

# From Maintenance to Mission

## Redefining Parish Identity Through Encounters at the Margins

*Joseph Grant and Anne K. Walter*

The authors suggest, from experience, how parishes can be transformed through “edge” ministry, leading to friendship with people living on the margins.

### *The Catholic Herald*

Taking the conventional parish as our starting point, we try to identify some of its strengths and weaknesses in order to rediscover a sense of mission, which should be at the heart of our lives of faith. Many parishes and parishioners fail to be what they are called to be, but recovery and renewed vitality are possible, with imagination, clear focus and commitment. Using our experience, others’ wisdom, and some true stories, we look for renewal of structures and lives.

Imagine the following scene: two parolees return to Mass in the inner city “peace and justice” parish, to celebrate and say thanks. Mike speaks for both, addressing the friends who had celebrated their birthdays, invited them “out” to Mass (on day-release), and assisted in finding them employment: “I come here because I feel like a human being. You have given me back my dignity.” Connections, encounters and unlikely friendships are the living proclamation that a parish community has really claimed its identity, mission, and purpose. When the edges of society seep into the conventional church-going center, we are

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turned inside out, transformation takes place, and evangelization of the parish community is bearing fruit.

Where do we North American Catholics go to experience such evangelization, to divest ourselves, pour out our lives, share our resources and direct our communal energy? Theological language describes our parishes as such places of encounter, and mission statements define them as “welcoming, inclusive, sacramental communities”; but really, it is our corporate acts that reveal the true nature of our profession and uncover our operative faith.

A parish bulletin is perhaps the clearest indicator of the vibrancy of Catholic communal life. Designed to stimulate participation and increase involvement in a local community’s faith-life, the bulletin outlines the tasks, priorities and practices that regulate the shared Catholic experience. Upon participating in the taking, blessing, breaking and sharing actions of Eucharist, the discerning communicant picks up the Sunday bulletin with the insightful question: Where do we go from here; how do we live this sacrament; where do we walk in faith together?

Some bulletins offer a more accurate barometer of Catholic faith in context than the pretensions of some of our parish mission statements. The following headlines are typical of Bulletins in middle-income, mid-American Catholic Parishes: “Dynamic Speaker on Socially Responsible Investing”; “Training on New Norms for Extraordinary Eucharistic Ministers”; “Fundraiser Picnic is Huge Success”; “Inauguration of New Baptismal Font: Six Infants Baptized.” Clearly, some things are happening here. But critical things and vital people are missing. In the following pages we do not want to trivialize such expressions of Catholic life but to pursue issues of identity, purpose, and mission. Rather than criticizing common parish activities, we suggest orientations that can lead the faithful beyond the devotional, educational and charitable fare we inevitably encounter at church. We are less concerned with what Catholics do at church, and more with where and how the Church leads Catholics into engagement with the world.

### ***A Crisis of Mistaken Identity***

At the conclusion of our theology studies, we were drawn to peripheral ministry in inner city Chicago. Now we find ourselves in more mainstream, formational ministries at parish and diocesan levels. But we bring to these “traditional” ministries an edge, a focus, and an eye fixed on the margins as the locus of Catholic life and the place of transformation. As a married couple in ministry, we struggle constantly to discern our identity and place in the local and larger Catholic Church. Most often we share a common frustration and a sense of dissatisfaction with the insular, self-absorbing nature of parish and diocesan ministry. The word “parochial” has come to represent an outlook or experience that is small-minded and myopic. We believe there is a crisis at the core of Catholic life in this nation, that is neither the tragedy of sexual abuse nor the declining

numbers of priests and religious, but rather a crisis of mistaken identity. Nearly twenty years ago Mark Searle identified the dissolution of Catholic identity in America, noting that American Catholics are becoming more American than Catholic: “In their moral, political and social attitudes Catholics are becoming indistinguishable from the rest of the population” (Searle, 316).

