

REPORT ON THE STATE OF FAITH FORMATION



Fall 2018

Go, and Make Disciples.

A look at the successes and challenges for growth in the faith and practice of people in the Diocese of Little Rock. A framework for moving forward.

Synopsis

This report comes as the result of my two year effort to understand the Church's vision for Faith Formation. In that time I have visited every pastor and many parish leaders to understand how faith formation is being practiced currently and hear the successes and challenges of each situation. I have also read much and attended national conferences to better grasp the landscape of the United States in this time. This report also takes into account the information provided by Deacon Keith Strohm during priest continuing education in April 2018.

The most common frustration and desire in the parishes relates to reaching people who are disconnected from parish life. In some cases this is described as people who go to Mass on Sundays but remain uninterested in further growth. In many cases it is described as people who want sacraments for their children, but not regular Mass attendance. In most parishes there is awareness of Catholics in the community who remain distant for a variety of reasons.

These concerns are not ignored, but there is a frequent sense of having tried a lot of ways to reach the disconnected, but with little or no success. However, parish leaders are usually hopeful about discovering the right program to help others reconnect.

My desire with this report is to try to describe a clear way to view the varying layers of these problems, emphasize that there is no single way to address them and help parishes work from a shared diocesan framework to make progress.

...BE LIKE A WISE MAN WHO BUILT HIS HOUSE ON ROCK. MT 7:24

Some premises

First: I would like to start with the Gospel image of building on sand or a solid foundation. The richness of Catholic faith is found in so many aspects of Church life, but that richness is the building. The foundation is faith in Jesus Christ and God's plan for salvation. In many of our parish efforts we are trying to build up the Church and we presume the foundation is strong. The presumption is often false. In dealing with any parish effort we must first consider the foundation of the people involved. For each person we must ask: How stable is their faith foundation?

Second: To have a stable foundation is to be a disciple. To be a disciple means to know and trust Jesus, to know what he teaches and strive to follow it and to be able to describe all of this in a personal way.

Third: Decisions about how to invest time and effort from the parish should be clear about who we are trying to reach and what level of formation they need. Attention will need to be given to people at various stages of formation in an ongoing way. Priorities will have to be set based on available resources and patience will be required because of the time that real formation takes.

Fourth: This is really God's plan and so it does not depend on our being perfect instruments. It depends on our own ongoing formation and cooperation with the Holy Spirit. We believe in a God who has already won and invites us to share his life.

Where to start?

To simplify the landscape I want to draw from material presented by Deacon Keith Strohm during the spring 2018 priest continuing education. He described parish efforts to form people in three stages of growth in their life with God.

The first stage where we must give effort is the **MAKING** of disciples. These are the people who lack the foundation of faith and are often distant or barely connected to parish life. At this stage we are focused on helping them feel a connection to faith that will begin to shape decisions they make about their time and energy. This stage is about coming to know Jesus Christ, about encounter.

The second stage is the **MATURING** of disciples. These are people who have made a personal commitment to Jesus, to growing in their faith, and regularly give their time and effort to be part of parish life. At this stage we are presenting them with a richer understanding of Catholic faith and practice.

The third stage is the **MISSIONING** of disciples. These are people who no longer treat faith as something privately held, but as something to be shared. At this stage we are helping them to see that Jesus expects fellow workers for the Kingdom. They are in need of both motivation to act on Jesus' grand commission, and training in the skills that make them competent evangelists.



One clarification: We often presume someone active in the parish is already a disciple and ready to be matured. In many cases this is not true. There are many active parishioners who are not



exactly disciples. They work to practice Catholic faith but their foundation is lacking. If they perceive God as distant rather than close and personal, work remains for them to be made disciples. A conscious understanding of the basic Gospel message, the Kerygma, must penetrate our lives. People may be open to this or resistant depending on whether they perceive the hunger in their hearts. Also, many Catholics who are disciples have never articulated their own story and need time to become aware of that before they are ready to share with others in any personal way.

What is happening in your parish?

After visiting all the parishes... It seems to me that the majority of what is being offered in parishes fits the stage of maturing disciples. Most programs that ask people to commit time and energy in an ongoing way only attract the already committed. We advertise new and good programs with the hope that new people will come and then get frustrated when “the same people always come.” No program will appeal to everyone equally and so we need to clarify who we are trying to reach.

