

Parish Life in the Pandemic:

ONE YEAR LATER

How Are Your Ministries Fairing?

A photograph showing four individuals in a church lobby. From left to right: a young man in a black t-shirt and shorts holding a large woven basket; a man in a dark polo shirt and shorts holding a smaller woven basket; a man in a light-colored patterned shirt and jeans holding a woven basket; and a man in a dark polo shirt and khaki pants holding a stack of three woven baskets. All are wearing face masks. The background shows church pews, a large potted plant, and various religious posters and icons on the walls.

Catholic Stewardship Consultants, Inc.

ONE YEAR **LATER**

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INTRODUCTION

It's hard to believe that almost a year has passed since COVID-19 struck the United States and forced our churches to close.

Once vibrant, bustling church buildings typically filled with parishioners of all ages were suddenly eerily empty. No fellowship, no coffee and donuts, no classes, Masses, meetings, or bible studies. Large parking lots vacant. Parish halls abandoned. Senior centers silent. Our priests left confused, wondering how to fulfill their vocation when they can't even reach or see their beloved flocks.

When quarantine protocols were originally implemented, most of us believed the interruption would be short-term and that we would resume our normal day-to-day operations once the quarantine was over. We thought maybe it would be a simple pause. And, so at first, most of us waited. We waited at home with our families to ensure our health and safety as we learned more about the causes and symptoms of the virus.

As we experienced our first ever Lent away from sacred spaces, we learned the first of many invaluable faith lessons. We couldn't enter our churches for the Stations of the Cross. We couldn't visit our adoration chapels to pray and seek the desired peace and tranquility we all desperately needed. Most importantly, we couldn't attend Mass. Thus, we were unable to physically hear the Word of God preached from the pulpit or to physically receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Two simple actions that most of us Catholics had taken for granted all of our lives.

In addition to missing out liturgically, parishioners also missed out on parish ministries. Many year-round ministries immediately ceased as there was no need for Altar Servers, Lectors, and Ushers. Additionally, any ministry designed to meet in-person was instantly shut down, whether it was RCIA, the Knights of Columbus, or Quilting. Cherished parish-wide events – picnics, Feast Day celebrations, weddings, and in many cases even funerals – were

also suspended. Historic faith-life alterations (and complications) were felt by us all.

Depending on where you reside, however, some of us felt the pinches more deeply than others.

In response to such closings, Catholic parishes answered in a variety of ways. Some parishes were afraid to act and did nothing. Thus, the pause continued and continued, and those parishes and their parishioners suffered due to a lack of spiritual connection and faith life. Other parishes were proactive. Seeking guidance from fellow priests and parish leaders, these dedicated pastors embraced technology and did what was once unthinkable by livestreaming Masses on the internet.

Whether it was leaning their iPhone against a stand and pressing record or having a tech-savvy parishioner record it with fancy video equipment, parishioners joyfully reconnected with their parishes in new and surprising ways.

The same was true with parish ministries.

While some parishes did not know how to take a step to reunite their ministries, other Catholic parishes acted creatively, determined to find ways to bend and adapt to meet the needs of their parishioners. Choosing to meet via Zoom, host outdoor meetings, meet while socially distanced and wearing masks, or host a hybrid, these parishes attempted all avenues to ensure their ministries continued despite the circumstances.

As we are about to embark on Lent again in just a few short weeks, it's the perfect time to pause, reflect and ask ourselves, "So, how are our parish ministries doing now?"

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THE GOAL OF A PARISH MINISTRY

Before we assess the current status of our parish ministries, let's reflect on their ultimate goal. Although some ministries aim to evangelize and others to serve, our parish ministries all exist to fill a need. It could be a liturgical need. It could be a parishioner need. It could be a community need. It could even be a social need. During the last year, how many of those needs have been unmet? These holes, these missed opportunities, these pauses have likely left deep craters. Thus, the needs are likely larger now than ever before. So, even though the ministry efforts may have had to pause or stop, the needs themselves did not go away. Instead, during this pandemic, they likely grew even stronger.

