

The Agenda

I am a great believer,...if you have a meeting, in knowing where you want to come out before you start the meeting. Excuse me if that doesn't sound very democratic.

— Nelson Rockefeller¹

We've said a lot about agendas in this book, and perhaps we've convinced you already that every meeting — particularly a parish committee meeting — needs an agenda, probably a written one. In this chapter, we'll propose that the art of agenda planning, both for individual meetings and over longer stretches of time, can not only hold your group together but may be the only hope for moving it forward.

Why Are Agendas So Powerful?

Many people have an inbred prejudice against the whole idea of an “agenda” — your parish, you may think, is no place for any sort of unnecessary red tape or bureaucracy. *We agree.* We simply think there are some important reasons why a well-crafted agenda can actually be more considerate of your membership, and your parish, than no agenda at all.

Reason 1: All in all, parish committees don't meet very often.

It's unlikely that your parish group will be able or willing to meet more than once a month or so, and during the summer you may decide to slow that schedule down

1. Quoted in Joseph E. Persico, *The Imperial Rockefeller* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), pp. 209-10.

even further. That means you have at most *twelve meetings a year* in which to consider some important and complex questions directly affecting your community. If you don't have an agenda — for each meeting, and a more general year-long set of priorities for your group — you'll find that the important issues you really need to talk about somehow fall by the wayside, because you just never seem to have enough time.

You *do* have enough time; you just have to plan it well. You can avoid the usual state of affairs by putting together a list of the major issues you want to make sure you deal with during the course of a year, and then, when planning agendas for individual meetings, making sure it's *those* issues you're spending the time on, and not simply whatever happens to come up.

This process of formulating the “big picture” for your committee shouldn't take an experienced chairperson more than an evening of serious thinking each year. Make a list of topics you think your committee needs to address; you can consult the next section of this chapter for our opinion on a basic checklist of topics, or you can use your own judgment about what's important in your parish and what isn't. Now, take that list of topics and pencil in an annual cycle of meetings, assuming that each of those topics is important enough to take up a whole session, or parts of several sessions over the course of your committee's year. What time each year will you review the budget, November? There's one meeting right there. How about a discussion, one year after it started, of your new Saturday evening liturgy? Again, that could take up a whole meeting. You've only got ten meetings left, and maybe fewer.

There's no need for chairpeople to circulate this whole year's plan to everyone on the committee. But the exercise is a useful and necessary one nevertheless, because a plan like this can help you remember that you *do* have some control over how the year goes. During the year, you may make course corrections and changes in your original vision of the year's agenda, based on your sense of urgent new business. But that flexibility shouldn't extend to allowing your committee's more tiresome members, or your parish staff, or general inertia to stall your group on old, unproductive, trivial business.

Your time is too precious to waste on unplanned, boring topics, or on whatever axes your members have brought in for their regular grinding. Devote your agenda planning to the big questions your group needs to start working on; funny thing, you'll find that you won't have room for those silly details that used to take up hours.

Reason 2: Groups don't survive if they're weighed down by long meetings.

That's a fact of organizational life, and it's true no matter how much your members

like each other and no matter how interesting the discussion is. Many parish organizations have a way of abusing their members' time, assuming that because they're volunteers the time they're donating has no value. You, however, know better — in fact, because most of your members are volunteers, your group should work even harder to make sure they find the time they spend interesting and rewarding.

That's why we continue to advocate one of the most radical reforms ever attempted in parish life: *No meeting should run longer than an hour*. All right, if you really twist our arms and throw in coffee, we'd sometimes be willing to go to ninety minutes, but absolutely no more than that. You've recruited some busy and talented people for your committee; you have no right to demand that, once a month, they write off an entire evening for your inefficient meanderings. (See "Let Us Pray?" at right.) People have children to spend time with, television to watch, and other work to do. All those things are more fun than a bad liturgy meeting.

What the One-Hour Rule means, though, is even more pressure on the chairperson to put together a solid agenda shorn of argument and dead air. It also demands that any agenda, even a good and substantive one, be helped along by three important behind-the-scenes activities.

1. Define exactly what you're supposed to discuss and decide.

Don't say that the meeting is "to talk

Let Us Pray?

Many committees, with all the good will in the world, feel that a liturgy committee meeting should include prayer. After all, it's all about prayer, isn't it?

At the risk of sounding like pagans, we're going to suggest that you use prayer at liturgy meetings sparingly. In the first place, there's our all-important One-Hour Rule on the length of meetings to consider. But mostly, our phobia has been brought on by the prayers sometimes concocted for parish meetings: heartfelt, yes, but also long, free-form, and wordy, with droning group recitations of homemade prayers, and perhaps a cassette tape for meditation. We suspect that as many members are left cold by this kind of thing as are inspired by it — but of course, are too polite to say so.