Judging from many parish bulletins, we are not addressing the primary question astute catechumens might ask, namely, what is it we Catholics do together that defines us, marks us, and directs our lives? We seem to have misplaced our mission, misunderstood our reason for being together as a local church, and mistaken our identity and responsibilities as members of the larger human community. We have forgotten who we are and why we have been brought together. This might be due to the overwhelming pressure involved in maintenance, plant management, budget administration, self-regulation and committee coordination. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus did not establish administration committees but created a mobile, inclusive community with a clear mandate to proclaim God’s breaking-in to our world, by freely gathering together with the broken and the overlooked people: “When you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind [who] cannot pay you back” (Luke 14:13).

So who are we, and who should we be? After our own cathedral in Louisville was opulently refurbished, we went on a hunt, with our children, to locate the poor box, only to discover a painted-over tin plate embedded in a rear column, with neither sign nor indication that it was in use. If we have lost our corporate memory it may be because our Catholic parishes are, as Henri Nouwen might put it, unfamiliar with the face of human suffering and strangers to Christ who is poor. When we locate new churches in convenient suburban security, poor people do not easily find them, and churchgoers inevitably become rather comfortable. Aidan Kavanagh described contemporary parish experience of Eucharist as “a celebration of middle-class values of consumerism, participation in approved groups, and comfort in affluence—politically correct values of joining, meeting, speaking out, affirming individual distinctiveness and creating community as feeling rather than form” (Kavanagh, 102).

The saddest indication of the widespread spiritual inertia in mainstream Catholic congregations is our general disinclination and inability systematically to seek out and befriend poor, lost, lame, and crippled people. From his martyr’s pulpit in San Salvador, Archbishop Romero’s words continue to haunt and unsettle:

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“A church that does not join the poor, in order to speak out from the side of the poor against the injustices committed against them, is not the true Church of Jesus Christ. The poor are the ones who tell us what the world is and what service the Church must offer the world” (Romero, 189).

### *Un-wholly Communion*

Undoubtedly there are communities and individuals with heroic dedication to marginal people, but these seem to be rare exceptions in our parishes and dioceses. Yet every week in our eucharistic celebrations we profess our intention to follow Jesus’ renunciation of the social patterns of having and hoarding, in favor of a radical preference for outcast and oppressed people. But, generally, our

parishes remain scandalously disconnected and dislocated from the very people we claim to welcome and befriend. Some might claim that our parishes are actually filled with spiritually hungry, overworked, and over-busy Catholics who must be served and whose needs must also be met. Robert McAfee Brown identified tension between the middle-class character of North American Christianity and the challenge of God’s preferential option for the poor, which requires some re-ordering and new priorities for North Americans. “It will mean challenging the economic system by which the Church gains its financial support and which provides the means of livelihood for most of its members, including its pastors. It will mean a radical solidarity with segments of society that have seldom if ever been within the walls of the Church” (in Mitchell, 37).

The reality gap between the concerns of conventional parishes (new textbooks, school enrollment, a new roof for the gym) and the daily struggles of refugees, shut-ins, prisoners, hungry and homeless people, is not easily bridged. This

may be due in part to social geography: suburban expansion leaves inner city communities (and some historic churches) depleted and neglected, while suburbanites find themselves in mega-parishes supporting private schools and developing programs to address the needs of overactive families and stressed out teenagers. Contact with marginal or excluded people is often choreographed around Thanksgiving or Christmas, producing the annual glut of giving but little real transformation of either party. Surely our eucharistic celebrations in

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such un-wholly conditions of alienation wreak havoc with the sacramental core of Catholic life. Albert Haase calls us, as a eucharistic people, to become the Bread of Life for others. “We are called to feed others with love, care, compassion, concern and hospitality. This is precisely what we commit ourselves to at each Eucharist. When we say our ‘Amen,’ we accept the challenge. We should think twice before we say it. It should make us shudder” (Haase, 141).

