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Those of you who have been in the fields of parish education and evangelization for a while will probably find nothing surprising about the recommendations we will discuss tonight. However, in light of the statistics and trends that Sr. Phyllis has shared with us, I want to suggest that this is a moment that calls for a different sense of urgency and commitment. Whereas before we might have talked about adult, family-centered, or whole community catechesis as preferred options, our task force and the bishop believe that a prioritized, concerted commitment to adult faith formation can no longer be seen as negotiable.

In fact, from our earliest meetings the Faith Formation Task Force felt strongly compelled to consider diocesan-wide efforts to inspire renewal in the adult church. We knew that before one evangelizes others, one must first be an animated disciple of Jesus. The Bishop is not interested in a flashy new evangelizing program. There is much wisdom in his approach. What is needed is not a program that begins and ends. What is needed is a decisive new lens towards this great challenge of faith formation, this great privilege of sharing the saving message of God's love in Jesus Christ with all those who cross our path. I will highlight a few insights from the "Deepening Spiritual Engagement" document, which I prepared with the help of the task force. As Sr. Phyllis mentioned, you can read that document on the website if your interest is piqued.

It is important to pause to ask what most pastors and pastoral leaders presume to be the minimum amount of leadership, resources, and effort required to direct parish faith formation. Some perceive that the basic responsibility of faith formation is to manage sacramental preparations, order textbooks, and forever scramble to get catechists in place for kindergarten through confirmation. If your parish does not regularly and creatively emphasize ongoing faith formation for people of all ages, it is time to discuss a new standard. This new standard includes robust adult education, and special resources, personnel and emphasis for youth, young adults, and young families. Some of our parishes do this very well already. For many parishes, this will mean a new approach—and this approach is vital if we are to reverse the rapid trends of young people leaving our parishes.

People in our culture are hungry for meaning and stability. Have we at times been guilty of what one youth ministry scholar warned some 20 years ago: "Youth look

to the church to show them something, someone capable of turning their lives inside out and the world upside down. Most of the time we have offered them pizza.” Too many youth and young adults seem to be leaving religion in search of spirituality. Perhaps there is a hopeful side to this trend. People in our culture are aching for a spiritual life. Our Roman Catholic tradition is overflowing with treasures for those who desire a deepening spiritual life. Let’s give people what they want—ways of connecting with God personally, new ways to pray, mentoring relationships, meaningful, honest dialogue about topics that matter, and vibrant community life.

If we are to take these priorities seriously, how will it happen and who will lead this? First, we need pastors to be on board with this vision. You hold primary responsibility for the faith formation of your parish or parishes. Pastors have plenty on their plates amidst all that is involved in diocesan pastoral planning and parish restructuring. Pastors should not be attempting this shift alone. There will be no successful plan for faith formation without an accompanying plan for lay leadership and a plan for animating the gifts and faith of parishioners of all ages.

The truths that the church passes on to each new generation are vital. Education about the truths of the faith must always be a central concern of the parish, and please do not hear in our recommendations tonight that we are de-emphasizing catechetical and doctrinal content. This is a both-and moment for our church. As the bishop said, people need more than experts in catechetical content. Parishioners, especially young people, need witnesses—experts in living a life of discipleship in this time and place. We need both catechetical content and greater efforts to evangelize and build relationships. The “Deepening Spiritual Engagement” document reminds that we need diverse mentors who can be present to others every bit as much as we need traditional catechists.

We must not lose sight of that fact that the deepest, fullest Truth we offer is too wonderful to be contained by a textbooks or doctrinal statements. The deepest Truth of our faith is a God who is Trinity, revealed through a person—Jesus Christ—who is not an idea to understand, but a living God whom we encounter in Word, sacrament and in everyday life, a God who never abandons us.

I like to think of ministry as two equal parts: one part is offering personalized support, comfort, and healing and the other part is challenging people to rise to the call

of discipleship, a responsible life of love and mercy centered on others and committed to social justice. Sometimes those of us in ministry become so principled that we forget about the comforting and supporting part.

In addition, focusing on the deepening spirituality of people of all ages, faith formation also needs a shift towards thinking about how we can better respond to the needs of young adults and young families. We know this to be a most vulnerable group. As the father of four young children I understand that parents need to be reminded that they are the primary catechists of their children. But I also sympathize with comedian Jim Gaffigan when he says, “You know what it’s like having a fourth kid? Imagine you’re drowning, then someone hands you a baby.” Sometimes pastoral leaders forget that parents are pretty overwhelmed in this culture. Parents cannot be seen as the stumbling blocks or enemies of our faith formation efforts. If we find that parents are poorly catechized, or only partially committed to the practice of the faith, it is not helpful to blame parents for the poverty of their own formation.

Many people in our church are most concerned about keeping our young connected to the church. While revived youth ministry efforts must be part of the path forward, the reality is that we cannot superimpose a vibrant youth program on a somewhat vibrant parish. Our young people experience the church and assess its relevance to their lives based on all that they take in—catechesis, social events, experiences of community, liturgy and sacraments, and service to others. To paraphrase what Maria Harris so famously said, “the parish does not have a faith formation program. The parish *is* a faith formation program.”

A parish that is centered on the ongoing faith formation and the spiritual depth and commitment of the adult church, that is engaged, welcoming, authentic, joyful, and present to and interested in the lives of young people, will naturally draw young people to the life of the church. Then young people might see and truly believe that faith formation, one’s deepening relationship with God, does not and cannot have an ending point or moment of graduation.

“Why are you standing there looking up at the sky?” These words to the Apostles might challenge us today as well—those of us in ministry might feel overwhelmed in the midst of a rapidly changing cultural landscape. Our answers will not be found by looking up at the sky. As the poet June Jones said, amidst great

challenges we cannot look around for other people to appear and rescue us, because “We are the ones we have been waiting for.” God’s extravagant grace and goodness is with us during this important moment in the history of our diocese. All of you, your parishioners of all ages, your youth and families — we are the ones we have been waiting for.

I want to offer a word of hope this evening. In my work with college students over the past decade, I have found over and over again that young people remain very hungry for God. They are not anti-Church, even though many are unsure if they are worthy or welcomed (or needed) in parishes. They are deeply compassionate, sensitive to diversity, and open-minded. They are gifted and eager to be engaged. They want to know what we believe and why we believe it. They know that the insulated Catholic neighborhoods and parishes of previous generations are not their world and are not the world of our future. With our mentorship, personal care, and willingness to listen, they will be our greatest champions in carrying the faith forward into a future that lies beyond the horizons of those of us gathered in this room.

Thank you for caring about this church and its future. I am excited to hear your feedback, ideas, and hopes as this planning process moves forward.