Certainly a brief prayer at the beginning or end from the pastor or the chairperson, asking for a blessing, can give a meeting focus. (*The Book of Blessings* — your parish very likely has a copy — has several good ones for starters.) But a 15-minute, or even a 5-minute, mini-ritual sitting around a table isn't the best use of your meeting time in the long run. Simply put, a bad liturgy probably won't help you do better work on good liturgy.

However, if your group has the talents or the energy, several times a year you could precede your meeting by celebrating, in your church or chapel, a liturgy with a track record: evening prayer itself. Its simple and ancient forms are easy to become familiar with, and can bring your group into contact with a tradition at least as old as Sunday Eucharist. Don't be put off by the humongous four-volume *Liturgy of the*

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Let Us Pray...continued

Hours or even its shorter one-volume adaptations; for groups that will only celebrate morning or evening prayer occasionally, they're too complex. Instead, interested committees could choose *Praise God in Song* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1979), *Pray Without Ceasing* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), or one of the other adaptations that include music. Certainly, as with made-up meeting rituals, evening prayer can be done badly. But working, over time, to make it a familiar part of your community's life is itself a useful and formative project for any group to take on.

about Lent." Say that, at the meeting, you'll share reactions to an article or two you've asked your committee to read, review some proposed changes in lenten priorities, and review notes and evaluations from last Lent. You should probably also assign a time limit for each of those activities, and stick to that limit closely unless the discussion really takes some interesting turns. That not only means that you'll save time on talk related to Lent; it means you have the best excuse in the world for cutting Mrs. Pinkowski short when she begins to wander off on the subject of the women's retreat.

The existence of a firm agenda recognizes that big meetings aren't good places for brainstorming or free-form discussion; people need to have a chance to think about the issues at hand *before* they come. That's why it's always a good idea to mail or distribute the final agenda, and as much supporting material as you can get together, to everyone on the committee *at least* a week before the meeting. (That also serves the invaluable purpose of reminding your members that there *is* a meeting coming up.)

2. Delegate some initial groundwork beforehand.

That meeting on Lent should be preceded — perhaps even several months in advance — by the formation of a smaller working group of two or three people. Its members will do some reading, review what's been done in the past, talk informally with the pastor and

the music director about what they'd like to see reflected in next year's celebrations, and perhaps prepare a proposed schedule of lenten liturgies with some notes on what they'd like to see done a little differently this coming year. By the time the parish committee's lenten meeting rolls around in, say, early January, that working group can present some interesting choices that the parish committee can react to and prioritize. Particularly if the working group has mailed out some background material to the parish committee *before* the meeting, that means the parish meeting should be over with time to spare.

The same goes for most topics on a parish committee's list. Small groups *do*; big groups consider, and provide feedback on the judgments of the small groups. The project of, say, evaluating clergy shouldn't begin in a big meeting; it should end there, after a smaller group of two or three have already gone through the initial process of soliciting opinions from affected parties and drafting a short paragraph on the subject that can be submitted to the committee as a whole. Here, as elsewhere, the best work will take place in the smaller group.

For an important "basic" agenda item such as how well your parish celebrates the liturgy of the Eucharist, you may be tempted to start by asking for free-form input from the group as a whole. You know your group best, but our prediction is that you'll be disappointed. Before you spend an evening starting from square one on a complex topic, a wise chairperson will have given all the members an article or two to read in advance of the meeting, or asked a smaller working group to review the whole topic and think about some first steps or proposed changes the committee as a whole can consider. Most committee members will be grateful for some formation and preparation in advance of being asked for an opinion or observations. And you'll save lots of valuable time.

3. When a discussion isn't making progress, delegate it out for settlement.

If, after an hour, none of the budget subcommittee's recommendations have won the group over, and warring factions won't give an inch on where they'd like to see your limited resources spent, you're probably best off giving your group a break and adjourning the meeting. But before you do, ask your poor financial working group to go back to the drawing board and put together some compromise positions.

There are two reasons this helps. First, after an hour, the productivity of your meeting has probably undergone a serious decline anyway; and second, people who have just done a lot of work locking themselves into certain positions on the budget are going to be in no mood to look weak by giving in. When you reconvene next month to look at some fresh proposals, there's a good chance everyone will turn out to be in a much better frame of mind to make a decision quickly.

Reason 3: Chairpeople need to know what the meeting is going to be like.

It may be an unpopular thing to suggest, but no unexpected issues should be allowed to come up at a liturgy committee meeting. Unpopular topics, yes; controversial topics, naturally. But nothing that wasn't submitted to the chairperson in writing beforehand, and that he or she did not have a chance to evaluate, discard, delay, rephrase, or delegate to a working group.