### *Peripheral Vision*

Where is the road to recovery for those large congregations, hobbled by the endless maintenance requirements of parish facilities, school administration, staff, and committee management? Where is recovery for any parish that limits its mission to the campus, serves only its own membership, or welcomes and recognizes only those who gather on Sunday? We suggest that liberation comes from the peripheral vision gained by going out and befriending the fringe people who offer us a spiritually awakening and socially engaging perspective on our mission, identity, and purpose. McAfee Brown pursues this, suggesting that evangelization must proceed “from the periphery to the center,” from the socially marginalized to the centers of power. A century ago saw the opposite movement, when missions moved from the center to the edges. But in future the non-poor of North America must rethink their privileged status in light of the Gospel (in Mitchell, 242–43).

Our goal-oriented culture bids us ignore anything or anyone who might distract or impede us from achievement and personal fulfillment. Yet it is *precisely* by paying attention to peripheral distractions, by being led into kinship with marginal people, that individual Catholics and their communities are exposed to life readjustment and faith reorientation. Here are a few stories of marginal encounters and the ensuing relationships that have adjusted the focus, vision, and mission of members and groups in some Louisville parishes.

#### *Our Neighbors’ Keeper*

Founded for impoverished Parisians, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul might have begun to look its age after 150 years of service. But in one parish the St. Vincent de Paul Conference was reborn recently in response to innumerable calls from neighbors whose financial needs were not being met by area agencies. Within months the group grew from four interested people to a dozen, with another few dozen offering regular financial assistance. Word quickly spread that this conference had become a resource for poor neighbors. In addition to weekly home visits, members respond to visitors in need and field a telephone hotline for neighbors in crisis. Sunday liturgy might include a visit from a family served or, at announcement time, a desperate request for help. Parishioners now have a

monthly opportunity to free themselves of some of the weight of possessions by donating to help support this outreach to their parishioner-neighbors.

Visiting and responding to parishioner-neighbors who face catastrophic illness, who live with mental and physical disabilities, and who can find only part-time labor or are unemployed, have shifted the priorities of the parish as a whole. The leadership council recently called for a new outreach that matches interested parish families with an elderly neighbor or family through an “adoption ministry”: such relationships promise to enrich both families as they share the joys and struggles of life with their “new family.” Gandhi’s talisman has become the focusing reflection at parish council meetings where people are invited to “think of the poorest person you have ever met, then ask yourself how your discussion or decision will impact that person.”

This St. Vincent de Paul ministry has challenged an entire community to be its neighbors’ keeper. Peripheral vision drew parishioners into the housing project along the edges of its zip code area and out of itself, refocusing its attention from maintenance to engagement in the world beyond. Opening our stained glass windows to the realities surrounding our churches is a constant Gospel challenge. Encounters with those people whose names we learn, whose hands we shake and whose stories we absorb, will pull us beyond our carefully tended territories and personal edges into compassionate and marginal encounters that transform individual hearts, and even the entire parish community.

### *Adoption Transformation*

Other local parishes have ventured into gospel outreach through their local Catholic Charities Refugee and Migrant Ministry by sponsoring refugee families. One group adopted a family from Somalia that included young parents and four children under the age of four. The father suffers from brittle-bone disease and is confined to a wheelchair. The six-month old baby girl has also inherited the disease and her bones continually fracture—sometimes even as her diapers are changed. Sponsoring families have helped these new arrivals become familiar with Louisville, prepare them for winter, find adequate clothes and furniture, move into housing with wheelchair access, and find a farm where they could slaughter meat for Ramadan. The sponsors, too, were richly blessed: hearing the story of Abraham from a Muslim perspective; sharing baby pictures; dealing with emergencies of health and spirit; watching and admiring how this family learned English from Sesame Street and ESL classes.

Every refugee family welcomed into this community has deeply impressed individual parishioners and through them the wider community. While most of the tasks of sponsorship are carried out by small groups of committed families, heightened awareness affects all. People help with rides, donate cooking utensils and supplies, and organize children’s trips. Stories and encounters are incorporated into prayer, shared at liturgy, and outlined in homilies and parish announce-

ments. The average parish can make a profound impact by welcoming the stranger. It can also allow itself to be deeply touched by kinship with refugees, immigrants, or migrant workers: all it needs is the desire for a new perspective and the courage to be available.

