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6 essential rules for communicating a new RCIA vision

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Without looking it up, can you tell me what your parish mission statement is? If you can, can all the members of the parish council? And what about the RCIA team? And if they can, can the parents whose children are in the school or religious education process tell me? What about the neophytes in your parish?

Do you know what your parish mission is?

In most parishes, hardly anyone can say clearly what the parish mission is. In some cases, they've never heard it stated. In other parishes, it appears on the cover of every Sunday bulletin and is sometimes read aloud at Mass. And still people cannot remember it. Why does this happen?

Why communication fails

Communication of an important vision fails for these reasons:

- There is **no sense of urgency** to remember it.
- The people who are communicating it are not **the right people**; they don't carry any authority with the listeners.
- **The message itself is blurry** or just plain bad.

Even when all those roadblocks are removed, it is still difficult to communicate a new vision. But the minimum requirement to get started with your communication plan is to be sure you have eliminated any possible barrier between the message and the listeners. We've looked at how to do that in previous posts. Here, I want to focus on some practical steps for communicating your vision of the future for your RCIA process and your parish.

In his book, *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter says:

The time and energy required for effective vision communication are directly related to the clarity and simplicity of the message. (89)

1. Use the KISS method

In other words, Keep It Simple, Sweetheart! Get rid of all jargon. Here are just a few jargon phrases to avoid:

- RCIA
- The rite
- Candidates
- Precatechumenate
- Confirmandi
- "seeking completion of the sacraments"
- Second Vatican Council / Vatican II
- Neophyte year
- Easter Vigil



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2. Paint a picture

If you can't use the technical language of the initiation process, how are you going to communicate a vision of change?

Use metaphors, analogies, and examples. For example:

Version 1: The RCIA is a restoration of an ancient process for incorporating unbaptized persons into Jesus Christ through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. The process was restored after the Second Vatican Council, but did not become widely available in the United States until late in the 1980s. The local Catholic bishop determines how RCIA will be administered in the parishes under his care. We need to align our process more closely with the process of the ancient church and the policies of the diocese. That means we will instituting an ongoing precatechumenate, year-round catechumenate, and a mystagogical period of at least one year from the anniversary of baptism.

Version 2: The Holy Spirit moves people to seek Christ in all seasons. The Holy Spirit does not take the summer off, and neither should we.

Which version better communicates the message?

3. Communicate early and often

Use lots of formats for getting your message out. Here are just few places you can spread the message throughout the parish:

- Parish council meetings
- Staff meetings
- Team meetings
- Back to school nights
- Posters
- Parish website and Facebook page
- Informal, one-on-ones
- E-mail messages
- Stewardship talks and reports
- Letter to the editor in the diocesan paper
- Infant baptismal preparation sessions
- Parish religious education program
- Youth retreat
- Annual Christmas and Easter messages

4. Repeat, repeat, repeat

We all know that once is not enough if we really want to communicate a message. But once we have said something three or four times, we think people should have gotten the message. The really obsessive among us might actually repeat a message ten or twelve times. I want to challenge you to think in "hundreds." How can you find hundreds and hundreds of ways to communicate your message over the next year?

5. Walk the Talk

You have to be the shining example of the change you want to create. If your goal is to move from a 9-month catechetical program to an ongoing conversion process, for example, what happens if you still use classroom language and models when initiating catechumens? And this goes for your entire team as well. Kotter says:

Nothing undermines the communication of a change vision more than behavior on the part of key players that seems inconsistent with the vision.
(97; italics in original)

6. Listen up

Any change process is going to generate resistance. While we can expect that, we shouldn't ignore it. Sometimes others want change just as much as we do, but they have a different idea about how to accomplish it. If we discount all feedback as simple complaining, we might miss some good ideas we hadn't thought of. And even if we hear no new ideas, we still have to listen. Change is not a top-down process. It is a dialogue within a community of disciples.

What are your next steps?

Have you been following along in this series on change? What has motivated you so far? What next steps will you take within the next week? Within the next month? Share your thoughts, and inspire the rest of us.

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