Chairpeople are in the job both to respect their members *and* to make sure results and energy can flow from the group. That second task gives them the right to prioritize the group's tasks, and manage its workload, in a way that makes for the greatest number of happy people and satisfying outcomes. Inevitably, that means chairpeople can't allow an important meeting about how well your parish celebrates the Easter Triduum to be bogged down with trivial agenda items that can wait until weeks or months later.

The process of making an agenda should certainly include an invitation to the committee as a whole to submit items for inclusion. Yet not every item submitted to a chairperson under this system needs to go on the agenda unedited, or as soon as possible. Unpopular as this may at times make your chairperson, that job entitles him or her to take unimportant matters (repeated complaints about rubrics, parking crises), items that aren't the committee's business (certain types of personnel problems), or any type of old business that doesn't need to be reopened, and find another satisfactory resolution *besides* bringing them to the parish committee.²

The chairperson has the right to deal with any issue one-on-one with the person who submitted it, or to take it up with a small group of those affected by it — or to turn a trivial observation (on usher behavior) into a larger and more wide-ranging issue (such as whether your parish's liturgies help strangers and newcomers feel welcome). The chairperson, if gutsy, can even take a submitted agenda item and throw it away — as long as, in his or her judgment, that course of action will both save the committee time and ultimately prove politically acceptable to the group as a whole.

Above all, what chairpeople have a right to reject is an issue that someone feels needs to be settled that, in fact, *really doesn't need to be settled right now*. Chairpeople have the right, and a duty to their group, to take topics that don't fit

2. In some cases, it's more efficient for a chairperson not even to inform a committee of everything that's transpiring. For example, a chairperson may decide to mention just "in passing" that "we have another request for a Latin Mass, which I will give our usual response to." But the committee is then likely to devote another five or ten minutes dredging up old business concerning the Latin Mass, or asking who the letter's from — time you don't need to waste. If you feel you must keep your committee up to date on extraneous matters, put it in an appendix to your minutes or agenda.

into the priorities they're working on and ask — mostly respectfully, we trust — to put them aside for later.

A Basic Checklist of Agenda Topics

With that groundwork in place, it's time to take a closer look at the topics your committee could actually talk about, and review the agenda items that should form the bread and butter of most committees' business.

We recognize that your committee may have some pressing issues or special situations that need immediate attention. That may shape your agendas for the first few months your committee meets. But at some point, the crisis mode needs to end, and there are a few genuinely basic parish-liturgy issues that every group needs to discuss — some at least once a year, some once every few years. If you never get to any of these “basics,” it's a sure sign that your committee needs to refocus its attention away from the month-to-month trivia, and get on to those more difficult questions that, over time, actually make a difference in how your parish celebrates.

With that in mind, here is a list of some of the core topics your group should be working on together, both the parish committee as a whole and, in many cases, with a working group dedicated to the topic. A few warnings, though, before you're tempted to plow through this list and knock off the items one after the other. First, some of these “items” are really long-term projects that won't be addressed or solved in one meeting, or even a couple. They're extended opportunities for your committee, music director, and pastor to study, discuss, and experiment in some rather complex and subtle areas where the rewards aren't always easy or immediate. So don't be impatient, and feel as if this is a checklist for the first year, or the first two, or even the first five of your committee's life. Instead, cut yourself a break, and recognize that a committee that makes effort and improvement in even a few of these areas is already a real blessing to the parish it's working in. (See also “Rest for the Weary, ” page 60.)

In addition, remember our principles from the earlier chapters of this book: Much of the real work, and planning, will get done by individuals and smaller groups, not by a larger parish committee. The parish committee is there to learn, to evaluate, and to provide community support. So when a topic seems too big for a parish committee to tackle — as many of these topics may — remember that a smaller working group may need to take this topic off on its own for some longer period of study and discussion. That's why, for many of these topics, we've included some notes on how a parish committee may wish to attack the topic to work most productively.

1. Liturgy Basics

Many committees find it easy to orient meetings around preparing for the major feasts and seasons. They're important, and take a lot of work, so that's a natural

Rest for the Weary

Some committees, we hope yours not among them, are simply tired — of their pastor, their parish, or one another. “Burned out” is an overused phrase in organizational life, but it’s as accurate as any to describe a group that is better off stopping, at least for a while, than trying to continue along its self-destructive paths. Committees in that situation will look at the agenda items in this chapter — many of which require work, energy, and good will to address effectively — and mostly feel discouraged. We’ll never make it, they’ll think, isn’t there some other way?