Efforts to make disciples will have to look different than studies or groups that meet regularly at the parish. When trying to reach the disconnected we have to consider what their needs are and ask how faith can speak to the desires and struggles they face. This is the “meet them where they are phase.” If we can meet them where they are, then we can more easily follow the example of Jesus and bring them to where God wants them.

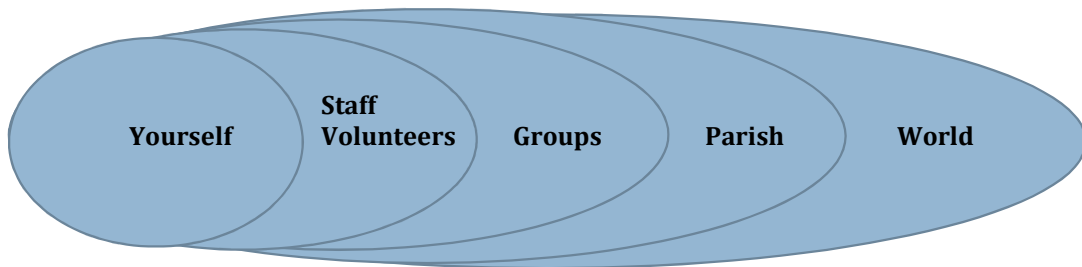
It takes creativity to provide for people in the making stage and then there is the missioning phase. There is a growing awareness that individual Catholics should witness to their family, friends and neighbors and sometimes we give an exhortation to do so. But, that exhortation rarely works and is generally premature. There is work that needs to be done to move someone from maturity to missioning before they can be effective witnesses.

Assessment

Every parish is different and no single program will work everywhere in the diocese. In order to determine what should get attention there is some assessment that needs to happen. Please consider the following questions:

- **What is your goal?** This needs to be clear so that any evaluation considers programs in light of how they advance the goal. The goal also needs to be understood and shared by any who will work toward it. The goal should be for an ultimate outcome, having to do with the lifelong faith of people and not just an immediate goal such as increasing the size of religious education. What do you hope will be the long term outcome of any effort that you give?
- **Who will accomplish this goal?** Most understand that the priest cannot accomplish parish goals alone but requires the work of various people in both formal and informal ways.
- **How do you invest your time and energy in those who will accomplish the goal?** The reality is that having the priest involved changes the dynamic of any parish effort. He cannot engage every person in the parish and yet often thinks in terms of reaching everyone. He often is counting on specific people but expecting them to just go and do. The need for real formation is key to any large success. Priests receive the long and personal attention of seminary formation and this shouldn't be taken for granted. Jesus formed his disciples with time and attention. Priests should also find ways to invest in the initially small number of people who will carry out the mission.

Consider the idea of **Spheres of Influence**. Too often priests hope to influence everyone and opportunities such as preaching can have wide effect, but rarely does preaching alone fulfill the mission of a parish. The pastor and other leaders need to clarify who they can directly influence and invest more time and energy in them. Only with the formation they receive can they carry out the mission in the fullest way. Once that group begins to reach their own sphere of influence the circle grows and begins to include more of the whole parish. This takes patience but anything else is unlikely to accomplish our goal.



Reality check

I have been impressed with the commitment of so many priests and other leaders in our parishes who desire to bring others closer to God. Our minds are often occupied by the search for ways to reach the disconnected. While that desire comes from God and wanting to reach everyone, it can cause us to take for granted the small number of people most ready for growth. We can easily overlook those who come to everything thinking that we already have them. The reality is that those who are most active will be our primary sphere of influence, our “low hanging fruit.” We are unlikely to reach a large number of parishioners without help and the help we need is available. What they need is formation.

Our most likely candidates are those who are in the stage of Maturing in faith, but we cannot shortcut the time that formation takes. In many cases formation of the most connected parishioners will be a combination of going back to the Making stage and then progressing to the Missioning stage. As stated above in the clarification, we need to help people articulate why and how they are disciples. In some cases, people who seem mature already will have their first real encounter with the Living God by returning to the basics.

If an active parishioner really does lack the foundation of personal faith, anything you try to build with them will be shaky at best. It is worth the investment and crucial to success in building up the parish.

