

CONGREGATIONAL STORIES

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TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO ACTION

Father Henry Kuykendall, priest at Nativity Catholic Church in Evansville, will never forget November 4th and the party that marked his 70th birthday. The celebration was “awesome”—his word—and not just because of the scores of well-wishers, the hog roast, the mariachi band, and the lively dancing. What made it special was that the two ethnic groups that comprise Nativity’s congregation mingled comfortably for the first time since Kuykendall invited area Latinos to make the small Anglo church their parish home seven years ago.

“They sat together, greeted each other’s families, and even table-hopped,” says Kuykendall. “Up until this year, we would have parties and the Spanish would sit on one side of the room and the Anglos would sit on the other side. This time I saw a real change in the dynamic.”

The shift was a tangible sign that Nativity is making progress toward its vision “to create unity within our diversity.” Kuykendall and his small but enthusiastic staff sparked the idea; a Flourishing Congregations grant from the Center for Congregations–Southwest helped them transform it into action. Nativity is implementing a multi-faceted program aimed at eliminating cultural barriers and training lay leaders to assume pastoral duties previously performed by the parish priest. At the core of the program are four retreats conducted on the campus of Saint Meinrad Monastery, a 60-mile bus ride from Evansville. Volunteers from Nativity’s Latino and Anglo communities attend the weekend workshops structured to help each group appreciate the other’s traditions.

“In the past, the Anglos didn’t understand why Latinos celebrate with festive music and incorporate different liturgies,”

explains Abraham Brown, the bilingual pastoral associate who joined Nativity’s staff a year ago. Separated by age and heritage, the young Latino families and the older Anglo members often felt they had little in common. Mass on Sunday at 9 a.m. accommodated the language and worship preferences of the Anglos; an all-Spanish version followed at noon. Not until the retreats did personal relationships start to form and a sense of community begin to build. Although both groups still prefer to celebrate Mass in their own language, they come together for special events—such as birthday parties—and “they call each other by name,” says Brown. “It’s been a big change.”



Encouraging as the change is, Kuykendall insists it’s a small part of the effort to fully integrate Latinos into the parish. He estimates

that the Catholic Church in Latin America is 50 years behind its American counterpart in the way it views the priesthood. In Mexico, all parish work is done by the priest or, in his absence, by the nuns. Parish members have little responsibility for supporting the church financially or through voluntarism. Kuykendall’s age and the diminishing number of available priests underscore the need for a more team-like approach to ministry. “I may be the last full-time priest at Nativity,” he says. “We must develop lay leaders who understand the way a parish works and have the skills to do pastoral work.”

He envisions a time when he can perform the sacramental rites and entrust members to conduct business meetings, maintain the facility, oversee the budget and plan fundraising events. To achieve this vision, the staff talks in terms of steps on a ladder, according to



Wendy McCormick, director of the Center for Congregations—Southwest. “They know they can’t take members who have no concept of church involvement and immediately assign them to the parish council. Instead, they hope to begin a process that gradually moves people up, one level at a time, from their current commitment.”

The workshops are helping, as is the formation of several lay leadership teams. Communication is less of a barrier as Latino members become more fluent in English. Kuykendall measures their language progress by the frequency of their laughter. When he delivers his sermons at the Latino Mass he speaks in English and then waits for Abraham Brown to translate his words into Spanish.

“I like to tell jokes,” says Kuykendall. “Lately I’ve noticed that 40 to 50 percent of the congregation is laughing twice. They hear me first in English and they laugh; then they hear the translation in Spanish and they laugh again.”

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Like Nativity Catholic Church in Evansville, Epworth United Methodist Church in Indianapolis is using a Center for Congregations grant to generate and manage major change.



Located on the northeast side, Epworth resembles the suburban neighborhood it serves. The sturdy limestone facility dates back to 1961 and reflects the unpretentious style of that era. “It looks a lot like the houses that surround it,” says Randy Siebert, chairman of the congregation’s Building for the Future Task Force. “It’s on a single floor and doesn’t have a steeple. Some people drive by every day and don’t even know we’re here.”

