



Re-emerging with purpose

Using what we learnt during lockdown to build more fruitful parishes

Our family has enjoyed our weekends during 'lockdown'. Without the sporting commitments and social activities that usually fill our weekends, we have enjoyed board games, quiet days in the garden and regular exercise. We have learnt from this lockdown time that we want to be more vigilant about the choices we make with our family time—what we say 'yes' to.

This is also true for our parishes. During the last couple of months, much of what we would consider 'essential' to a parish community has been stripped away. We have had to abandon the way we normally do Mass, evangelisation, faith-sharing and social gatherings. So much of how we habitually express our faith and our relationship with Jesus has changed. Yet these have been weeks of unprecedented innovation, vibrancy and a commitment to reaching out into our communities.

Will we allow this temporary 'new normal' to teach us a new way forward for our parishes? Here are four things that parishes may consider as we re-emerge.

1. God is here

History tells us that some of the greatest religious revivals in the past have occurred as a response to catastrophic events such as flu pandemics, plagues and wars. God has worked very powerfully in people's lives through these times. We can trust that God can and is also working now, in 2020, in perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime way. [The Tablet](#), for instance, recently reported on a study that documented an enormous increase in Google searches for 'prayer'. God has the world's attention right now.

2. Constraints lead to creativity

Take a moment to write down everything good that's come out of the changes your parish has had to make since this disruption started.

We are seeing an unparalleled burst of creativity and innovation. In a few short weeks, parishes have learnt to livestream Mass and to meet and pray together online. Many parishes have a new vibrancy, with a fresh focus on finding ways to reach out to their community. There is excitement in the air!

As we slowly begin to open again, there's more at stake than just access to buildings and Masses. The biggest mistake many parish leaders will make is that they'll step straight back into the past the moment they step back into their building.

Ask yourselves:

- Can we draw a line in the sand here?
- Can we use our re-emergence in a creative way, not just to go 'back to normal'?
- Can we resist the temptation to relax and take our feet off the pedal of rapid change we have been experiencing?

Things have changed. The world has changed. Profoundly. Deciding not to continue along the path of change we have just commenced during lockdown is to choose to block the channel of creativity and energy that the Holy Spirit has initiated these past weeks. As the world slowly reopens, don't go back to 'normal'; instead, move forward into a 'new normal'. Let's take our new skills into a new way of being in the world. Don't waste the progress we have made!

3. Everyone we want to reach is online

Make a list of the people your parish would like to draw into your parish life.

Probably your list, like mine, includes youth, young adults, school families and so on. Where are all these people? Well, probably lots of places, but one place they all are is online—a lot.

The Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference recently released the [Guide to Social Media for Parishes](#). It notes an almost 100 per cent social media engagement in the under-forty age groups. If we really want to reach that list of people above, online is where they are—and where we need to be too.

Social media use by age group



Source: based on data from Sensis, ['The must-know stats from the 2018 Yellow Social Media Report'](#).

Pope Francis calls the internet a 'digital continent'. In his 2014 [message for the 48th World Communications Day](#), he likened the 'digital highway' to 'a street teeming with people who are often hurting, men and women looking for salvation or hope ... Keeping the doors of our churches open also means keeping them open in the digital environment so that people, whatever their situation in life, can enter, and so that the Gospel can go out to reach everyone.'

More people are coming to our 'digital' doors—via our websites and livestreams—than habitually come to our physical doors. Clicking on a link is much easier than getting in the car and driving down the road. Also, people share online more deeply more quickly—they type deeper than they talk! Your website is your 'front door', especially for people under forty years of age. It is the first place most people will go if they are exploring your parish. Is your front page welcoming? Beautiful? Engaging?

In the same way that remote work will become the new normal for many people in the wider economy, online parish experiences may become a first option for many people. (Just because we don't like something doesn't mean it isn't happening.) If we dismiss online ministry, we'll miss most of the very people we're trying to reach. Everyone we want to reach is online. It's time for us to act like it and to plan accordingly.

4. Turn clicks into bricks

How, then, do we turn those 'clicks' into 'bricks'—into people moving out of the digital world into the 'bricks' of our physical church? Thanks to the coronavirus, many parishes currently have a substantial online presence. How can we plan to maximise this opportunity in order to make disciples?

As you re-emerge, the people you have reached online may come and have a look at you on a Sunday. They may give you one, perhaps two, opportunities to welcome them 'live' before they move on somewhere else. Plan to meet, welcome and engage with new people who have been part of your online congregation. This will be much easier if you have already begun this process online.

The intentional digital engagement pathway outlined below moves people from 'clicks' to bricks' and is already being used by churches around the world.

Stage 1: Digital

- Meet people online via your livestreams.
- Engage digitally, encouraging them to express views and to converse with you via posts, emails and online faith or evangelisation groups.
- Invite them into a personal 'conversation' via phone or online chat.
- Invite them to meet physically for a coffee or at a parish gathering.

Stage 2: Physical

- Meet and welcome people at the church door.
- Match them with people of similar interests, so that they form relationships within the community.
- Move them into a process where they will hear the kerygma and be invited to say 'yes' to Jesus.
- Encourage them to participate in sacramental initiation and ongoing catechesis.
- Support them to grow in discipleship and service.

As you physically gather again:

- Don't be tone deaf to the fears of people about gathering. Respect their caution.
- Plan to provide both online and physical opportunities to gather and pray.
- Acknowledge the presence of new people in the congregation.
- Make sure your hospitality is warm and welcoming.
- Preach engaging, kerygmatic homilies about God's personal love.
- Offer 'entry points' that invite new people into something more—a way to explore faith, a particular person or family to connect with, an invitation to dinner in someone's home, a beginner's discussion forum such as Alpha.

Remember you have one chance, at the most two. Plan to use it.

Making disciples: from 'clicks' to 'bricks'

Leading forward

Most of us have done a good job reacting to uncontrollable events. Now, how do we lead our communities into being the prophetic presence of Jesus in the 'new normal' of a changed world?

First, don't settle for what you have already done. Don't 'ride out' the rest of this gradual re-emergence while you wait for 'normality' to return—keep leading, keep innovating, keep trying.

Second, gather a small group of people who can work together to develop a new range of pastoral activities, now that our usual ones have disappeared. The following steps may help your team to assess and discern:

- Ask yourselves what you have learnt during this crisis so far.
- Look over your usual parish activities, and make a plan:
 - ~ What will you keep the same?
 - ~ What did you used to do that wasn't fruitful, or is no longer relevant and should be permanently dropped?
 - ~ What new things will you start doing? What opportunities does the new normal make possible?
- Spend significant time discerning the 'why' behind each 'what'. ('Because we have always done it this way' is not a good reason to continue!)
- Develop a timeline and communication plan for your team that will help you roll out any changes.

The next year will be critical for many parishes. We will need to be vigilant and purposeful about what we do with our time and resources, what we say 'yes' to. Because crisis is an accelerator, the decisions you make will have a significant impact on the long-term fruitfulness of your parish. May these weeks of unprecedented innovation, creativity and gospel boldness begin a new era of fruitful mission!

The Archdiocesan Animation Team is available to discuss strategies with you and/or your team, and to facilitate sessions with your team (remotely) on many topics and issues. Just ask!

Contact Lorraine on 0402 217 123 or at lorraine.mccarthy@cam.org.au.

NEXT WEEK: 'The five pillars of a fruitful parish'