These pressing needs that ministries strive to fill are still of utmost importance. After all, the hungry are still hungry and the homeless are still homeless – even in the midst of a pandemic. Those in need don't get a "free pass" during this unprecedented season. Although not all ministries cater to life and death situations, their efforts, their connections are still tangible and relevant.

Let us remember that discipleship does not cease to exist when circumstances become challenging. Look to the saints, most of who lived in much more dire times than these. Look how they rose above the hardships to continue on their faith walk and allow nothing to get them down. Putting all of their trust in God, they persevered to answer their calling.

Likewise, we need to emulate their examples.

MINISTRY REPORT CARD

How have your ministries responded to the pandemic?

As you reflect on the current climate of your parish ministries, there are some important questions for your clergy and key lay leaders to consider:

1. *Do you have any leaders that are stuck in their ways and won't make necessary changes?*

Make a point to speak to them to encourage them. We all can benefit from learning new methods and growing as servant leaders.

2. *Do you have new ministries that are now needed that were not previously needed?*

Find a volunteer(s) to help fill the void as soon as possible.

3. *Do you have ministries that are no longer needed or that could be merged with other like ministries?*

Join forces! Remind leaders that it's not about making sure their ministry stays afloat but to provide people with the opportunity to serve the Lord however he calls.

4. *Do you have large ministries that have too many volunteers and not enough to do?*

That is OK. Don't turn them away. Instead, be creative. Split up the work or find new needed work to undertake.

5. *Do you have new leaders helping you explore these potential ministry holes?*

If not, gather assistance and check on the status of each ministry by communicating with their leaders.

Once you discuss the big picture, it's time to narrow it down and focus on each ministry — a ministry audit, if you will. For each current ministry review the following questions:

1. *What is the current ministry status? Are things running smoothly? Has this ministry risen to the occasion?*

2. *Do you have enough help? If not, what do you specifically need?*

3. *Do your members have enough to do? If not, where can they be redirected?*

4. *Are there new ways to serve? Is the ministry prepared to fill these new ways?*

5. *How can we (the parish key leaders) help?*

Listening and offering prayers and guidance is always a great start. Remember investing time into assessing how your parish ministries are holding up is critical to their overall health.

COMMUNICATION

Old School Style

Once you've addressed parish leadership, it's now time for the ministry leaders to do a deep dive into checking in with their members.

It is 2021, and there have never been more ways to communicate. You can text or email or direct message or Facebook or Instagram message or use Flocknote, Mailchimp or Constant Contact... the list goes on. These methods are all extremely convenient. After all, what is faster than a group email to reach everyone simultaneously?

However, in some cases, these new, efficient and tech-savvy communications lack a personal or intimate feel.

When reaching out to check on a fellow ministry member it is critical to make a personal connection. This is needed now more than ever! If we can't be physically present to make a one-on-one connection with others, it's essential to find ways to be as warm and welcoming as possible when reaching out to ministry members and parishioners online.

Whether in person or online, something magical happens when we make person-to-person contact. The genuine connection makes a difference. It has warmth. It is individual. It makes a distinction, and the parishioner knows you sincerely care when you communicate in this style.

You will see the difference in the response you receive. Parishioners will be more willing to serve, more needs will be met, and fellow parishioners will rise up for their parish community.

Modern Options

Once a more personal method of contact with ministry members has been made, it is perfectly acceptable to utilize the gambit of more modern approaches.

For instance, after a personal call or in-person communication is delivered, followup through platforms such

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as CallingPost (an automated voice messaging and texting service), or email blasts is perfectly acceptable. Social media updates on your ministry are also encouraged as long as they are properly set up and executed. These tech-savvy options should be used – to help share messages and important information – but only after the member knows they are cared for and checked on with a more personal approach.