...BE LIKE A WISE MAN WHO BUILT HIS HOUSE ON ROCK. MT 7:24

Moving Forward

After considering goals and where you want to go in parish efforts you can more accurately evaluate what is currently being offered. There are an impressive number of efforts taking place in the parishes of our diocese. Many are bearing fruit and reflect the desire to help people grow. We live at a time when there is a great variety of quality faith formation materials and methods for making them available. Many parishes are already using them. My main critique after visiting parishes is that these good materials are being too randomly chosen. Improvement will be found by considering more deeply why particular materials are chosen. For further assessment of your parishes' efforts this is the primary question: *Why do you choose the materials and programs you offer? Who do you hope to reach?*

What materials or programs does your parish currently offer?

Why do you choose those in particular?

Who do you think they will reach?

Clarify your plan

If your parish is offering good material randomly chosen, then step back and formulate a plan for future decisions. Here are some considerations:

In the **MAKING** stage:

This stage is the least structured because it is about the initial encounter with the Lord. The parish is trying to provide opportunities for encountering Jesus and follow up with the initial stages of faith. Efforts like preaching, retreats, Catholics Come Home, and welcome committees are examples, but success will not come from a program but from people who can witness to their faith. The most important effort at this stage is often the one that is most neglected, -- one-on-one conversations. To have a plan is to be pro-active about opportunities to make contact with unknown parishioners.

- *Who is greeting new people that come through the doors?*
- *What is said to them?*
- *What is done when someone comes forward to receive a sacrament?*

Mistakes at this stage often come from presuming that a person is more advanced in their faith life because they are around the parish. Later in this report will be suggestions for materials to assist at each stage.

In the **MATURING** stage:

Growth in knowledge and practice of the faith is an essential part of Catholic life, but we should take better advantage of the fullness of our faith tradition. Instead of just deciding what to offer based on what seems interesting we should follow the structure already provided by the Church. The guiding document for this is called The National Directory for Catechesis (NDC), which

articulates Six Tasks of Catechesis. The knowledge and practice of these areas of faith provides for full maturity as a Catholic. As tasks, they constitute the work of faith formation in a parish and are

SIX TASKS OF CATECHESIS

- 1. Knowledge of the Faith
- 2. Liturgy and Sacraments
- 3. Moral Life
- 4. Prayer
- 5. Community Life
- 6. Missionary Spirit

presented as the responsibility of every diocese and parish. They also provide a more systematic approach to growth in maturity. While each parish must decide how to prioritize the tasks based on available resources the framework is already provided. My goal for Maturing disciples is that each parish uses this framework with the benefit of more complete formation and leading to the Missioning stage. This framework can also assist in the challenge of changing pastors that is a reality of church

life. With the six tasks as a common language parishes can better continue work in times of transition.

In the **Missioning** stage:

In this stage there can be considerable resistance. Even as people mature in their faith there is a tendency to treat the relationship with God as private. Many Catholics consider it someone else’s job to evangelize or say they wouldn’t want to impose on other people. And yet, Jesus is clear in the Gospel that he always calls in order to send. The Church cannot fulfill its mission without sending laborers into the harvest. Priests and parish staff can also be resistant to an outward focused missionary spirit because it is easier to offer programs and hope people come than to engage them knowing that some will be hostile. We are at a stage in history where significant decline is happening because of indifference to faith. Many people in our society think that they have tried Christianity and found it lacking. Many people look elsewhere to find meaning in life. But the witness of true faith has not lost its strength. The Holy Spirit will bear fruit through people that are open channels of grace. Too many Catholics are unwilling to cooperate with this work of the Holy Spirit.

