In the first place, because it will give you a core group of already active people — people who, even if they cannot yet articulate it, have an allegiance to a particular liturgy or liturgical style. Your primary challenge here will not be to get them to develop some clear likes and dislikes, but to get them to articulate the ones they already have.

Second, it will give you (we hope) at least two groups of people whose liturgical preferences are somewhat at odds. Perhaps you will find this conflict unproductive — it can easily become so. But we think it's preferable to having people who are there because it doesn't matter to them which liturgy they attend; after all, they like the Mass. This will get very boring after a while.

Third, it's only fair. Your parish committee will, through its financial and personnel decisions, determine the future of the liturgies of your parish. The key people who have been working on these liturgies need to be heard regularly, and to hear what's being said about their work.

Note that we added the qualifier "creative" to the criterion. We don't want to suggest a hierarchy, but it's important to distinguish the people whose choices will actually shape the liturgy, and those whose actions are more routine, though they may be vital. For example, in some parishes the person who coordinates the lectors simply insures that someone is present at all the liturgies. Such a coordinator does not play a creative role in the liturgy, so his or her presence is less critical than a person who is more proactive — say, by reviewing the lector list and winnowing the less effective. Likewise, ushers who are working on their contribution to hospitality are more critical for your group than a head usher whose first love is counting the collection.

2. Those parishioners whose temperament inclines them to the evaluation of liturgies

Mixed in with your active liturgists and ministers of various stripes, include some number of people who may not serve as active liturgical ministers. But these are not to be thought of by any stretch of the imagination as ordinary folks.

Review the job description we set out in Chapter 1 for a good liturgy committee member. Think about it carefully as you talk to people who have expressed an interest in membership, or as you read over the questionnaires you've devised to

separate the pious from the perceptive. You want people who have opinions but not prejudices; people who may like one style of liturgy but are willing to sit still through a few others. You want people who are interested in seeing some particular things happen but are willing to let other people have their way, too — as long as that way isn't a genuine threat to the committee's goals for the parish's liturgies.

But articulate members like this are hard to find, and they're rare for two reasons. The first is that there just aren't that many people who've had a strong enough experience of good liturgy that would make them want to recreate that experience in another setting. Bad liturgy breeds indifferent Catholics; a strong liturgical community, on the other hand, will have enthusiastic alumni everywhere. Bad liturgy, however, is far more common than good.

The other reason such people are scarce is that, like most perceptive and articulate people, they're busy. Not busy with other parish activities, maybe, but just busy with their own lives, with a variety of other projects and interests they find rewarding. They are people who are inclined to articulate their likes and dislikes, and that means they're not inclined to sit still for something that wastes their time, no matter how admirable the purported goal. It's tough to rope these people in for a meeting, but these are exactly the people you want.

How will you find them? By taking the opposite course of most parishes that need people to help out, which is latching on to those people who are still sitting around after everyone else leaves. You need to make your group seem a desirable one — one that has a clear goal, and clear responsibilities; one where people's time is not abused; one that clearly has an effect on liturgies; one that fosters friendships and fun.

You'll communicate these things primarily by doing them; a successful group accomplishing things and enjoying itself will quickly attract others by word of mouth. But suppose you're just now trying to get some fresh blood into your committee. Keep two points in mind as an ongoing public relations program for your group:

1. Write your announcements and membership pitches with a great deal of care.

Don't be condescending, and above all don't be vague. Most bulletin announcements for every type of parish activity are weak on detail, not to mention personality. Instead, take the opportunity to tell people what you do: Remember, *people have no idea* what the liturgy committee does.

- Give examples of what the committee has accomplished.
- Say how long the meetings are, and how often they are.
- Imply that the material for discussion is substantive, and not limited to issues of scheduling, decorations, or heavy lifting.
- Say who's on the committee, and how big the group is.

Developing Perfect Pitch

Bad Pitch

The Liturgy Committee meeting will be held two weeks from this Tuesday night at 7:30 in the rectory. All are welcome.

Longer but Better Pitch

The Parish Liturgy Committee will have its regular monthly meeting this Tuesday night in the rectory. We'll discuss the possibility of establishing daily morning prayer, and form a small group to plan and evaluate our parish's Holy Week celebrations. Meetings are informal (there are only twelve of us) and last no more than an hour. Those who come just to listen may well decide to ask how to become a member — after all, lately the food hasn't been half bad. The committee's chairperson is Bub Muldoon [Bub's phone number goes here].

- Hand out your job description.
- Don't settle for a bald announcement of the liturgy committee's next meeting date and time — if you're going to bother to announce it at all, give people a reason to come.
- Don't take yourselves too seriously (people get enough of that at their regular jobs).
- Keep your announcements and invitations coming regularly. Some of your most valuable potential members may be busy enough to be only occasional bulletin readers, and may miss your perfunctory annual announcement.

