

Good Evening, I hope you enjoyed the short inspiring video!

When I introduced myself at the Vicariate meetings, I stated that my interest in Lifelong Faith Formation began with a simple invitation, which led to encounter and then to engagement, which deepened into relationship and finally a sense of belonging! As I continue this journey, I become even more convinced that this is our pathway to lifelong faith formation.

The weekend of February 9-10, it was confirmed for me again! I was a member of the Welcome Retreat Team, and the men's retreat was held that weekend, with 22 men from the parish joining 11 team members for the retreat. Time and time again, we heard, "I thought I was the only one who had problems, that all of you on the team had everything altogether. I now know we all have struggles and doubts in life, and that we are all in need." This illustrates the need for each of us to share our stories of faith with each other, and to be in relationship with each other, to know that our parish should be a place we feel we belong and that we can be ourselves.

The first encounter someone has of our parish or parishioners is essential. We can never underestimate the importance of that moment when the person

standing in front of you feels that you have acknowledged them and made them feel special.

I trust that you have been talking about the parish project that I introduced at the vicariate meetings. Especially focusing on the questions:

- Why would anyone want to come to our parish?
- Why do people belong?
- How do they know they belong?
- How did you know you belonged? Do you know you belong?

Remember the path of invitation:

Encounter

Engagement

Relationship

Belonging!

Remember the image that I used at the vicariate meetings... the Front Porch... For me it was a place of gathering, a place of learning, a place of listening, a place of solitude, a place of relationships.....

These simple moments changed my world....

Often, when we think about what it means for a parish to be welcoming or hospitable, we immediately gravitate to images of hyper-caffeinated greeters, painfully awkward forced introductions at the beginning of Mass, and the hit “contemporary” hymn “All Are Welcome” played during Mass. Often, experiences like these have turned a lot of people off to the idea of hospitality as a part of the Sunday experience of parish because they find it can produce a sort of shallow motif of community where true intimacy is not present, but a community mentality is being proclaimed. Great hospitality, though, meaning a truly welcoming parish atmosphere, is essential to becoming a vibrant parish.

When we strive to welcome, especially fallen away Catholics back to our parish we need to keep in mind, what are we asking them to come back to? Will they find anyone willing to encounter them, or welcome them back?

It is true of parish life that the most effective method of making a change is the longest and most difficult. It is easy to slap programs at problems like a Band-aid

and think the issue has been resolved. It is a lot more difficult to create an entire parish culture where people have been empowered to welcome newcomers and form real community. We need to move away from a culture of thinking that the work of the parish is primarily accomplished by the pastor and his staff. If you are committed to becoming a parish of intentional disciples, then we all need to take ownership of our parishes. Forming parishioners to see hospitality this way takes a lot of time and effort. It requires homilies preached consistently on the culture of encounter. It requires that the parish itself is feeding parishioners with opportunities to experience authentic community and be fed by real friendships themselves.

This evening you will be working together as a parish. I invite you to do the exercise with the group of people that came with you this evening. A handout will be passed out now for your use during the exercise, but also to take it with you to broaden the conversation with your parish.

1. The first page gives you some questions that you should ask yourselves.

You may want to focus on a particular target audience, instead of tackling everything at once. And the target audience could be different for different individuals of the parish.

2. The second page gives you some examples--- you could name some more.
But specifically, under outreach by whom—you may each want to focus on a group....
3. The 3rd page is where you want to do most of your work. You will look at each quadrant and identify what you could do under that quadrant.... At first strive for initiatives which are lower effort, with the likelihood of high impact, (the low hanging fruit which will give you the sense of accomplishment and momentum). Then move to the other quadrants which could become a strategic plan for you moving forward.

The facilitators will be around to answer any questions you may have, and also to keep track of time. There will be time to come back together as a larger group and hear ideas from each other.