

MAKING DISCIPLES

RESOURCE SUMMARIES

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SUMMARY 4

Book: [*Divine Renovation*](#)

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Associated Website: divinerenovation.net

This series of summaries is intended to help busy pastoral professionals and church volunteers know whether a resource is going to be helpful to them. If a resource looks useful – PLEASE BUY IT! I do not wish to take away the livelihood of any author by summarising their key points online!

Overview

Revd James Mallon was given a golden opportunity – appointed parish priest of three merged parishes whose brand-new building had opened only months earlier, he was as close to having a 'blank canvas' as any parish priest could hope for. In his early years of priesthood he had learned that orthodoxy alone does not lead to church growth, and he was willing to learn leadership skills from the world of business and from evangelical churches. Applying all of this to his new merged parish of St Benedict, he has in four years successfully fostered a parish culture with high levels of engagement by practicing Catholics. Volunteering and financial giving has doubled, participation in courses has tripled, and more than 40% of parishioners are actively engaged with the life of the parish. Mallon is now developing the best ways to draw in those who approach the Church seeking sacraments – ways which deeply challenge our current culture of applying the sacrament and waiting with forlorn hope for the grace to manifest!

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH

The Great Commission calls us to go, baptise, make disciples and teach the message of Christ. In the original Greek, the hinge verb is to MAKE disciples. Many of our parishes have lost touch with their identity; the members are concerned with mending crumbling buildings and the property is often in use by third-party groups (card socials, uniformed groups...) whose activities do not serve to make disciples.

Only 6%-20% of parishioners in a typical parish actively choose to take part in activities which develop their faith, and these activities are seen as purely optional (at best; or quite outré, at worst!) by the rest of the parish,

Until the 1960s, the conveyer belt which took Catholic children through Catholic school and gave them First Communion and Confirmation at fixed ages resulted in a group of loyal 'belonging' Catholics. The social changes since that time mean that the conveyer belt no longer produces 'belongers' and the generation of parents asking themselves 'What did we do wrong?' have the hollow consolation that, according to the standards of their generation, they did everything right - but changing society needs a change in approach. Now we must deal with the pain of parents lamenting their children's loss of faith, while prophetically guiding today's believers to be effective in handing on their faith to their children and their neighbours.

We are a church in pain for many reasons. Our educational, healthcare and social service institutions have become irrelevant as the welfare state has taken over these tasks. We recognise that any closure or amalgamation of a parish is a tragedy, a consequence of the Church not being healthy, not growing. This realization is also painful, and adds to the twofold pain of losing what is familiar and being forced into a new and unknown reality.

Added to this, the Church bears its share of guilt for sexual abuse and for failing to deal with this at diocesan level, a guilt which means clergy no longer enjoy automatic trust. And for those in active ministry, even those with a strong vision of what the church should be, who have tried to renew their parishes with good and orthodox catechetical materials, there is the pain of seeing that this is barely effective, yet soldiering on. There is a temptation to 'stay and quit trying' rather than to 'stay and fight'!

Studies of why Latin American Catholics join evangelical churches find there are four key factors:

1. Never having been guided to a personal encounter with Christ in a Catholic context, these Catholics hear Jesus proclaimed by evangelicals who can both express the kerygma (Gospel message) and witness personally to its life-transforming power.
2. In the evangelical church communities, every member is valued and welcomed personally.
3. Doctrine and scripture are taught in such a way the message is life-enhancing.
4. Many members of these churches are seen to be willing to go and take the Gospel to those who need to hear it.

Counter-intuitively, although most evangelical churches have *higher* expectations of their members than Catholic parishes do, this does not deter Catholics from converting!

Today's Catholics expect their priest to be holy so they don't have to be 'religious'.

Today's post-modern generation are no longer asking the question 'Is it true?' so good apologetics has limited impact.

When our physical buildings and our patterns of Mass times no longer serve our purpose or make good use of our resources, something has to give.

Pope Francis has identified a number of things that get in the way of the Gospel:

- The wrong sort of liberation theology;
- Turning to psychology rather than Christ for salvation;
- Setting too much store in certain kinds of liturgical form while knocking those who don't concur;
- Fixation on particular solutions to pastoral issues which are legitimately in dispute;
- Seeing the ultimate end of the church as 'helping people' rather than proclaiming the Gospel;
- Clericalism.

Mallon develops thoughts on two of these issues.

Pelagianism says that we can make the first move towards God; Semi-Pelagianism is the 50/50 view that we and God meet half-way. In fact the dynamic is 100/100 - it is entirely God's grace that motivates us to seek Him, and then we must make our move impelled by this. The new Missal often uses the term 'merit' and this could usefully be unpacked - that it is God who enables us to perform acts then worthy of His reward. How many Catholics today still believe that it is our good deeds which will gain us a ticket to heaven, rather than God's grace alone?

If we have a latent belief that it's our own niceness which gets us to heaven...

- we will be minimalists, 'just nice enough';
- grace is not amazing to us, since what do we have to thank Jesus for?
- why would we be motivated to share the Gospel with other nice people?

Jansenism says that we are so unworthy of God that we must constantly make amends; although it is the opposite of Pelagianism in its dependence on God, it ultimately also overemphasises the need for human action, in this case via excessive sacramental confession.

Both Pelagianism and Jansenism block us from the wonder of the Good News, that it is what Jesus did FOR US that saves us, heals us and frees us!