Let's go back to the CallingPost option. Remember, this unique approach allows parishioners to actually "hear" the voice of the pastor or ministry leader. A weekly recorded call or update from a live person via CallingPost or similar service is a welcome and valuable communication tool. Why not give it a try? Visit www.callingpost.com/Industry_Church.html to find out more.

MINISTRY RESILIENCE AND RESURGENCE

You Can't Keep a Good Catholic Down

Through the last year, one thing that has not been lost is that our parish homes are resilient. Even when greatly challenged, time and time again, those deeply invested parishioners and key ministry leaders stick around. They know their calling, they take heed, and they remain firmly planted.

It's truly amazing.

And, for most ministries, after any pause, there is an excitement about resuming. Parishioners miss their ministry life, seeing one another, and serving together. They long to return to some semblance of normalcy, and when they can even get a taste of it again, it's contagious.



The commitment and dedication of most ministry leaders mean the life of the ministry is still beating (even if it has been dormant for most of this last year). So, it's essential to tap into each ministry with concern, compassion, and encouragement. Helping members find a way to move forward is key.

This will look different from diocese to diocese. That's OK. The goal is to take the step to keep moving and not remain idle.

PERFORM MINISTRY CHECK-UPS WITH AN ANNUAL STEWARDSHIP RENEWAL

What is the best way to annually check ministry vibrancy? The answer is simple. It is through an annual Stewardship Renewal. Conducting an annual renewal is a regular opportunity to invite parishioners into the life of the parish, have ministry leaders thank the parishioners for their interest, and then welcome them into the life of service.

The annual event also provides a natural way to purge and prioritize the parish ministries. To help discover which ministries have become obsolete and which new ministries would be

beneficial to begin. This is also a great time to review the parish leadership. Is there a leader who has served the ministry too long and should share their talents in a new ministry? Or is there a ministry without a leader who needs help? An annual Stewardship Renewal allows for regular opportunities to ensure parish ministries are in tip-top shape.

This type of housekeeping helps keep the parish on the best possible path to serve its parishioners and the surrounding community.

SHARED WISDOM

Throughout the last year, CSC has witnessed Catholic churches respond to the needs of their parish ministries in a variety of ways. Inspired by the sheer determination and deep faith of fellow leaders, we would like to share some of the success.

Likely you have already adopted such approaches or even surpassed such feats. Keep up the great work. Or, if you are looking for camaraderie or encouragement, consider the following ideas and techniques.

Remember that ministry evolution will look different since some areas of the country have resumed conducting more in-person activities or hybrid activities where other areas have not done so at all. These limitations and challenges are opportunities for us to come together as one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church and live out our faith in whatever way we are called. Perseverance is key!

“For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”
— *Philippians 4:13*

IDEAS TO KEEP YOUR MINISTRIES ACTIVE DURING THE PANDEMIC

Catholic Stewardship Consultants has worked closely with parishes over the past year to help them be proactive in keeping ministries and parishioners engaged during the pandemic.

By helping our parishes continue forming parishioners in the principles of stewardship and active discipleship, we have seen many successes in all areas of parish life. Below are links to just a few of the articles that have appeared in our parish newsletters over the past several months. The articles tell the stories of how our client parish ministries are being creative and successful during the pandemic.

Through the monthly newsletters that CSC produces, our client parishes have been able to share these success stories of active stewardship with all parishioners both in print and online via parish websites and social media channels.