A dip in membership, an approaching 50th anniversary, and the arrival of senior pastor Doug Walker prompted members to schedule a retreat to discuss the church’s future. Where did they see Epworth going? What might the church look like in 10 or 15 years? “It was a brain-storming session where all attendees could dream as big as they wanted without considering costs,” recalls Walker,



whose personal assessment was that the congregation was in fine shape but the physical structure needed to be updated to attract a younger population.

A long-range planning committee formed and eventually evolved into the Building for the Future Task Force. Members solicited input from the congregation. A resource grant from the Indianapolis Center helped support a facilities assessment that confirmed Walker’s initial evaluation. Maintenance projects had been put on hold for too long. Big-ticket needs included energy-efficient windows and upgrades to the heating, cooling, plumbing and electrical systems. Then there were aesthetics to consider.

“The sanctuary is virtually the way it was when it was built 50 years ago,” says Bob Andrews, chair of the board of trustees. Known for its excellent music program, the church lacks space in the chancel area for its choirs, instrumentalists and praise band. Other projects that emerged as priorities were the entrance and foyer that members described as “unwelcoming” and the basement fellowship hall that has a low ceiling and view-obstructing posts. “We realized that we couldn’t wait any longer to make improvements,” says Andrews.

To determine priorities and time line, the same company that conducted the site assessment now will create a master plan. An architect will meet with focus groups. A capital campaign will follow only if the congregation expresses its willingness to step up its giving to underwrite the renovation costs. Satisfaction with the status quo has diminished, and a readiness for change is growing even among church elders who have attended Epworth since the doors opened 50 years ago.

“Some of our oldest members are among the most enthusiastic supporters,” says Andrews. “They understand that the work needs to be done and they’re glad that somebody has finally grabbed hold and said, ‘Okay, here we go.’”

A DECADE OF GROWTH

The same energy for change that Epworth is experiencing sparked the launch of a new congregation 10 years ago in a part of Indiana already known for its number and variety of churches. The Bridge Community Church, founded by four couples, now attracts more than 900 weekly worshippers to its big box facility—originally a Kmart—on the northern edge of Decatur. A clue to its continued success is in its motto: “The Bridge exists to help people find their way back to God.”

The assumption is that most people have had some kind of church experience in their lifetime. For those who choose no

longer to attend, the experience was likely negative. The Bridge offers a clean-slate approach without traditional trappings to remind worshippers of their previous brush with religion. The sanctuary, called the auditorium, has no organ, stained-glass windows or hymnals. Dress is casual, music is contemporary, and sermons—called them messages—are packed with applications to daily life.



“Most people love God but for one reason or another don’t consider church worth their time,” explains Mo Hodge, lead teacher and founding pastor at The Bridge. “Many have been hurt by the church, or they’ve had high expectations that weren’t met. They left on bad terms, and so we want to win them back. Our main goal is to make God famous. The old way of saying that is to ‘give glory to God,’ but that sometimes loses its meaning because it’s used so much.”

Sophisticated technology attracts families and nudges them to return each week. Classrooms are equipped with lights, cameras, screens and sound systems. The congregation’s websites, updated through a grant from the Center for Congregations—Northeast, include audio and video from recent services. A new DVD gives viewers a sampling of what they’ll encounter when they visit The Bridge. Hodge and his staff were so pleased with the quality of the DVD that they made more than a thousand copies and looked for ways to distribute them to those looking for a nontraditional type of worship.

“We decided to deliver full Thanksgiving meals to low-income neighborhoods,” he says. “We packed 334 boxes with turkeys, potatoes, vegetables and frozen pumpkin pies” ... plus copies of the DVD. “The Sunday before Thanksgiving we drove all over the county knocking on doors and giving out boxes. People were dumbfounded. They sent thank-you cards, called us on the phone, and a couple of families came to church the next Sunday.”

