Profile of Inactive Catholics and the Path to Active Participation

Profile of Inactive Catholics most likely to respond to CCH commercials:

- They identify themselves as Catholic and they do not see themselves as inactive. They don’t understand why Mass is important and why belonging to a parish community is important, but they don’t consider themselves as “inactive Catholics.”
- At least 90% of them became inactive because of social stresses. Life got too hectic and busy, they had to work on Sundays, they got involved with sports for themselves or for their children or they just fell out of the intentional habit of coming to Mass on Sundays. In a nutshell, they did not have a significant relationship with Jesus and with his community such that attending Mass was not as important to them as other options.
- They are not angry with the church. People who identify themselves as “recovering Catholics” or who will forcefully and sometimes argumentatively speak against the Catholic Church are not likely to be moved by the commercials.
- They do not feel the church has harmed them so they are not in need of pastoral healing per se. If asked, they can quickly come up with a reason(s) why they left, such as being upset by the sex abuse scandal or by the mergers and linkages in our area. However, this explanation is not why they left, but a further justification for their actions. (Indeed, CARA’s 2003 study found that nearly 85% of inactive Catholics did so before the sex abuse scandal.)
- A small minority of inactive Catholics will have some past hurts connected with the church and will need compassionate and trained pastoral ministers to work with them. After airing the CCH commercials in the Diocese of Phoenix, 7% of diocesan contacts had marriage issues and 3% had issues regarding homosexuality. An “annulment fair” in the Diocese of Corpus Christi was attended by over 100 people in one afternoon. (Estimates were that 5000-7000 people returned during their Lent 2009 campaign.)

Demographic Profile of those most likely to respond to CCH commercials:

- Both male and female, between the ages of 20 and 50
- Young adults (age 18-35ish) may be married or not
- Many returnees will have children and the children will be of all age groups
- Many returnees will be Hispanic who hope the church is more welcoming to them now
- Some returnees will be “religious ed parents” who do not come to Mass, but bring their children to Catholic school or Catholic religious education programs.
- Some returnees will be individuals who were initially upset about a parish closing, linkage or merger. If they are still really emotional about this, they are not likely to respond to the commercials; returnees tend feel neutral or positive about the church
Moving to Full Participation – Three Stages

While these stages tend to be sequential, two or more stages can nonetheless be active simultaneously. There is no way of knowing how long (or if) a person will take to move through these stages. That will depend on God and on the person. We may never know our role in this process, only that God will work through us if we so agree.

1. **Stage One: Welcome.** When they return, inactive Catholics need to feel welcomed, as though they are already part of an open, genuine, vibrant, happy parish community. People often decide within 5-7 minutes of coming to a church whether they intend to return, so a parish community cannot be too warm and effusive towards everyone around them from the moment people turn into the parking lot. See the September CCH Resource Packet, Welcoming 101 and Radical Christian Hospitality pdfs available at the diocesan website for ideas on strengthening the welcome process in your parish. (Go to gbdioc.org and select “Read More” for the Catholics Come Home section. On the next page, select resources link for parish leaders and volunteers.)

2. **Stage Two: Connect.** 85% of people who come to a church for the second time end up becoming members. However, one major factor distinguishes those who are still active six months later from those who are not. People who are still active report an average of 7 friends in the community, seven people they can call/rely on to discuss spiritual matters and other life issues. Those who are no longer active report an average of only 2 friends in the community.

   In addition to connecting returning Catholics to other people in the parish, returnees also need to be connected to the sacramental, pastoral and catechetical aspects of our faith. Whether it is two weeks or two months later, returnees will eventually share with others in the parish their need to receive Reconciliation, for their child to receive First Communion, or their interest in learning more about the Bible. The key for parish staff to remember here is that individuals will surface their needs at their own pace based on their specific life journey (even if they don’t articulate it as an need, for example, for Reconciliation) and these needs complement rather than supplement their need for social integration into the parish community.

3. **Stage Three: Commit.** Remember the first time someone invited you to share some of your talents with the parish? Remember how you felt the first time you realized that you thought you were helping the parish do X, but really you were getting more out of it than what you could ever possibly give? Remember how participating and serving in the parish opened you up to God, to your faith and to other people? Well, returning Catholics will never know this feeling until you ask them to share, to serve, to give of themselves. Discipleship is a journey. Stewardship is a journey. They both begin with invitations.

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Returning Catholics and the Weight Watchers Model

Balancing the need for individual attention and desire for anonymity

Weight Watchers meetings work for so many people because as soon as you walk in the door, you know you will not be judged, you will be accepted no matter how well you are losing weight and you know everyone is there for the same reason. In this environment, people do not mind identifying themselves even though they would normally prefer anonymity. Weight Watchers knows how to balance a desire for anonymity with the need for individual attention. What lessons can today’s parish can learn from Weight Watchers?

Larger parishes: Catholic parishes with more than a few hundred units are generally very well suited to providing the anonymity that most people desire. But, how well do we provide the individual attention that people also need? For better or worse, today’s returning Catholics want to feel like they got something out of Mass and that there is something the parish can do for them before they will ever consider becoming a parish member and long before most of them will ever approach the pastoral staff to introduce themselves. This section presents some ideas of how you might help the returnees to feel special, like honored guests, while not singling them out such that they feel embarrassed and that all eyes are focused on them.

Smaller parishes: What about smaller and/or rural parishes where “everybody knows everybody?” Although everyone may know where Jane attended second grade, who her first boyfriend was and that she twists her hair when she is nervous, it is unlikely that the broader community knows what in life gives Jane her greatest joy and what troubles her heart more than anything else in this world. Christian communities are about providing the space where we can be human with one another, where it is safe to let God and others touch that which matters most to us, both the joyful and the painful. Whereas larger parishes may need to figure out ways to provide individual attention while not overstepping the desire for anonymity, smaller parishes may need to do the opposite: help returnees feel like they are part of the group, part of the community that is gathered and not simply an individual who has not gone to Mass the past six years.

Every parish will ultimately need to decide for itself the best way to balance the need each of us has to be able to come to Mass and participate communally and relatively anonymously in the liturgy with the need to be touched by God and by other human beings, uniquely and individually. We hope some of the ideas presented in the next section serve as a spark for you!