

# Three stages in leading parishes through this time of crisis

INNOVATE  
ENGAGE  
RE-EMERGE



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How can we lead positively and creatively through these times, when so many of the things we normally do as a parish have been suspended?

The swiftness with which our lives have changed over the last few weeks is extraordinary. It is not surprising that some of us find ourselves adrift in this ‘new normal’. So much has changed, and so many of the ‘ordinary’ ways of operating are not currently possible because of government restrictions and because we want to keep the most vulnerable in our community safe. As a church, we have responded to increasingly tighter restrictions, made many enforced changes and negotiated a unique Easter Triduum.

## WHERE TO NOW?

This is not a time just to wait for ‘things to go back to normal’ in a few weeks or months. Rather, it can be a time to revisit our central mission as parishes—to make and form disciples—and to plan for how we will lead our people through this season so that we re-emerge after the shutdown as stronger, more mission-oriented communities.

How might we do this? We have identified *three main stages* in this process, and offer here a number of practical suggestions and strategies to help guide you through them:

### 1. INNOVATE

Parishes have been forced to hit the ‘pause button’ on what they have always done and have started quickly innovating around immediate concerns. By now, parishes need to have strategies in place for:

- provision of prayer opportunities and resources, and/or masses via live-streaming
- ongoing provision of pastoral care, especially to those isolating, alone or in need
- planning with committees and teams to keep the parish operational
- a multifaceted and intentional communication plan for parishioners, including print and digital media.

### 2. ENGAGE

Think about how your parish might ‘not only survive but thrive’ under the current circumstances. Nobody knows how long this season will last—even if

restrictions begin to lift in next month, there will be a gradual phase-out over many weeks and months. Putting everything on hold isn’t an option. It’s time to lead your team into this new reality.

In particular, recognise that this is a golden opportunity to re-evaluate everything the parish is doing. As clumsy and awkward as this adjustment period may be, it is also a time of huge opportunity, fresh growth and enthusiasm.

#### • Lead out of a team.

- ~ **Not alone.** As a pastor, you can’t lead your community through a crisis like this on your own.
- ~ **Invite.** Identify a team of experienced and trusted leaders to plan and work alongside you.
- ~ **Gather.** Meet on a digital platform (such as Zoom) several times a week, to plan, create and implement your pastoral strategies.

#### • Continue usual parish leadership teams and groups.

- ~ **Modify.** Move your usual parish meetings (pastoral council, finance, liturgy, staff, RCIA) to an online format. You need these meetings more than ever.
- ~ **Pivot.** Revise staff and volunteer roles and responsibilities. For example, those who give Communion to the sick may phone those people regularly instead. Your liturgy team may research or produce resources for home prayer; the RCIA team may begin online sessions.

#### • Communicate. Plan how you will maximise the effectiveness of communication to staff, parish groups, parishioners and searchers. Let everyone know ‘we are still here’.

- ~ **As a pastor, personally communicate regularly.** During uncertain times, people need and want to hear from their leader. Perhaps provide short video reflections or write a regular and personal email message to your people.
- ~ **Update your parish website.** Your home page is the front door to your parish, especially now. Don’t have a ‘we are closed’ banner on your front page. The parish is definitely open, even if the church building is shut—as Christians, we are never closed! Think of your front page as a billboard, not an informational hub. Have everything people need prominently available. Remove everything that is currently paused—usual mass times, rosters, groups etc. Consider

the kinds of questions visitors to your website might have: What is on? What can this parish do for me? How can I be involved? Make the tone of your online presence welcoming, hopeful and engaging.

- ~ **Update or create social media platforms** such as Facebook, so that they are regular and engaging means through which the parish community can communicate, reach out and minister. Route all social media back to the parish website.
- ~ **Don't forget email**—it is a uniquely effective tool if used wisely.
- **Be seeker-friendly.** There is evidence that many people who are not usual church attenders are giving 'live-streaming' Masses a try. The very cohort we usually struggle to reach—younger, tech-savvy millennials—are the ones connecting with us. Wow! Online Mass is a non-threatening way for newcomers to explore our faith without the worry of 'doing the wrong thing' or 'being stuck' somewhere they feel uncomfortable.
  - ~ **Assume** that you have people watching who may not usually attend your parish. Welcome newcomers at the start. Plan your homily to be intentionally welcoming and inclusive to non-churchgoers. Offer simple explanations of parts of the Mass.
  - ~ **Conclude** each online Mass with an invitation to connect. Offer a mobile number to which people can text the word 'new', or offer an address for people to email.
  - ~ **Intentionally** move your online congregation from viewers to engagers. Viewers become consumers and critics; engagers begin to participate and will be more likely to return. Invite people to say where they are joining from, send in prayer requests or ask questions. Have this moderated and then followed up by your team. Have a clear invitation to a 'next step'—for example, an online 'pizza with the pastor' Zoom chat, online Alpha, or Q&A webinar.
- **Reach out and serve.** Develop ways that people can serve the parish and wider community during the shutdown, and mobilise these people quickly. People who usually serve in the parish will want to serve.

- **Launch online faith-formation and prayer groups.**

Zoom is a great platform for this. People in your parish will have many hours per week of extra time they are wanting to fill.

### 3. RE-EMERGE

Eventually, this time will pass. Once you have your strategies in place, you may have many months of living in this new reality. Consider using this time as a God-given moment to plan and prepare for a powerful, mission-focused re-emergence.

- As a pastor, what does God want to do inside of you at this time?
  - ~ Renewal always starts inside people. The pandemic has created a once-in-a-century opportunity to step outside our normal routine and carefully listen to God in our hidden places.
  - ~ Throughout history, God has often come inside dark clouds. Step into the moment!
- How would you like your parish to emerge from this time?
  - ~ Prayerfully ask: What dream does God have for this parish? What is the Spirit bringing to life?
  - ~ Have we longed to change but been held back by a 'we've always done things this way' culture?
- As a parish team, what seeds can you sow now, in order to ensure a powerful, mission-focused re-emergence?

We are being invited to join Jesus on mission. We are being given an opportunity reshape our parish—and for the parish to look and stay looking different. For decades, we've talking about being on mission and mobilising the church for a new evangelisation. Maybe this time provides an opportunity to put these ideas into action.

It's time to do it!



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The Archdiocesan Animation Team is available to discuss strategies with you and/or your team, and to facilitate sessions with your team (remotely) on many topics and issues. Just ask!

Contact Lorraine on 0402 217 123, or at [lorraine.mccarthy@cam.org.au](mailto:lorraine.mccarthy@cam.org.au).

**NEXT WEEK: 'Staying connected: beyond live-streaming ...'**