In some cases, as we’ve suggested in Chapter 3, sometimes it’s simply best for a committee like this to start over. A new chairperson, a brace of new members, or a new committee entirely can sometimes succeed when an existing group simply can’t function any longer. However, we’ll also suggest that a group discouraged with its efforts may simply need some time away from its usual habits, and a few small victories, to feel better about itself. No group can go for long without some sense of success and accomplishment, and if your committee has gone without it for too long, you’ll never store up strength for the work that always lies ahead.

Here are some ideas for committees that need time away from their usual preoccupations.

Get away from Sunday. Sunday Mass is often the focus of most committees’ efforts, but Sunday is also often the place where it’s hardest to bring change to a parish’s habits, staff members, and customs. Instead, committees or subgroups could take a year to learn about, and experiment with, parish morning and evening prayer, or penance services, or the stations of the cross during Lent. Liturgies like these,
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phenomenon. But Sunday after Sunday, other, harder-to-address issues actually make more of a cumulative impact on your parish’s worship. The real “building blocks” of Sunday worship are the basic practices that you do week after week, and we often underestimate the rewards of doing them well and the damage done by doing them carelessly.

The Liturgy of the Word

The liturgy of the Word’s equality with the liturgy of the Eucharist is still underappreciated in most parishes. Do we do everything we can to allow these readings to have their impact? Are they diminished by the seating of latecomers, poor or rushed lectors, a bad p.a. system, unfamiliarity with the ritual requirements, a distant or ugly location from which to read, a general sense of boredom?

Excerpts from one or two of the liturgy documents, such as Chapter I of the *Lectionary for Mass: Introduction*, might make useful committee background reading, as would excerpts from one or more of the other basic liturgy resources in Appendix A. Most committee members will in fact need some basic training in the lectionary itself: how it is organized, which gospel we hear in each yearly cycle, how the Old Testament readings are chosen, how the New Testament readings flow over the course of the year. For many, the idea that the responsorial psalm is not just a musical interlude, but a Scripture proclamation integral to the others, will be news. A session or two

spent on these topics can raise liturgical literacy as well as awareness of the lectionary's importance and potential impact. Your parish lectors may also benefit.

After this phase, field trips and other resources³ can help remind members that good readers, easily heard, and surrounded with the care that we usually reserve for the Eucharist, make an enormous difference. How well does our parish do? What have committee members seen in other parishes that was effective? If your lectors do not have their own chairperson or coordinator, perhaps a working group of lectors could explore possibilities for regular training, study resources,⁴ a diocesan-sponsored workshop, membership policies, and an infusion of new people. As always, come back and systematically evaluate any changes or experiments you try.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

Nothing is more central to what we all imagine when we think of Catholic Sunday liturgy than the Eucharist. Yet most parishes miss out on the power inherent in the symbols of the Eucharist and, even more surprisingly, continue to ignore thirty years of liturgical documents and directives on its proper

3. For example, Alec McCowen's solo reading of *St. Mark's Gospel* impresses many people with how one reader can hold an audience's attention for an entire evening with "just" the Scriptures (New York: Arthur Cantor Films, 1990; available from several video distributors).

4. See Appendix A for a list of resources related to the lectionary and lector preparation.

Rest for the Weary...continued

out of the limelight, can sometimes give committee members more freedom of operation, and the needed experience of seeing their ideas and plans actually put into practice. Both are a tonic for groups not used to either.

See the world. Some long-standing committees simply need some fresh air. In fact, nearly every committee could benefit from spending one Sunday a month in another church: seeing different buildings, hearing different homilies, experiencing the welcome (or lack of it) in different denominations and communities. At Sunday brunch afterwards, spend some time just talking about what you saw and heard and felt — no agenda, no need to apply everything or compare everything to your problems back home.

Take a sabbatical. Instead of immersing yourself in your usual cycle of meetings and planning, take a year where your only goal is to study, as a group. Read a few books together. Once a quarter, attend a liturgy workshop together in a nearby diocese. Decide that you deserve the time simply to become more knowledgeable, and to get some distance from all the people and projects that have been driving you crazy.

Whatever you decide about staying with or leaving a committee that's no longer healthy, remember one important thing: Don't feel guilty, and don't blame yourself. Liturgy requires the delicate and complex collaboration of many people, and the right circumstances for it aren't always in place. Your parish needs your hard work, but never your misery. So if you're an unhappy committee member — take some time away. You may enjoy it a lot more after a good long rest.

celebration. Many elements of the rite that should now be commonplace — communion in the form of bread and wine every Sunday, bread that looks more like real bread than hosts do, avoiding the use of the tabernacle as a storage area for large quantities of consecrated bread for Sunday communion, the use of simple and beautiful vessels for the meal itself — are all more the exception than the rule. We are all the weaker for it, for reasons we'll discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

As background and preparation for the project, committees might wish first to read together, not the liturgy documents themselves, but a book like Gabe Huck's *The Communion Rite at Sunday Mass* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989). One or more meetings could easily be devoted to evaluating current parish practices and sharing reactions to the recommendations of such a book. Over time, a working group can consult with your pastor about choosing some initial areas for attention and change, with ongoing evaluation and recommendations from the committee as a whole.