Charismatic Prayer Group Immaculate Conception, North Little Rock, Ark. https://bit.ly/3ijixYML	Prayer Chain Ministry Queen of the Holy Rosary, Overland Park, Kan. https://bit.ly/3IMQSGJ	COVID Outreach Little Falls Catholic Community, Little Falls, Minn. https://bit.ly/34BNSxD
Sandwich Ministry Christ the King, Lexington, Ky. https://bit.ly/35LR0fV	Young Adult Ministry Our Lady Star of the Sea, Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla. https://bit.ly/2IyXXDh	Unique Faith Formation Opportunities Immaculate Conception, Willoughby, Ohio https://bit.ly/3IDADCI
Parishioner Serves Parish in Face of Crisis St. Leo's, Grand Island, Neb. https://bit.ly/3fghEMa	OLA Live Our Lady of the Assumption, Carmichael, Calif. https://bit.ly/39bOH2V	Sanitizing Ministry Blessed Sacrament, Grand Island, Neb. https://bit.ly/34F3lat
Children's Liturgy of the Word St. Vincent de Paul, Arlington, Texas https://bit.ly/2HoMFB9	Baby Blessing Ministry St. Francis Xavier, Stillwater, Okla. https://bit.ly/2HsETGe	CYO Athletics St. Joseph and Nativity of the BVM, Amherst, Ohio https://bit.ly/3n7pWN
Ushers Ministry St. Anthony of Padua, Quincy, Ill. https://bit.ly/3moLP6h	Welcome Committee St. Benedict Cathedral, Evansville, Ind. https://bit.ly/3jkY4nf	Bereavement Committee St. Theresa, Maui, Hawaii https://bit.ly/3mdgS4R

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MORE TIPS TO KEEP YOUR MINISTRIES ACTIVE DURING THE PANDEMIC

In addition to the stories from our parish newsletters, here is a short list of additional ministry ideas for your parish. Not all these will be a good fit for all parishes since each diocese/archdiocese has its own protocols, especially for liturgical ministers. Nevertheless, we believe some of these can provide guidance and inspiration to help your parish ministries thrive.

Finance Council, Pastoral Council, or Stewardship Council

Meet during regularly scheduled times via Zoom. Don't stop! Split up the list of ministry leaders and make monthly calls to check in on how ministry activities are going. Bring back challenges to the meetings to discuss with the group.

Prayer Groups or Rosary Groups

Meet outdoors, weather permitting. Bring an outdoor chair and social distance. If typically meeting at church, try doing so in an outdoor space or roped-off area of the parking lot. If meeting in homes, use outdoor spaces. If the weather doesn't permit, continue to regularly hold meetings via Zoom. Don't stop! Create a Facebook group to share words of encouragement with the group. Post pictures of your families praying together.

Carnivals or Festivals

Once an in-person event, conducting an online experience has taken over this arena. Via group Zoom, offer activities ahead of time (outdoor relay races, contests done by teachers, musical numbers, talents, etc.) and then play the pre-recorded events along with a live host. Challenge attendees to "tip" certain events to raise money, charge a fee to get the online link, etc.

Retreats

Offer Online Retreats via Zoom. Begin with livestreaming Mass and continue

with talks, breaking in between for snacks and bathroom breaks. In areas where the climate is moderate, consider outdoor retreats to ensure social distancing. Encourage smaller groups or families to make retreats at local retreat centers that offer them.

Eucharistic Ministers

When allowed, resume with masks. Complete formation series while pausing to keep forming the ministers. If possible, gather monthly for a Eucharistic Holy Hour as a group using social distancing.

Altar Servers

When permissible, resume with masks. Complete formation series while pausing to keep forming the servers. Organize a regular monthly day of service, where altar servers help out in the community. It could be as simple as helping an elderly neighbor by mowing the lawn, raking leaves, or shoveling snow individually. Or get the group together to complete a service project at the parish.

Lectors

When permissible, resume with masks. Start a zoom or in-person scripture study. Take the time to form the group to come to a better understanding of Scripture.

Choir

When permissible, resume with masks for musicians and members when not singing. If singing is now allowed in your

congregation, allow socially distanced choir members to sing so music can be heard by all during the liturgy. If allowed, continue to practice in preparation for upcoming liturgies. Even practicing worship/sacred music is a form of prayer.

Greeters/Ushers

More important now than ever before. Wear a mask and social distance, but be sure to provide a warm, inviting welcome to parishioners at each Mass and help guide them to follow protocols and answer any questions. Have a group of socially-distanced greeters standing outside to welcome parishioners and open doors. Organize a day of service at the parish in which you can keep properly socially distanced.