### ***Inner-City Retreat***

The seeds of change may germinate in an intentional community within the parish. One group of parishioners, meeting weekly for prayer, expressed dissatisfaction with Catholic youth ministry and its lack of social awareness. A common vision arose from this prayerful dialogue and the group proposed a new parish outreach: a justice-based retreat ministry for youth and young adults that would pass on the Catholic peace and justice heritage to the next generation.

Nearly a fourth of the membership of the parish became involved in this creative process. Their efforts transformed a dilapidated rectory into an inner-city retreat house, and the original small investment of communal funds grew to include grants from local and national foundations. In one year alone, more than thirty retreat groups of various sizes dedicated a day or a weekend to prayerful reflection in the inner city, breaking open the Gospel through encounters with marginal people and pondering the implications of Catholic Social Teaching. By listening to the stories of people living with HIV/AIDS, praying and eating with prisoners, and befriending homeless and mentally handicapped people, young people's minds and hearts were broken open.

Some parishioners visit and share their experience with retreatants; others prepare the vegetarian meals: an experiment in eating simply so that others might simply eat. Sunday petitions include the retreat center's needs, as well as prayers of blessing for the young retreatants sharing Eucharist with the parish community that weekend. Some young people have come back to visit this ministry and this parish with their families, while others have become regular participants in the monthly contemplative dialogue offered to former retreatants.

These are just a few stories that exemplify the grace-filled opportunities our parishes desperately need. Opportunities for life are available, if and when we make our communities available *beyond* the parish center and the confines of our spiritual comfort zone. At a parish gathering someone naively asked, "If Jesus came to our parish, I wonder which committee meeting or church event he would

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feel most comfortable attending.” The prophets and prophetic teachings of our Church confirm our experience that Christ is most reachable and identifiable among God’s privileged “anawim”—the poor ones. In the recent U.S. Bishops pastoral reflection, we read: “Our parishes and schools must continue to be clear about their identity and mission, and to be beacons of hope and centers of help for poor families and communities” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 422).

### *From Custodians to Missionaries*

The mission of the parish in this country is in danger of being compromised by internal custodial tasks: maintaining parish and school buildings, religious programming, liturgical preparation, sacramental distribution, high-energy after-school entertainment for young people, and so on. A similar crisis facing the nascent Christian community in Jerusalem led to the creation of diaconal ministries. From the outset it was made clear that the Christian assembly is not a retreat from the world. Nor should Christian communities wait for people to come to their door. Being Church necessarily means *being sent out* from Eucharist. We are Church when we receive Eucharist in order to *become* Eucharist. The bishops’ pastoral calls us, not simply to Sunday worship but to live the Gospel and to integrate “homilies, faith formation programs, schools, universities and seminaries” to “reflect Christ’s concern for those in need.” All are called to “affirm our church’s teaching about the obligation to serve others, to overcome structures of sin and to work for greater justice in the world.” The bishops urge everyone, at every level, to “serve and to promote justice for those who are poor” (USCCB, 423).

Marginal encounters reorient lives: they shake up parish priorities and unsettle plans and programs. Reflecting on a personal encounter with a neighbor in desperate need can lead an administration committee to reconsider its planned expenditure on a new church sidewalk. The focus of teen activities shifts when young parishioners develop unlikely (Gospel) friendships with youth of a different culture and when they deepen connections with people who are incarcerated, homeless or disabled. Religious education is no longer an intellectual exercise when our faith communities reflect on our experiences of human need and we invite poor people to become catechists. Adult formation leads to transformation when faith-sharing takes place in less comfortable surroundings and in the company of “edge” people. Sunday Eucharist becomes a potluck when every parishioner brings food for the parish food pantry or for distribution by parishioners through a local community kitchen. Family formation expands the horizon and responsibilities of parenting when it includes prayerful consideration for the local and global needs of children, and encourages the adoption and support of

needy families. Sacramental preparation invites us to be more receptive to God's grace when it is prayerfully conscious of the sorrows, joys and every day struggles of God's people in the wider world.