A brief political note: On this one, it's particularly important to get a good sense up front of your pastor's feelings, and to be realistic about which issues you can take on right away and those that will have to wait. If his worry is the large number of eucharistic ministers that would be required to distribute communion under both species, or potential chaos and hassle, you may be able to bring him around with sheer organizational effort and a few experiments on major feasts that go well. If, though, he has unorthodox but deeply felt eucharistic beliefs, you may not win him over to changes you'd like to try even by "proving" to him that the liturgy documents say he's wrong. As always: Choose your battles.

The Beginning

The liturgy begins, not with the procession, but when you enter the church. Alas, that means many liturgies begin poorly: halting welcomes, uncomfortable silences and shuffling, poor musical preparation, perhaps announcing (inappropriately) the day's Mass intention. It's hard to recover from such a bad start. You'll probably find strongly divided opinions on your committee about the purpose of this period before the liturgy: welcome and hospitality? Quiet private prayer? Music rehearsal to get some momentum going for the opening song? What we get, usually, is a cloudy mix of all three that accomplishes none of them.

You'll find little in the official documents of the church to help you — most practices, such as kneeling and praying for a few moments upon entering the church each Sunday, are based on custom and not law. So this important topic is, in a way, an "advanced" project for committees already comfortable with their sense of liturgy and liturgical style. Some authors listed in our Appendix A, such as Elaine Rendler and Eugene Walsh, could provide some food for thought. Then,

share opinions on what happens in your parish. Some members may be able to relate experiences from other parishes, or your group may visit a few other churches to observe differences or similarities. Ask a working group to make a list of potential improvements, from the major to the minor, and to return to the larger group with some recommendations. Check back regularly to evaluate the changes you chose to implement, always going back to your overall hopes for what this first part of the liturgy is “for.”

2. The Climaxes of the Year

Most committees understand that there are times during the year that call for special planning and effort. Yet most focus on the details of execution that should be left to their musicians and smaller groups who can work more efficiently. The parish committee has, in a way, a more difficult focus: What is the real message and impact these seasons should bring to our parish? What about the way we have celebrated these seasons in the past was effective or ineffective, or might have missed the mark of what the season is really about? Is there anything we could do in the community that could help our liturgies do their work more powerfully? Are there parish events or customs that overshadow these high points of the liturgical year? A few examples of how to address these topics follow in the seasonal specifics below.

Easter Triduum

The liturgies of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil are a three-day total immersion in the life of Jesus and the symbol-world all Christians share. It's no exaggeration to say that those who have experienced these liturgies cannot imagine life without them, and are left with images and memories that are a powerful part of their lives throughout the year. The task for your committee is to fall in love with these liturgies yourselves, and to see how the power they hold can be brought to more and more members of your parish. In many parishes, the message still hasn't been heard: These liturgies can change lives.

The parish committee should avoid detailed involvement in the planning of the Triduum liturgies. Instead, as with the other seasons noted below, this is an ideal project for a smaller working group of three to four members and your music director to take on, building on the feedback and direction provided by the larger parish group. At the parish committee level, the more important issues are not the details of what to do, but whether the Triduum plays as large a role in parish life as it might. Are our Triduum liturgies well attended? Are there groups that could be more involved in their preparation, or invited more assiduously? In our announcements and overall parish messages during Lent and before, do we lead up to the Triduum as the climax of everything we do?

Both parish committee and working group members may wish to study a

resource such as Gabe Huck's *The Three Days* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992) for a sense of the season's importance and liturgical traditions; this will also enable them to give useful evaluations at the first parish committee meeting after the Triduum is celebrated. Detailed notes from each year's evaluation can then be given to a smaller working group, made up of (always) your music director, members of the staff with special skills in liturgy, and other parishioners with a special interest in such an annual project. That working group, each year, will be the group that works through musical choices and logistics, worship aids and the environment, ministry scheduling and coordination, problems of stage management, and all the other work of preparation and execution. They'll need lots of help, but the parish committee meeting isn't the place to get it.