Sacristans

When permissible, resume with masks. Since not many are typically needed at one time, this should be an easy ministry to continue. Organize a day of service at the parish in which you can keep properly socially distanced. Focus on cleaning the implements used during the liturgy.

Adoration

When allowed, resume with masks. If not allowed stream online so parishioners can see the Monstrance. Play Praise and Worship music during this time.

Cleaning/Sanitation

Continue and if more help is needed, post in the bulletin to recruit more assistance. Great for teens and young adults! With additional sanitation needed, members can ensure none of the parish structure is damaged with improper cleaning.

Meals (Funeral, New Baby, etc.)

These are still needed. Drop off or send, if necessary. Allow families/individuals to prepare meals at home. Bring to a

centralized drop-off point, where meals can be taken from a car without having to “change hands.”

Meals on Wheels, Soup Kitchen, or Sandwich Ministries

These are still needed (maybe even more). Drop-off to those in need is essential, coordinating all logistics behind the scenes – driving route, addresses, food collections, etc. Allow families/individuals to prepare meals at home. Bring to a centralized drop-off point, where meals can be taken from a car without having to “change hands.”

Parish Office Volunteers

Take turns coming into the office to help, mask up, and social distance. Use helpers for ongoing and continued communications with parishioners. Sending cards, calling, etc.

Prayer Shawl or Quilting Ministry

Provide assignments and work from home or quilt socially distancing with masks where allowed.

Outdoor Landscaping

Continue working outdoors to keep church grounds looking their best. Mask up/social distance if required.

Spiritual Direction

Continue as usual via Zoom. If allowed, meet six feet apart with masks. Spiritual support is needed more than ever!

Technology Team

Build this ministry as much as you can. There are many ways to communicate when you cannot meet in person. Advertise needs in the bulletin and online, if needed. Technology provides a great way to evangelize. Seek to create teams that will continue to maintain the parish website and social media accounts.

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Catholic Stewardship Consultants, Inc.

Catholic Stewardship Consultants (CSC) is a Christ-centered organization that provides customized stewardship services to Catholic parishes. We believe that the ultimate mission of the Church is to bring people into a living relationship with God and each other, through Jesus Christ. And we believe that the message of stewardship is essential in furthering that mission. CSC works with parishes to establish a stewardship spirituality, beginning with current leaders. CSC helps educate parishioners, and then invite them to make commitments of time, talent, and treasure. The result is that parishioners are drawn into parish life and increase their financial giving. But the most important result is that parishioners grow closer to Jesus as they become better stewards.

For more information, please contact us at info@catholicsteward.com or 888-822-1847 or visit our website www.catholicsteward.com.

MORE MINISTRY TIPS

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Faith Formation

Continue ongoing formation via Zoom. Send personal cards or notes to students to lift spirits and even include a Holy Card of a favorite saint. This may be the time to discern whole family catechesis programs instead of standard classes. There are several excellent programs available.

RCIA

Continue via Zoom. Meet in person socially distancing with masks when permissible.

Pre-Cana/Marriage Prep

Continue via Zoom. Meet in person socially distancing with masks when permissible. Offer a hybrid to cover those concerned to meet in person.

Children's Liturgy of the Word

Have leaders record a session with their smartphones just as if they were

in front of the children discussing the weekly readings. Then, email sessions to members to watch on Sunday when the family is livestreaming Mass. Or post to the parish YouTube account. Children will recognize their teachers and continue to deepen their understanding of the liturgy.

Prayer Chains

Of all ministries, this behind-the-scenes ministry can continue by sharing the prayer needs via email or phone chains to ensure parishioners are uplifted in prayer.

Welcome Committees

If you cannot host a socially distanced get-together or meal, send out welcome packets to new parishioners and help them become acclimated to the community. Ensure all new members receive key parish information — including a Stewardship Renewal packet — and are invited into the life of the parish.