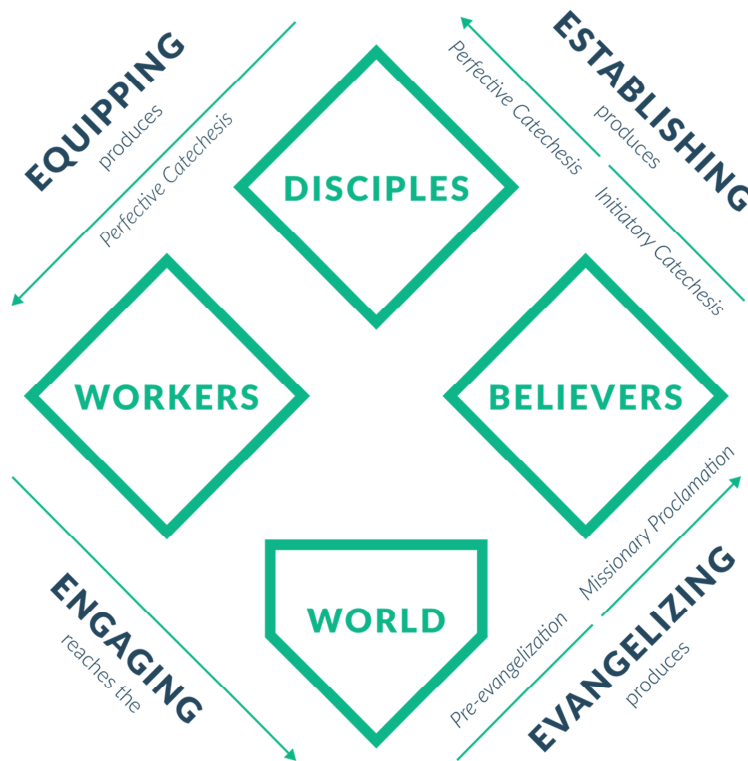
And so, in the Missioning stage we must engage in a combination of motivating people to see evangelization as their responsibility, and training them to be effective witnesses. There are certain competencies that need to be learned once someone is willing. A well-meaning person can do damage if they come across in a judgmental or pressuring way. Guiding people through this stage is essential to engaging the disconnected and doing the initial work of making disciples. Formation at this stage is learning to follow the example of Jesus who met people where they were, but never left them there. Our job is to bring people into contact with Jesus and walk with them as they become disciples. This is a call issued to each follower of Jesus, not only those with a professional role.

"GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL THE NATIONS..."

Another Visual

The group known as Evangelical Catholic has used the image of a baseball diamond to describe the path of discipleship. This graphic traces the progress from initial contact with faith to becoming a believer and growing into a disciple before being trained as a worker who is then sent back to make initial contact with others who do not have a relationship with God.

The ideas are the same as the model of Making, Maturing, Missioning but different images connect with different people and understanding the landscape is crucial to making parish efforts more effective.



(© The Evangelical Catholic 2018, www.evangelicalcatholic.org, used with permission)

This image can help a parish determine who is being reached by the programs they offer and where to direct further effort. Only as we help people progress around the bases can we expect laborers for the harvest.

Let's Get Practical

The challenges we face with the general weakening of faith demand some new ways of doing things. Unless we are willing to rethink the status quo very little will change. One of the most practical changes is something the Church has long been calling for, **a shift in focus to the formation of adults**. It is much easier to run programs for children and so many of our resources are directed that way. But, any real influence on the lives of young people has to be a cooperative effort between the parish and the parents. In most cases we speak to the parents of their role and yet remain frustrated that children often know less than they should and abandon faith after receiving their sacraments. Often those parents never received faith formation themselves and are in need of attention before they can fulfill their role as first teachers of faith. They may not have had a personal encounter with Jesus that they can share. A practical shift in resources must give more attention to the formation of adults and parents or children will not be surrounded with faith in a way they can absorb.

While a shift in focus to adults is more difficult, it will bear the fruit we are searching for. As the NDC (3) states, "More and more, adult catechesis is understood to be the chief form of catechesis and is given priority in catechetical planning." One goal of this report is to help parishes make this shift in a practical and effective way.

With some assessment done and a clearer plan in place, more effective decisions can be made. There are many great materials available in the Church today and more being developed continually. What follows are suggestions of materials that can be used for the different stages of the discipleship path. No materials work equally well in every place and some discernment is necessary based on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the actual people implementing the resource. Here are possible materials to consider:

Test the foundation

Before getting to materials appropriate for each stage, first consider the key people that you want to start with. Identify the people most ready to share the work of forming missionary disciples and then take time with them to both solidify their desire and train them to be effective. In this preliminary stage the focus is to be sure they understand and live based on a relationship with God that is intimate and strengthening. To be a missionary disciple a person must be able to identify and articulate how God has worked in their life and when they personally committed to follow him. They need to become familiar enough with the basic Gospel message (the Kerygma) to speak about it in a personal and compelling way. Take time with these key people to prayerfully consider and discuss the following:

- *Discover Your Story*
- *Unpacking your Story*
- *The Kerygma Experience*

Effort in the MAKING stage:

This stage will deal with people in the widest range of starting points and so will need activity at multiple levels to bear fruit. Many people in need of taking the first steps toward discipleship are resistant to any demands on their time and energy and so are unwilling to accept invitations to most parish events. At this stage one-on-one effort with patience is likely to be the only effort that bears fruit. There are no particular programs to do this for you because it will be unique to the situation of the individual and is based on an actual relationship. Leaders here are the people who have progressed through all three stages and have competency in listening and speaking the story of faith.

