

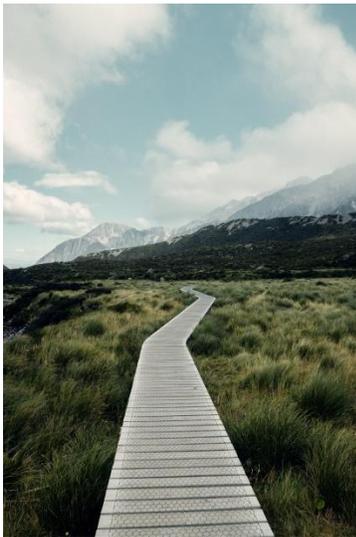
Stop lamenting and start connecting!

31 suggestions to reach across to those not coming to your parish

It's uneven at best. For the most part, there's agreement that in too many places, far fewer people are coming to the parish for anything now than they were before the pandemic. It is no longer true (if it ever was) that if you build it, they will come. So now what? Here are some hope-filled, practical activities to reach out and connect, to bridge the gulf:

GO TO THEM

- Technology helped during the worst of the pandemic. It can still help now. For those for whom you have email addresses, use them. Here's some content that meets them where they are (and don't forget to encourage them to share this email with friends and family and have an opt in page):
 - They are not ok. Most of us are not ok. Anxiety is high. Uncertainty around the economy, the geo-political landscape and our very own neighborhoods is high. Send a Scripture text and a prayer for their protection from needless anxiety. Do it often.
 - Summer is upon us. Add to the anxiety, "what will we do with the kids?" If you are offering anything to fill in that gap, email personal invitations to bring their kids. If your parish is not offering in-person activities, curate movies, send puzzles and worksheets, add a book to the summer reading list. Just help parents fill in the time...see their struggle and provide some help.
 - Father's Day is coming. Many have lost their fathers, recently and long ago. These are bittersweet moments for many. Offer the assurances of faith. Send a prayer for them to pray for their Dads. Ask them to send the names of their deceased fathers and have the parish pray together for these beloved men. Grieve together.
 - Make it like a greeting card. Let them know they belong to Christ and to the Body of Christ. That's all. Just remind them they belong. All human beings have a deep desire to belong.
 - Send photos of first communions, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, penitential services...with the heading, "We wanted you to know, Christ is present here. That's all."
- Get out and about, where your parishioners are likely to be: graduations, sporting events, community pools, restaurants, festivals. Wear a button or a T-shirt from your parish. Maybe even a ribbon that says "Ask me!" And then be prepared to listen to their stories and invite them for coffee. That's all. Folks are lonely and looking for connections. Make a few.
- Host neighborhood gatherings: porch parties, lawn games, watermelon fun...you get the idea. And invite parishioners and other neighbors to hang out together. Build relationships. Don't be shy about praying, wearing your parish swag, and having a card with Mass times and contact information. Do be more interested in building interpersonal relationships through listening, laughter and food...all ways Jesus met people where they are!



INVITE THEM TO COME TO THE PARISH

- But give them a slow start “back” or in the door. Mass, religious education, ministry may be too much to start or start anew. So here are some heart-filling options:
 - Host a prayer service for all those who have lost loved ones during the last two years. Use our rich Catholic tradition, but make it ecumenical. Somewhere around 50% of our households are living ecumenically and grieving without our support.
 - Look to the prayer resources for those who have miscarried, lost young children to SIDS or other accidents and host a prayer service for these grieving people.
 - Open the parish one evening, provide lots of candles and places to place them and invite the community to come in to light a candle and pray. Have some parishioners nearby who can sit with someone and pray for or with them if it’s needed. (Borrowed this idea-I can’t remember from whom- and I think they called it “Light the Night”. And they do it regularly.)
 - Have a showcase of gifts and talents in the parish. Invite participation and attendance. Perhaps some people have items to sell or services to sell...and perhaps others just have a passion to share. We give praise to God when we use our God-given gifts and share them with others.
 - Repeat the above showcase, but just for children and teens. They have amazing gifts and talents. Let them shine. Give praise to God this way.
 - Consider other ecumenical ways to pray: Taizé, Tennebrae, Praise and Worship. Intercessory.
 - Hold a storytelling event: grandparents, books, biblical storytelling, the parish’s story. Rocking chairs, pajamas, and skilled storytellers and listeners.
- Have special Sundays devoted to new beginnings...with radical, amazing hospitality toward each person who comes through the door, designate already “connected parishioners” who will befriend the folks who come, and create beautiful resources to help everyone enter the community. Advertise these widely. These special Sundays can include, for example:
 - Welcoming children born in the last year or new to the parish
 - Welcoming those new to the area
 - A Youth or Teen Sunday
 - Young parents Sunday
 - Outdoor Mass Sunday
 - Toddler appreciation Sunday
 - Married in the last two years Sunday
 - Milestone anniversary Sunday (not just weddings, but work, ordination, vows, sobriety)
- Create faith formation opportunities for families that are not “all or nothing.” That is, reach out to those who just cannot commit to something weekly, but they can commit to another option. Some of these alternative choices might include:
 - Once per month whole family catechesis
 - Once per quarter video based conversation on moral issues (great for teens and parents)
 - A three-week Intro to the Bible for 4th-8th graders
 - Twice per year, exploring what it means to be baptized (choose your age group)
 - Teaching Mass, twice per year
 - Biblical storytelling: 3 times a year

- Learn about our sanctuary/worship space and the rest of the parish (2 sessions twice per year, perhaps tied to one or more of the welcome events)
- Two hours with Father and Friends (2-3 times per year- questions, storytelling, with the priest and the staff)

The concept is this: connect by offering balm to suffering, by offering celebration of gifts and talents, by offering ways to pray that are not Mass, by recognizing maintaining connection means having more than one way to connect, and by making certain Sundays of the year super welcome events so it's a simple on-ramp, an easy way to come back to Mass.

It's up to us...those who know that a most important element to Jesus' message is to draw near, to connect. And Jesus met people where THEY were, responded to their sufferings, shared in their joy and brought His mercy everywhere He went. He invited seekers and the curious, the sick and lame, the blind and deaf. He invited Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free people. And He made it easy for them to "Come and See!" When they did, they found mercy, compassion, justice, healing, and other people willing to embrace them and walk with them. They found welcome. We can imitate Him and do the same...

And what we will build is relationships with Christ through our works. Then, then they will return because they have met the Risen Lord among us.

Photo by Lincoln on Unsplash