Lent and Easter

We know "things change" during Lent, but why? Some parishes attempt, through the worship environment and the musical profile, to impose a certain austerity, some of which can be appropriate, some of which seems unnatural, some of which ignores the purpose and goal of our fasting. Finding the right mood and style and details for Lent is a tougher assignment than many realize.

The challenge is finding, and then expressing, the inseparable relationship between Lent and Easter, between suffering and resurrection. Walter Burghardt, S.J.'s wonderful homily⁵ on this point should be required reading: Christ's dying and rising are one mystery, not two, and redemption is an inescapable fact of our history. We cannot "pretend" in Lent that it has not yet happened, any more than we can pretend in Advent that Christ is not yet born. Our lenten disciplines are not exercises in avoiding evil, but attempts to "put on Christ" in preparation for reliving the death, resurrection, and new life of Easter.

For liturgy committees, this understanding of Lent can mean some significant changes in the way Lent is discussed and the way its celebration is evaluated. It may, for example, suggest that Lent's primary goal is not an aura of austerity, but effective preparation for celebrating the Easter Triduum. How well has the parish been prepared to renew its baptismal promises? Has it been challenged to be generous, as well as introspective?

As always, the parish committee stays out of the details: Your music director will take ultimate responsibility for the musical outlines of the season, and a working group focused on the environment should work out the specifics there. For the parish committee, an overall discussion of Lent's many threads — fasting, almsgiving, repentance, preparation for baptism — should ultimately focus on trying to give the working groups some overall direction on what to do and what excesses to avoid. Liturgy Training Publications' *Sourcebook for Sundays and*

5. See "For Your Penance, Look Redeemed" in *Tell the Next Generation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1980).

Seasons (see Appendix A for details) is usually a good place to start for both parish committees and working groups.

The parish committee's real focus is, as always, the overall effect of liturgy on the parish: Are enough invitations extended to participate in Lent and Easter, enough different liturgical opportunities available? Does Lent seem different *overall* in your parish, not just at Sunday Mass? (At one parish we know, the hoopla and buildup for the St. Patrick's Day dance always far overshadow any liturgical efforts to work through Lent's complex images. That's a liturgical problem worth discussing in the parish committee.) Does the celebration of the 50 days of Easter receive as much attention as the 40 days of Lent, together forming one great arc in your committee's thinking?

And remember, at the parish committee's first meeting after each Lent is over, there should be at least 15 minutes devoted to evaluations (not necessarily consensus) on whether the parish's efforts met the real goals of the liturgical season.

Advent and Christmas/Epiphany

Like Lent, Advent's identity is complex. Just as Lent isn't a time to pretend that Jesus is not yet risen, Advent is not a season for pretending that Christ has not yet come. In these few short weeks, we look at the world and ask ourselves what needs to happen to make it ready for Christ's coming — but it is his second coming, as much as his first, that we look forward to, and we already have evidence of the love with which he will come to save us.

Advent is a time for preparation, but what we do to prepare, and the spirit and mood with which we do it, can take many forms. We think it's hopeless and more than a bit pretentious for liturgists to pretend that the excitement of impending Christmas celebrations can't be part of Advent, and that our desire to give gifts to those closest to us is somehow inappropriate. Nevertheless, most parishes need to fight constant skirmishes nudging parish Christmas events out of Advent and into the Christmas season, where they belong. That's important: Advent has its own powerful images of preparing and making ready — and even the end-time — that need room to make their impact.

As with Lent, your Advent task is to consider all these subtle demands and then evaluate whether its imagery and scriptural message make the impact they can in your parish. For the Christmas season, your discussions can focus, not just on the poinsettias and the manger scene, but on whether your parish is adequately welcoming and serving the untold hordes of visitors, seekers, and wanderers who join you each year.

Our lenten recommendations above can be extended to Advent and Christmas as well: One or more working groups does the hard work of planning and execution, while the parish committee comes to an understanding of the season's

purpose and evaluates how well the parish celebrates it. Again, the Liturgy Training Publications *Sourcebook* is a good place to start, as are many other homiletic resources and commentaries on the season.⁶

Pentecost

Pentecost can often be lost in end-of-year fatigue, school graduations, and early summer vacations. Your group may want to discuss, however, whether this isn't overlooking a wonderful opportunity. With its focus on the urgency of our mission and the power of the Holy Spirit to inspire us with grace and fire, Pentecost can be a powerful and a joyful "year-end" celebration for the whole parish.

Ask a working group to do some research in our recommended sources and suggest some reading or an article for the parish committee. Evaluate your own parish's past celebrations of Pentecost, and ask the working group to propose some ways that Pentecost could begin to assume its traditional place and importance as the feast of the Holy Spirit.