There are people in this stage who have sensed their need for growth but don't know where to turn and, while remaining resistant, are willing to consider a limited commitment of their time. For this group parish missions or retreats as well as personal attention can bear fruit. There are materials more geared to introducing the ideas of faith that can be helpful here:

- “Forming Intentional Disciples” by Sherry Weddell (and in particular the idea of thresholds of faith that are part of this pre-evangelization).
- The Kerygma Experience
- Catholic Christian Outreach - Discovery - <https://cco.ca/resources/faith-studies-series/>
- Alpha for Catholics - <https://alphausa.org/catholic/>
- ChristLife - <https://christlife.org/>

Finally, this group will also have active Catholics for whom faith has not become personal. They practice and are involved but haven't really encountered Jesus in a loving and saving way. The difficulty with them can be convincing that they need this. There is a strong current in many parishes of seeing faith as going to Mass and nothing else. The convincing part of this can only be built with a relationship and one-on-one attention. The same materials as listed above are helpful, but the approach of convincing is different than with other people. Each of these groups requires the accompaniment that Pope Francis often describes.

Effort in the MATURING stage:

There is the greatest wealth of materials in this stage as well as the most willing people. This is where people will benefit from longer and more structured study and group interaction. As a person grows it is important to help them remember that maturity in faith is both for personal benefit and eventual work in the mission of Jesus. It is important to emphasize that Catholics need to learn not only what we believe and how we practice, but how to articulate it. One of the common reasons people give for not evangelizing is that they don't

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know what to say. Practice is the only way to overcome this fear which is why small group settings can be very effective ways to mature.

One resource for the initial part of this stage is unique in that it focuses on charisms as particular gifts from God for an individual and can greatly help someone better sense their gifts as part of God's plan. This motivates them and makes them more effective in whatever way they serve. This program will be available in the diocese during the fall of 2018.

- Siena Institute Called & Gifted Program - <https://siena.org/called-gifted>

It is crucial to clarify your plan and be intentional about moving people toward becoming missionary disciples. This will happen at different rates for different people and so flexibility is important. For parishes with sufficient resources multiple studies with different materials and focus help people make progress in growth. With fewer resources it just takes more time for this progress. The Six Tasks of Catechesis from the NDC are meant to be the framework for a plan. For each area there are many possible resources. Some resources have identified their material in light of the six tasks:

- Little Rock Scripture Study (attach form) - <https://littlerockscripture.org/>
- Formed (attach form) - <https://formed.org/>

Other popular resources are available and can easily be identified according to the six tasks.

- Ascension Press - <https://ascensionpress.com/>
- Dynamic Catholic - <https://dynamiccatholic.com/>
- Word on Fire - <https://www.wordonfire.org/>

There are also resources that take a more systematic approach to adult faith formation and research online will show the specific topics of presentations to help guide your selection of what is more appropriate in your setting. Many of these resources are meant to be small group based or retreat like.

- Catholic Christian Outreach (Faith Studies Series in particular) - <https://cco.ca/>
- Relit - <http://relittraining.com/index.html>
- Paradisus Dei - <http://paradisusdei.org/>
- Walking With Purpose - <https://walkingwithpurpose.com/>
- Lifelong Faith Formation - <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/>

Another approach is to contact an organization geared toward consulting with parishes. These organizations provide materials and more personal guidance on what would be best suited to your situation. Such services can be very helpful but come with additional cost. That cost would vary but research may help identify if this is worth the investment.

