

Learning Methods: Approach and Methodology

[Download PDF for printing](#)

Shaping healthy parishes is difficult, complex, and joyful work. It requires an understanding of how to nurture and bring out the best in the parish, as a community and an organization. Leaders shape the parish. Healthy leaders are essential to the development of healthy and faithful parishes. The emotional and spiritual maturity of leaders is at the heart of what is possible.

We are also focused on making immediate, tangible improvements in parishes while building their long-term health. In doing that we will pay attention to the need to focus your energies around what works and the primary task of a parish church.

Shaping the Parish™ will help participants address those needs through learning methods such as:

Three themes

We are working with three interdependent themes.

- Spiritual practice
- Emotional and social intelligence
- Change theory and methods

Practical & Timely Action

Participants will be helped to improve parish life and health in a frequent and regular series of actions.

There are three primary methods used:

- 1) Developmental Initiatives (Projects/Interventions) - Six formal initiatives over the course of the program. These are projects you select from a program list of possibilities. You report on each, noting the results, what you learned about interventions & change, and what you learned about your own spiritual life and emotional & social intelligence.
- 2) Tools and methods every weekend (or in the national program, throughout each week) - You will return to the parish with practical and useful tools, skills, and methods that you can make use of quickly.
- 3) Many interventions - The assumption of the program is that parish leaders make many interventions every few months in the hope of improving parish life and increasing health. That just happens as part of parish life. Participation in the program will offer you a way to focus those actions in a more effective and efficient manner.

We are working at both short term improvement in parish health and long term transformation.

Experiential Education

Shaping the Parish offers an in-depth, experiential approach to transforming leaders and parishes. Experiential education requires two key elements: First, that participants actually do something, experience something. Second, that they have an opportunity to reflect on and learn from that experience. What was tried. What was that like? What worked, what didn't? What might you do differently in the future? What did you learn?

This experiential approach will apply both to the workshop time and the developmental initiatives in the parish.

I

n the workshop time there will be exercises, role plays and group work that we will learn from in a disciplined reflection process. The "here and now" experience will be used to learn about our impact on others and our own awareness and self management. We'll also learn about how to work more effectively in and with teams.

Our experience in designing and implementing parish initiatives (projects/interventions) will be reflected upon and learned from in a process of self, peer, and trainer/facilitator critique.

Developmental Initiative (Projects & Interventions)

Participants will design, implement and reflect on six developmental initiatives over a period of 18 to 20 months in a diocesan program and 12 - 16 months in the national program. Trainers and facilitators will provide substantial support and guidance in helping participants carry out parish initiatives to foster health and spiritual and emotional maturity.

Guidance and Support

The program is designed to provide guidance and support for the participants in three ways: 1) At times the coaching is systematic and done with all the participants. For example, after having worked with instruments assessing emotional intelligence and completing some time in a T-group, messages were sent to each participant with follow-up coaching. It was specific for each person. 2) At other times the coaching is driven by an issue the person faces. For example, one priest went home to have his bishop tell him that the parish had two years to decide to merge, close, yoke, etc. In that case we could help him work with an existing developmental initiative on Congregational Options and suggest ways in which he might make use of his strengths in dealing with the situation. 3) As participants design and implement initiatives (projects/interventions) in parishes.

High expectations

There is a lot to do. Participants will be expected to implement parish interventions every couple of months. (between all weekends in diocesan programs and on a schedule in the national program). There's a significant amount of reading to complete. And while we are working on improving parish life and health the means toward that includes significant attention to the participant's own spiritual life and emotional intelligence. That's hard work.

Theory & Methods

Participants will learn from the fields of organization development, ascetical and pastoral theology, and ecclesiology. Useful theory is essential as we decide on which methods and processes to use in the parish. At the same time we learn to build and understand useful and valid theory as we try out methods and skills.

Enough time

The program is long enough to develop a critical mass of learning for the participant while being efficient about time use.

Teams

Coming as part of a parish team is strongly encouraged. The effectiveness of your work in the parish is enhanced by working together to improve parish life and ministry. Learning is increased as you explore theory, methods and applications together.

If it's not possible to come with a team (this will often be true in the national program) you can compensate to some degree by recruiting a back-in-the-parish team. Select people you trust and can work well with. The team can do the readings and help plan and implement the developmental initiatives.

[Your parish development team](#)

[Possible Team Process for Working on the Initiatives](#)

Exams

There's brief exam at the beginning of each weekend. *You do need to pass the exams to stay in the program.* You will be given several opportunities to do that if necessary.

As part of the mix, exams have proven to be a useful learning tool. We have used them in other programs over the years. They create a situation in which participants come to the program ready to enter into the action-learning process with a base of knowledge. That allows us to spend less time on presentations and more on application. We have seen a significant increase in learning since exams have been introduced in these programs.

[More information](#)

[Exams for first three weekends](#) of the diocesan program.