3. Liturgy Resources

The Music Program

Music, as we'll discuss in more detail in the next chapter, is one of the key elements that shape your parish's experience of liturgy. It's important enough, and raises enough strong feelings, that it deserves to be checked in on by your parish committee once a year. However, without a strong chairperson with a goal in mind, such a discussion can easily be sidetracked into musical likes and dislikes, thorny issues of style, and even nitpicking specific songs. Instead, it's best to stick with more basic issues that your committee could write down and refer back to each year as goals for its music program: Are our basic musical choices (what we sing, what we don't sing) in line with the best liturgical practice? Do our choirs show strong membership and growth? Do we have the resources we need for music, hymnals, instrumentalists, cantors, a full-time music director? Were there particular liturgies where everything came together musically? What feasts or events would we like to see have a higher musical priority during the coming year? What can we learn from other music programs we've seen or know about?

Depending on how your charter has established the music director's position and job description, your committee's role may include a formal evaluation of his or her performance. At the very least, you'll want to hold at least one meeting a year focused on the committee's evaluation, *and* the music director's, of how well the music program has been progressing. Your goal is to spend more time listening to your musicians tell you what *they'd* like to accomplish, and less on your committee fiddling with the specifics that are the music director's responsibility.

6. John Shea's *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) is a good source to get the imagination working along some different paths.

One good project is to have a group, including your music director, write a brief mission statement for the music program that the committee, and the director, can use each year as a benchmark for evaluating progress. Happily, music is one of the two areas where it's safe to put the full text of a real liturgy document into the hands of your committee. *Music in Catholic Worship*, issued by our U.S. bishops in 1972, is a useful summary of the role music plays in shaping our liturgy, and articulates all the basic directives concerning where music should be used and how it operates most effectively. Our other basic resources, listed in Appendix A, also have excellent food for thought for your annual musical review.

Art and Environment

Again, as we'll discuss in the next chapter, the environment in which you worship is perhaps the most powerful force that shapes our experience of liturgy. At the parish level, too often our attention is distracted by seasonal variations. Here again, we need to focus on the "basics": seating that encourages participation, flexible lighting, beautiful objects and appointments, simplicity in design, clarity of symbols. They're hard to address — not only do they tap into the territoriality people feel about particular objects and customs, but they're often expensive to change or repair. In addition, to be frank, while the *musical* talents and standards of the American church have improved tenfold in the past few decades, good people and resources in the area of *environment* are few, and not as widely available to the average parish.

This is an area where a committee may well feel at sea without a period of formation and preparation. Everyone should read *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, a document from the U.S. bishops that has set the tone for church design and architecture for the past 20 years. Even more important, your committee needs to experience liturgy in lots of different places. There is no substitute for field trips: Ask your diocesan liturgy director, or knowledgeable friends, about some churches your group could visit for a liturgy and Sunday brunch. Take pictures and talk about what you saw. Over time, a working group may form and prepare a list of recommendations prioritized in terms of both desirability and their doability. As always, choose the doable — new communion vessels, a gradual rearrangement of the sanctuary — even when what you'd really like to plan is arson.

In addition, your parish committee will need an ongoing working group that focuses, season after season, on the details of making the space and resources you have work as well as they can. A strong chairperson for this group is essential, as are a handful of members with taste and flair. If your parish committee only has one working group, this should be the first — recruiting the right people here, and keeping them happy, is a key task for a parish liturgy chairperson. Give them lots of input, good reading material on the feasts and

seasons,⁷ honest evaluations from the parish committee after each season — and enough money to get the job done right.

Money and Budgets

You can't have good music, or improvements in your environment, or much else, without money, and as we've pointed out in earlier chapters, your committee can't avoid at least putting its two cents in (as it were) on parish budget priorities. What are the projects, or the changes, you would like to undertake that only money can make possible? How much are you currently spending on liturgy, and can that be changed? What would be required for the pastor, or the parish council, or the finance committee, to consider some changes in the budget so that you could do what needs to be done?

A good relationship with your pastor, and an understanding in advance of what the terms of the discussion will be, is essential. Once a year, however, at least make sure that your group either reviews or hears about the liturgy budget, and goes on record with its recommendations for the people, resources, and improvements that are needed. If everything's fine, then it will be a short meeting. If your group feels that changes are needed, you'll need a longer-term strategy for getting your priorities for liturgy higher on the parish's list. (You could review Chapter 2, on Politics, if you're discouraged.)

Liturgical Ministries

Your lectors, eucharistic ministers, servers, and ushers play key roles in your liturgy every Sunday, and on major occasions they work even harder and are even more visible and important. How well do they do? Do their membership policies bring in enough newcomers and cycle out those who are no longer enthusiastic? Do they receive any training, or formation, in their ministry? Are they thanked and rewarded for their work?