- M3 Ministries (Dc. Keith Strohm) - <http://m3catholic.com/>
- Evangelical Catholic - <https://www.evangelicalcatholic.org/>
- Burning Hearts - <http://www.burningheartdisciples.org/>
- Amazing Parish - <https://amazingparish.org/>
- Divine Renovation - <https://www.divinerenovation.net/>

Efforts in the MISSIONING stage:

This stage presumes that the person has become a disciple and is now focused on sharing the mission that Jesus gives. Part of what is needed is motivation. Some people are quickly ready to share their faith, but that seems rare among Catholics. In the minds of many, evangelization is a task for others or something that only Protestants do. A key step in motivation is helping them realize this is the expectation of Jesus and something long taught officially by the Catholic Church. It can help to tap into the mature desire to be a good Catholic and then focus on official Church teaching. The following documents can be studied to help people realize Catholic teaching about evangelization:

- *Evangelii Nuntiandi*
- *Christifideles Laici*
- *Evangelii Gaudium*
- Living as Missionary Disciples (USCCB)

**“GIVE A REASON FOR THE
HOPE THAT IS IN YOU
1PT 3:15”**

Once a person understands the call of Jesus to share the Gospel, they are ready to live as missionary disciples. At the heart of this mission is being able to speak about one’s own relationship with God and “give a reason for the hope that is in you (1Pt 3:15).” They should be encouraged to look for every opportunity to do this, starting with their own families. The cooperative effort to reach children depends on parents who share the importance of faith from their most personal perspective. Most frequently only parents can convey to a child the importance of faith as more than another school subject.

Practice will fine tune a person’s ability to share the Gospel, but there is training that can help someone be a more effective witness. Enthusiasm is good, but there is a risk of overwhelming a person in the first steps of faith or imposing your own path on someone else. Jesus was gentle and patient in calling others and those are skills that don’t come so easily for us. We can learn them and there is help in being a more effective witness. The following are meant to help an individual develop skills:

- Listening as a Disciple (Green Bay)
- Ananias Training (Siena Institute)

These resources are meant to help a parish become more evangelizing:

- Light of the World - <https://www.lotwem.org/>
- Catholic Leadership Training - <http://www.catholicleadership.developeveryoneconsulting.com/wow-catholic-service.html>
- Rebuilt - <http://rebuiltparish.com/>

Evangelizing usually starts in the home and then extends to the larger family of God that we belong to. The apostles were chosen by God and their faults and weaknesses are on full display in the Gospels. God is not depending on our perfect knowledge or strength but our willingness to share what we have been given. Most people never feel fully equipped but God sends us anyway. Bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God will always be a combination of God's grace and our willingness. It is worth our effort because salvation is at stake.



BE SERVANTS OF COMMUNION AND OF THE CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER! I WOULD LIKE YOU TO BE ALMOST OBSESSED ABOUT THIS. BE SO WITHOUT BEING PRESUMPTUOUS, IMPOSING “OUR TRUTHS,” BUT RATHER BE GUIDED BY THE HUMBLE YET JOYFUL CERTAINTY OF THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN FOUND, TOUCHED AND TRANSFORMED BY THE TRUTH WHO IS CHRIST, EVER TO BE PROCLAIMED.—HOMILY, WORLD YOUTH DAY, JULY 27, 2013

POPE FRANCIS



What about everything else?

This report is not meant to address every aspect of parish life in the Catholic Church. There is very little here about specific programs such as religious education of children, preparation for baptism, first communion or confirmation. There are also good programs not included in this report. If a program is not mentioned, that does not mean it is unworthy or should be excluded from parish ministry. The goal of this report is to emphasize the need for a plan and to cause a questioning of the status quo. With time other resources will be added to these lists and I welcome your recommendations.

The hope is that each of us will step back and take an honest look at our efforts. Each parish should consider who is working on faith formation and how well they are formed. All of our ministries with children deserve closer consideration as well, but before spending time, effort or money on improving those programs we need to form the adults who will be involved. Materials alone will never form children into disciples. There is a need to develop official policies for sacraments and programs, and that will come in time. This report is meant to be preliminary to updating policies and serve as a foundation for the specifics they entail. Too often our approach to sacraments becomes a battle with parents over requirements. Such battles cause great frustration and miss the point. Success in the formation of adults will be the only way to reduce those battles and allow the sacraments to bear more fruit according to God's plan.

I conclude by offering my time for follow up on this report. Pastors are pulled in many directions and can find it hard to give the time to sufficient research of materials. Part of my role as Diocesan Director of Faith Formation is to consult with parishes. Please contact me if it would be helpful to discuss further or meet with parish staff to develop your plan.

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*You did not choose me but I chose you,
and appointed you that you would go
and bear fruit, and that your fruit would
remain, so that whatever you ask of the
Father in My name He may give to you.
John 15:16*