It can be tricky to find the right tone of voice and approach for your parish, but that's no excuse for poor communications work. (See "Developing Perfect Pitch," at left, for some ideas.)

2. Be visible.

If your liturgy committee has a reading list (see Appendix A), offer the books for sale parish-wide. If you're going to go on an unusual field trip, invite people to come along as guests. Have your committee members (wearing name tags) occasionally visit each parish liturgy and hang around afterward to meet people. Keep thinking of ways to make your parish committee sound busy, challenging, and full of potential friends.

3. Create interesting and varied short-term assignments.

We suggested in Chapter 1 that your

parish committee will have a need for a wide variety of working groups and teams in addition to the parish committee. Some of these groups may be ongoing, addressing projects such as your worship environment, where there's always something to do. Still others may focus on a particular project that has a beginning, middle, and end — say, for example, learning about and experimenting with evening prayer, or logistics for your parish's 50th anniversary liturgy.

Groups like this offer an ideal opportunity to introduce parishioners to the work of your parish liturgy committee overall. Because the task for the working group will probably sound more specific, manageable, or at least finite than the work of the parish committee, you'll be more likely to attract someone who isn't sure what a parish liturgy committee might be like, but finds the particular project appealing.

So it's important, throughout the year, to be inviting members of the parish to be involved in a variety of liturgical projects and study efforts. Some people who become involved in one of these smaller projects may decide to stay put working on that particular task. That's OK; if that's the work they enjoy doing, be grateful. But others, working on a one-shot project, may meet a few people involved with your parish committee and hit it off, and decide that what your parish committee is doing sounds interesting. There's no better pool of potential recruits for your group than people who have already met a few of your members in the context of a project and decided that they seem pretty enjoyable to work with.

Starting Up a New Group

The toughest question is how to get a new committee going from scratch. Suppose you're a pastor, an associate, a music director or a parish council member, and you're faced with the need to start from zero (or one: you). Where do you begin?

As with many organizational issues in this book, we can't really lay down any hard and fast rules. You know your parish, your staff, and your history better than we do. Nevertheless, here are a few guidelines you may find useful as you set off down that lonesome road.

How big?

The size of your group should reflect its function — in general, small groups *do*, and big groups *think*. This principle applies to both your parish committee and your working groups.

We think actually planning a liturgy or working out a creative solution to a problem is what the psychologists call a disjunctive task¹ — a job where the result depends more on talent and skills than on brute force. In disjunctive tasks, the end result is only as good as the most talented individual member of the group — which means that adding in a lot of people making little contribution will not

1. Marvin E. Shaw, *Group Dynamics*, second edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), pp. 320-21.

make the group, or its work, any better. Don't let your recruiting efforts for working groups with a particular issue to explore or solution to find let you wind up with a lot of people whose presence only slows things down.

In the parish committee, though, since the tasks involve representation and evaluation rather than creative work, theoretically you could use a bigger group — big enough to get a variety of viewpoints. Six to ten is a good size to shoot for at first, and perhaps no bigger — because the bigger your parish committee gets, the more problems you'll face. For one thing, people prefer to work in smaller groups; while big groups mean a greater chance that someone will find someone in the group they like and thus be inclined to stick around, they also mean that people are far less inclined to make a significant contribution.² In addition, the bigger the group, and the more diverse it becomes, the stronger the leadership you need to get things done.

Yet while we hope you decide to start small, we hope you don't let our warnings about group size blind you to an even greater danger — the fear of new people. Some groups — like yours, if you're starting from nothing — are desperate for new members. Others, for a variety of reasons, regard them as a threat, because they interrupt business as usual. In a polarized group, new people can change the chemistry and cause old coalitions to be reformed; in a homogeneous group they may just not seem to fit in to what has become a very comfortable parish social club. Any group that doesn't want a fairly steady flow of old people leaving and new people coming in is showing signs of degeneration — be on guard for it.

Who's on first?

No matter how desperate your situation, you'll probably be able to start out with several people who have a vested interest in your liturgical situation: a musician or two, and perhaps an active (and excellent) lector. That gives you four members, unless you're one of the above. Between the four of you, surely you can find two others — but don't act hastily, or out of desperation. Look for people you think would be effective, not people to fill seats. Finding a solid core group of congenial people is crucial at this stage; don't feel bad if you haven't been open about the selection process as long as it means that you're starting strong.

If you need to put out an ad, don't automatically accept anyone who answers it. Invite people who express an interest to a meeting or two as observers — perhaps you'll even ask them to fill out a questionnaire based on your job description, or at least take them out for a drink and talk it over. After that, the committee can decide whether it would like to extend an invitation to join.