Using technology as a tool, The Bridge has built a reputation for having one of the strongest youth ministries in the area. Full-time staff serves specific age groups from toddlers through high school, and a family worship hour unfolds with all the pizzazz of a live Disney show. “This focus on children is among the three most important things to work on” for a new church trying to establish its niche in a landscape dot-

ted with steeples and spires, says Brian Witwer, director of the Center for Congregations — Northeast. The other two essential elements are “strong worship experiences and outreach ministries. After that, everything else will follow.”

SUBSTANCE & SUSTAINABILITY

Finding help in building a vibrant youth ministry was C. Davies Reed’s goal when he enrolled in an all-day work-

shop sponsored by the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. Reed, 18 months into his position as associate rector at St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church in Carmel, was aware of the three major challenges that he faced. A recent seminary graduate—the priesthood is his second career—he had little formal training in youth ministry; the youth program represented only one-third of his responsibilities at St. Christopher’s; and the program that he inherited was in a slump.

“Most youth programs have a pattern of highs and lows, often based on the personality of the youth pastor,” he says. “If you have someone with a great personality, he gets things going, but then he moves on. If no one is available to continue the momentum, the program can lose energy. The key is to create a program that has both substance and sustainability.” At its strongest point, his church’s youth program was supervised by a team of parents whose teens were part of the group. After the students graduated and the parents stepped aside, the quality suffered. “When I came, there really was very little in place for kids in grades six through 12,” he says.



The workshop, called *Sustainable Youth Ministry* with Mark DeVries from Youth Ministry Architects, gave him a glimpse of a strong program’s structure. “Did Youth Ministry Architects ever work with individual congregations?” he asked DeVries during a coffee break.



“Did the Indianapolis Center ever make grants to support a consultation?” he asked Center staff member Nancy Armstrong. The affirmative answers prompted Reed to apply for a grant, secure matching funds and schedule a team of consultants for a weekend of intense meetings, discussions, focus groups and interviews. The sessions culminated in a Sunday presentation to the entire congregation.

“We learned that we need to allocate more resources—more money and more people—if we want to grow our program,” says Reed. “We have to change the way we’re doing things, and we need to recruit a legion of volunteers.” The response from the congregation was positive and resulted in parents coming forward with offers of help. “Some said, ‘I want to be involved but I don’t want to be frontline. I’ll do backroom stuff,’” recalls Reed. “Well, there’s plenty of that to do. For example: Food. You’ve got to feed kids. Last year, I tried to do it all by myself. I’d order the pizza, set up the room and then make sure the activities were ready.”

The consultants provided a timeline that included a to-do list of tasks, arranged by priority. For starters, the youth of the church identified adults they would like to have involved in planning the program. Those members have agreed to make up a team that will help design a sustainable ministry. Reed estimates it will take about 18 months to “get to where we really need to be, with all the pieces in place.”

Just as the congregation erected its church in three construction phases, so does Reed plan to build the youth program in specific stages. He hopes the result will be a ministry that can sustain changes in personnel without losing its impetus. Success will breed success, and he looks forward to the time when a groundswell of people will join him in the effort. “It will take a while for all of us to reorient our thinking, but we’re going to do this as a community.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What questions and ideas about your congregation’s work does this article evoke?
- In what ways does your congregation determine program needs and field ideas and suggestions?
- How does your congregation turn ideas into action?
- How do congregational leaders find the resources they need to enhance ministries and activities?

RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

Using Survey Assessment Tools. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Congregations, 2011. Part of the Center’s Using Resources series, this article explores assessment tools, when to use them, what to consider, and input from congregational leaders.



Group Processes that Facilitate Positive Change. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Congregations, 2007. This Using Resources piece shares information about various positive change resources, including Appreciative Inquiry.



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Our Mission

The Center for Congregations strengthens Indiana congregations by helping them find and use the best resources to address their challenges and opportunities.

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