We become more receptive of God's inbreaking when we are weekly reminded that we *are* the Body of Christ sent out to keep company with sick, incarcerated and homebound people. Likewise, Scripture study forges bonds and trust between people of different cultures and denominations, when Catholics break open God's word with neighbor Christians. Such opportunities challenge us in every facet of parish life to open wide the doors and confidently to move away from the business of serving the needs of the "most" among us—and out into Reign of God ministries-without-boundaries.

### ***Good Neighbors***

"[Who] proved himself a neighbor to the man who fell into the brigands' hands?" "The one who took pity on him" he replied. Jesus said to him, "Go, and do the same yourself" (Luke 10:36-37). The questions that mark our faithfulness, questions concerning our identity, purpose and joint mission in the world, can never be answered within the walls, confines and context of a parish campus or in terms of parochial maintenance. If parish activities and gatherings focus primarily on meeting our own needs, our attempts to become community can degenerate into territorial conflicts, increasing the problems and exacerbating the very needs we want to address.

The answers, the liberating responses, lie *beyond* our worship houses. A parish is a living thing, a neighborhood of people, an expanding network of relationships. The voices that point us toward the exit necessarily come from the periphery, from struggling people unencumbered by our theological and liturgical preoccupations. Those who dare heed these cries will be liberated and implicated, astonished, and disturbed out of their complacency. If we are faithful to the social teachings of our Church and follow the example of the witnesses, prophets, and saints, we will recognize that liberation comes to us only through walking the gospel path together.

Liberation comes through intentional forays to the margins, to encounter and visit parishioner-neighbors who are homebound, hospitalized, mentally handicapped, hungry or incarcerated. It also comes through fidelity to covenant partnerships with parishioner-neighbors who are denied access or full membership in our Church, because of social, ethical or sexual credentials. Liberation comes through the kinship that results from adopting new migrant or refugee parishioner-neighbors, and by reaching out to welcome, include and support sister-parish relationships with impoverished church communities. And liberation comes through breaking open all these encounters, pondering the implications and sharing their challenges in prayer, at Eucharist, and at community gatherings: "The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the body

and blood of Christ given up for us we must recognize Christ in the poorest” (*Catechism* §1397).

Thus it is that we rediscover our mission—as buried treasure waiting in the field. Through the praxis of “edge” ministry we reclaim our identity, we reaffirm our purpose, and we know where our communities must go in order to take, bless, break open and share our eucharistic lives. By relocating our corporate lives and identity beyond the church building, we break the life-sapping cycle of maintenance. Religious formation is revitalized when it leads us out of the classroom and into dialogue with those who can broaden and deepen our faith experience. By inviting struggling and broken people into our homes and circles of dialogue, our prayer groups and bible studies are reformed and refocused.

In a vibrant parish community, every would-be member is initiated into ministry and sent out with a clear responsibility to bear witness to what God is doing in the world beyond. The Parish bulletin then becomes a herald of what God has in store for those who risk compassionate involvement in the lives of their neighbors, especially those whom society has overlooked. Can we now envision the parish bulletin that reads more like a gospel manifesto? Its headlines might be more like the following: “Teen Group Makes Retreat with Muslim Refugees”; “Young Mothers Needed to Provide Daycare Assistance for Single Parents”; “Retirees Organize After School Reading Program at Community Center”; “Young Adults to Host Delegates From Sister Parish in Haiti”; “Families Needed for St. Vincent de Paul Home Visits”; “Bible Study Group Gathers at Women’s Penitentiary”; “Joint Parish Picnic with Covenant Churches, at the Shelter for Homeless Families.”

### ***Conclusion***

In final analysis we will be judged on our practical ability to recognize and respond to Christ in disguise. In these pages we have tried to indicate some ways to do this, and to stimulate some responses. We conclude with a prayerful adaptation of a familiar text that illustrates the liberation promised us as Church when we re-direct our focus, energies and resources toward the “least” in our midst:

We encounter You, Christ-of-the-margins,  
Among those who live on the fringes of our world.  
And visiting with You we find that our hunger for meaning is fed,  
Our thirst for purpose is satisfied.  
We are welcomed and are no longer strangers.  
Our dignity is restored, our pain is healed, and we are set free (CrossRoads, 1999).

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