2. This even applies to churches. One study of five sociologically similar Milwaukee Methodist parishes found that members of the smaller communities participated in more different kinds of activities, held more leadership positions, spent more time in parish activities, attended church more often, and even contributed more money. Allan W. Wicker, "Size of Church Membership and Members' Support of Church Behavior Settings," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 13 (1969) 278-88.

And in general, in spite of whatever pressure you may feel to add particular people to your committee, or simply to get new faces, this is a pattern you will find useful throughout all the stages of your group's development: (1) new member attends a few meetings, or participates in a working group; (2) formal or informal review process; (3) invitation to join. Breaking down all the barriers to membership may seem like a good or a fair idea — but in fact it only threatens to water down your group with nonparticipating members and prevent a committee from developing a sense of its own special qualifications and expertise for the job at hand. Remember, if you'll take anybody who shows up, what does that say about the people who are already there?

What about the clergy?

Now, another natural for any committee: the clergy. Maybe the pastor and all the staff. In the long run, of course, you'll want them all. But take a closer look at what might, and in all too many cases *does*, happen.

You have a new committee that's just going to be learning about liturgy, feeling its way, trying to develop a sense of its own range of opinions. Then you introduce a priest who everyone sort of assumes has had some sort of liturgical training somewhere along the line. That can be a good thing — if the priest involved is determined to foster leadership roles in the group besides his own. But it can also be very dangerous to your group's organizational childhood. Couple the priest's assumed expertise and the *leadership* role many will automatically grant him, and you run the risk of keeping the lay members of your committee in a permanent state of dependency.

If you're a layperson trying to get a group off the ground, you might suggest to your pastor that the committee could benefit from a few meetings without him present as well as with him. Perhaps you'll get your first members together and have a few informal brainstorming sessions about what's right (or wrong) with your liturgies. Read some books together (like this one). Visit some "great" liturgies nearby and talk about them among yourselves. Then start to consider your own parish's liturgies more seriously — and then, invite some members of your parish's staff along to participate. By that point, your group will have some reflections to share that are truly their own, and won't feel as if without direction from the pastor or the staff they wouldn't know where to turn.

All this is much less critical for a group that's had a chance to get going — they may be accustomed to occasionally debating the suggestions of the clergy or the music director, as well as making use of the expertise and insights they have. For these groups, indeed for any group, priests can clearly function successfully as a committee's resident expert, or even as "ordinary" members. But a new group, unsure of itself, is more likely to depend on a priest-leader and neglect its own responsibilities to sharpen its own skills and goal-setting abilities.

All these caveats also apply to any sort of “experts” in your parish — from the organist with a master’s degree from Juilliard to the sister who once went to a weekend liturgy workshop. The key issue here, as with the clergy, is separating the concept of leadership from that of expertise. Your leaders (as we’ll discuss in the next chapter) need to know what expertise is, but don’t have to *be* experts; your experts, by the same token, are not necessarily the people who need to be your leaders (and often *shouldn’t* be).

The danger of setting up a society of experts and drones is a very real one. The only solution is to give the whole issue of membership development and training constant attention. How? Start by creating opportunities for “regular” members to work one-on-one with the experts — form small discussion or research teams to examine particular questions. Don’t always defer questions to the experts (“Monsignor, is that the right way to do it?”) — ask someone else to master the documents and regulations. If you work at it imaginatively, you’ll wind up with a committee where everyone’s learning, and feels confident in their own knowledge and ability to work independently.

Cleaning House

A situation akin to starting from scratch is when you wish you *could* start from scratch. Suppose your parish committee is a contentious group with a long history of conflict that has caused a permanent stall. Or a group where the entrenched majority never stops playing their favorite tunes. Or a group that *looks* bored but is actually quite happy in its inactivity. What to do?

Some creative conflict (see Chapter 4) is the first thing to try. A brace of new members, some unusual agendas, and a little confrontation may work wonders. But if you genuinely feel that the situation is not salvageable, we think you should face facts, and start from square one. Put everyone on notice, set up some membership criteria, and start over building the kind of group you need.

Naturally, this could be buying you a lot of trouble — existing members relieved of their duties may complain to everyone, write to the bishop, exert pressure, and put up quite a fight. Our only advice is *to stick with the process once you have begun it*. It’s far worse to have to try to smooth over an event like this if it’s somehow stopped in the middle; if you’re forced to back down, your leadership as pastor or as chairperson has suffered a terminal blow to its credibility. If you’re the chairperson in a situation like this, reach an understanding with your pastor *beforehand* about how much trouble there’s likely to be, and make sure that he (or your parish council) won’t pull the rug out from under you once any fighting starts.