

C.R.E.W. Initiative: Reactivating Inactive Catholics

*By Susan Francesconi, St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Naperville
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I'm not a gambler, but I'd wager your parish has a few inactive parishioners.

You know them; these are the folks who once felt strongly enough about belonging to a Catholic parish that they joined yours, yet over time have silently disappeared. They are still registered, have not moved, changed parishes, or switched to another faith tradition—or, at least they haven't made the formal leap. As far as you know they do not regularly attend Mass, and your parish records indicate they do not participate in any ministries, nor have they made any recorded contributions.

There are a myriad of reasons why people drift away from active parish life, but each reason is grounded in this singular harsh truth: from the perspective of the inactive parishioner, the Roman Catholic Church and your parish are not currently relevant to them and their state in life. They have eliminated active participation from their list of priorities.

This statement is a clarion call to everyone involved in Church ministry. Christ's great commission tells us to create disciples and we are failing in that by not serving these parishioners—the lost sheep. The primary challenge we face is in recognizing that even our best efforts cannot be imparted to people who are not present to hear it.

Who among you does not feel slightly defensive after reading that statement? After all, we can't force people to take part in our faith formation events, or to come hear our guest speakers, to attend our parish missions and so on. But the truth is, Jesus did not remain at home waiting for people to come to see him. Rather, HE went to them.

St. Thomas the Apostle in Naperville, thanks to a recent grant awarded by the Diocese of Joliet Catholic Education Foundation, is piloting an evangelical program called CREW (Connect, Respond, Engage, & Welcome) which strives to seek out and reconnect with inactive parishioners through invitation and welcoming. It is our hope that this initiative will lead to an increased number of parishioners who are aware of, thinking about, attending to and maturing in their faith through the community, events and activities at St. Thomas the Apostle.

Our method of identifying inactive parishioners is based on two parameters measured over a 12 month period: no recorded ministry participation, and no recorded contributions. While we realize this is an imperfect method, we believe that these two parameters are good indicators of waning or inactive participation. We also realize the inadequacy of measuring our success within these parameters. Rather, in the first year, it may be the relational aspects—the one-to-one conversations and awareness of newcomers—that indicate our success.

The three parts of CREW include invitation, welcome, and engagement.

The Invitation: Our first point of contact is through a series of 7 large 4-color postcards. The cards in no way indicate the recipient's inactive state. These cards are original to St. Thomas and look like nothing our parishioners have received in the past. The front of each card features a clever image and message; the content on the back includes an invitation to attend three upcoming events, a social (Donut Sunday) during which they can learn about a featured ministry, and general parish information. We believe that over the 16 week period that the cards are received; a percentage of parishioners will identify with and attend at least one event.

The Welcome: When a parishioner decides to attend an event, how will he or she be greeted? Will we live up to the warm and welcoming image portrayed on the postcard? An increased welcoming presence will benefit all parishioners and has the potential of making or breaking the success of our efforts to reconnect. St. Thomas CREW has a small but extremely dedicated team who currently work at various large events greeting people, initiating conversations with newcomers and providing information from the welcome table. We anticipate increasing the size of the team as the results our efforts become more visible, and expect that over time the essence of welcoming will become part of the "breath" of every parishioner.

The Engagement. While there is no guarantee that an inactive parishioner will become reengaged after attending a single event, we believe that a verbal invitation to return can help bridge that gap. Consider the impersonal “See you soon” vs. the sincere “If you like music, I hope you will decide to attend our Praise night next Wednesday, here’s a flyer with all the information”. Our attended welcome table is the perfect channel for verbally communicating a broad platform of upcoming parish activities. In addition, on Donut Sunday we have initiated ministry presentations called “Spotlight on Ministry”. These presentations allow a single ministry to showcase what they do, promote their upcoming events and recruit new members.

Making disciples begins with meeting people where they are. As the coordinator of St. Thomas CREW, I pray that the efforts of our first year will do just that and result in an increased awareness of the relevance of parish life and allow greater participation in the many opportunities for spiritual growth here at St. Thomas. If you would like to read more about CREW, a volunteer recruitment summary has been posted on the St. Thomas the Apostle website. Please visit www.stapostle.org and type the word CREW into the search engine.

St. Thomas the Apostle Pilots Evangelization Project: Early Results

*By Susan Francesconi, St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Naperville
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In the fall of 2007, thanks to a grant from the Diocese of Joliet Catholic Education Foundation, St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Naperville piloted an evangelical program called C.R.E.W. (Connect, Respond, Engage, & Welcome). C.R.E.W. was designed as a way to invite and re-engage inactive parishioners into the faith community so that a greater awareness of events and activities at St. Thomas the Apostle might lead to increased participation and spiritual growth. The method of contact included a series of seven invitations mailed bi-weekly to inactive parishioners combined with an increased focus on welcoming and Christian hospitality at all liturgies and special events.

We identified inactive parishioners using two parameters occurring within a 12 month period which may indicate waning or inactive participation: no recorded ministry participation, and no recorded contributions. We anticipated a positive response from 25% of the total group, but also recognized the difficulty we would have accurately measuring that success and determined that in the first year, along with statistical measurements, we would observe the relational aspects—the one-to-one conversations and overall awareness of newcomers—that indicate success.

Exactly 12 months from the date of the first mailing, we showed an 11% success rate in reaching inactive parishioners. We began with close to 1500 families. That number was reduced as recipients informed our business office they were no longer members of the parish or had moved away. Of the remaining 1229 inactive families, 11%, or 134 have joined at least one ministry, made a measurable contribution since Jan 1, 2008, or both. While this number is below our projected success rate, we know it represents a leap in the right direction. What excites us more than our numbers is the feedback we receive from new parishioners, current parishioners and visitors to St. Thomas. We are told that St. Thomas “feels like home.” Words such as “warm, welcoming, helpful, and safe” are commonly heard and we believe it is this increased focus on welcoming and hospitality which encourages parishioners to recognize their role in the Church, increase their attendance at Mass, and hear the call to pursue continued spiritual formation.

Due to the success of our first year, the three parts of CREW, the invitation, the welcome, and the engagement will continue to be used as a means to reach inactive parishioners. In addition, we realize that these points of contact could benefit newly registered parishioners by keeping them informed of parish activities. Therefore, by increasing the circle of recipients to include new and inactive parishioners, and continuing to foster a parish-wide awareness of what it means to be a welcoming community we anticipate a continued reduction in the incidence of parishioner inactivity.

Susan Francesconi is the Coordinator of External Communications at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish in Naperville, Illinois. To contact her, email sfrancesconi@stapostle.org.