Every few years, it's helpful for the parish committee to undertake an overall review of the health of these ministries: what the liturgy demands of each role, and an evaluation of how well your parish measures up. In fact, it's not a bad idea to have the leaders of such ministries give a short annual report to the liturgy committee on how things are going and their goals for the coming year. If a particular ministry needs a basic shakeup — more members, a new understanding of its role, formation, or a general attitude adjustment — form a working group made up of parish committee members and one or two dedicated members of the ministry, and ask them to set some goals for the group, explore the resources available, and make some recommendations to the parish committee. Often, one problem is simply that

7. In addition to the Liturgy Training Publications *Sourcebook*, they may also benefit from the excellent overall background in G. Thomas Ryan's *The Sacristy Manual* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993), or a subscription to the *Environment & Art Letter*, also published by LTP.

too many people have been in the jobs too long, and a leadership change (with the pastor's support) and a sudden influx of new blood in the ranks can work wonders.

4. Special topics

Liturgy and Children

This is a topic where there's great ferment in the church's pastoral work, and you'll find a wide variety of opinions about how to include children in the parish's life. Some solutions seem to lean in the direction of "dumbing down" all the parish's liturgies to make them more child-friendly; others segregate children into their own liturgies and music program, which means they rarely get a chance to hear the music and prayers they'll need to know as adult members of the assembly. It's a complicated area, and one where your committee can do some useful long-term work with a dedicated parish religious education director, checking in once a year or so on the different approaches you try.

If you have lots of children in your parish, you could start simply by wondering if you've done everything you can to help parents with children feel welcome. Do you have child care available for, say, single parents for whom it would be a blessing? Do parents feel welcome in your worship space, or stared down with disapproval if their children act up?

RCIA

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has renewed the church's sense of baptism and of adult faith, and reestablished the powerful link between Lent as preparation both for Easter and for baptism. Yet the RCIA rites themselves often are poorly celebrated, and the RCIA can sometimes take place with few in the parish aware of it. On the other hand, in some parishes enthusiasm for the RCIA can overshadow the other demands of the liturgy, and turn the focus so closely on the candidates and the RCIA process that the rest of the assembly's path through Lent and Easter is forgotten.

Ask your RCIA team to familiarize your parish committee with the calendar of the RCIA and the rites that affect your Sunday liturgies. One option: Form a working group made up of members of both teams, to plan more effective ways of celebrating the rites and raising the Sunday assembly's awareness of the candidates. Each year, after Easter, evaluate how successfully the RCIA was celebrated.

The Liturgy Schedule

Many committees have liturgy-schedule discussions, but most focus on logistics rather than pastoral need. Instead, once every year or two, could a committee instead reflect on larger issues: Are we serving our parish well with what we're doing? Overall, are there too many Sunday liturgies — could we celebrate more

effectively, and use resources more wisely, with fewer? Does our schedule on Sunday, or during the week, meet the needs of working people, of parents, of seniors who worship early, of students who like the nighttime? Have we explored morning prayer, evening prayer, penance services? Do any liturgies during the year reflect ecumenical cooperation or awareness?

To keep scheduling discussions sharp, parish chairpeople should keep an eye out for examples that can stimulate a committee's thinking. Sometimes a simple starting point for a discussion — a newspaper clipping describing how some parishes reach out to younger people, a shared experience of morning or evening prayer, an invitation from the local ecumenical group to participate in a Thanksgiving liturgy — can lead to useful discussions about people and groups your parish could be serving better. That, rather than parking, should be the focus of meetings to discuss “the schedule.”

Hospitality and Welcome

If we don't feel at least minimally comfortable and welcome when we walk into a church, the power of ritual is diminished. However, the experience of hospitality is a subtle matter of details: When forced, it can easily put off as many people as it welcomes. Generally speaking, though, parishes aren't in much danger of overdoing it with hospitality, and parish committees need periodically to put themselves in the shoes of the stranger and the newcomer and ask whether all their hard work in the liturgy department is being reinforced by a general sense of welcome and acceptance.

The experience of hospitality is made up of dozens of details: the neatness and signage of your vestibules, the tone of your bulletin and pulpit announcements, the demographic mix and appearance of your ushers and other ministers, the worship aids and information about your liturgies and schedules that people receive. All these things can be included in a periodic evaluation. Our recommendation, as always, is to precede such a meeting with some background reading; the works of Elaine Rendler and Eugene Walsh listed in Appendix A are good for starters, and your diocesan or parish evangelization group may be able to raise your consciousness about the opportunities we have each Sunday to reach out to those who are searching for a welcome and a home.