Mallon understands 'clericalism' to mean the way in which ordained clergy and a small number of lay people (pastoral employees or volunteers) have appropriated the universal call to be missionary disciples... these few will be 'holy' so the rest of the congregation don't have to be. Therefore we use the language of 'joining the church' when we really mean someone has become a cleric or entered a religious congregation. But many who think they are called to priesthood are in fact called to holiness.

'Clericalism' also includes the phenomenon of not subjecting ordained clergy to the same level of scrutiny and professional standards expected of others, even lay employees of a diocese, hence allowing priests with alcoholism or similar problems to get into trouble without being offered appropriate assistance.

In 1943, Pius XII exhorted Catholics to get to know the Bible, and Vatican II called for lay involvement, but to the traditional "pay, pray and obey" mentality we have added first and foremost liturgical ministries - a quasi-clerical role which has little to do with the laity's proper role in the wider world.

We do indeed need lay ministers to assist at parish liturgy, and employed or volunteer lay pastoral assistants to work with a priest in a large parish; but these roles should be recognised as an extension of the PRIEST's ministry, rather than examples of the baptised taking on the role proper to the laity.

The priest's role is to preach the Word, celebrate the Sacraments and to pastor the community. In Ephesians 4, we read that the pastor is not to do all the work of ministry himself, but to equip the saints to do the work of ministry. The priest, with his lay associates, must call forth the gifts latent in the laity so that the whole body of Christ ministers to those in need.

THE CALL TO MAKE MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

A disciple is a person with a hunger for Jesus - to worship Him, to know more about Him, to know Him. The Church's job is to make Disciples - but for many generations we have only been making Belongers. We must help the Belongers to become Disciples - this is the New Evangelisation which Paul VI pointed us towards, which was named by John Paul II, and has been strongly endorsed by Benedict XVI and Francis. But we also share in the Church's perennial apostolic mission, to go also to the fringes of society, to those who have never known Christ or belonged to any church, to offer them the Good News and invite them also to become Disciples.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed our universal call to holiness and our universal call to mission. Paul VI wrote: "It has been possible to define evangelization in the terms of proclaiming Christ to those who do not know Him, of preaching, of catechesis, of conferring Baptism and the other Sacraments." ([*Evangelii Nuntiandi*](#) 17) This broad definition of evangelization includes all of the tasks that make up the Great Commission, but also includes most of the activities of the Church: preaching, catechesis, teaching, sacraments, and proclamation (or 'kerygma').

St Francis of Assisi never actually said "Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." On the contrary, St Paul affirms that "Faith comes by hearing" (Rom 10:17) and Paul VI also affirmed that it was essential that evangelization must be "made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus." (EN22)

Under Benedict XVI, a relatively unfamiliar term, at least in official Catholic documents, begins to appear more and more often. Benedict begins to speak of the necessity of a personal encounter and personal relationship with Jesus. Although this language, along with the word "evangelisation" itself, might sound rather Protestant to Catholic ears, the concept is familiar: the notion of an individual having an encounter with the living God is at the heart of what we traditionally call spirituality or "mystical theology".

Pope Francis is well known for calling on Catholics to be "missionary disciples" - this terminology can be traced to the '[Aparecida document](#)', published in 2008, one year after the gathering of the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean at the famous Brazilian shrine in the town of Aparecida. The theme for that conference was "Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our peoples will have life in him."

The document noted the dynamics of conversion: The Good News is preached. People make a decision to follow Jesus. They seek to get to know Him better and learn more of his ways. They build a strong communion (with God and one another) and get involved in mission.

LEADING WITH A VISION

Priests who are pastors need to be Leaders. But seminary does not major on leadership skills and most pastors now serve only brief apprenticeships before taking charge of their own parish. Diocesan structures enable priests with poor leadership skills (or poor preaching ability) to stay in place unless a great disaster takes place. Also, an 8-year term is too short to achieve real change. It takes at least 12 and maybe 18-25 years to effect real change.

Mallon learned much from the worlds of secular business leadership ([Gallup Leadership Excellence Course](#)) and American evangelical churches ([Leadership Network](#), [Parish Catalyst](#)). To be a good leader, know your weaknesses, work as part of a team which can compensate for them and challenge you. Receiving prayer from each other is a good way in to showing some vulnerability - for you and others on your team.

An essential duty of the pastor is to be the vision caster. Know your intended destination and be passionate about it. A leader's charisms will shape his passions, inevitably. Write down the vision for the community, and your own personal purpose statement that will define your ministry. Share this picture of the future with your leadership team; allow it to be refined through the Holy Spirit at work in their hearts. Once the vision is drafted, discuss it with parish staff, with the pastoral council, with every parish leader, regardless of role or office – with anyone who has influence. Listen, discuss, receive their feedback and refine the vision.

A more developed vision document can be judged by its 'purpose statement' which provides a good test for all activities of the parish. This defines the primary purpose of the organization, against which all activities can be measured. The purpose statement of Mallon's own parish is "To raise up disciples who joyfully live out their mission." At Nativity Parish, of Rebuilt fame, it is to "Love God, love others, make disciples." Holy Trinity Brompton's is "to play our part in the re-evangelisation of the nations and the transformation of society." Saint Monica Catholic Community's is "To form loving disciples who will transform the world." Downtown Chicago's Old Saint Patrick's Church's statement is "to serve the life and the work of the laity on the world."

Once you have settled on the vision with your key leaders, communicate it to the community. **THIS TAKES TIME.** Take time to meet with key influencers and discuss the vision with them. Preach about the vision regularly, even once every 3 weeks. Note where your people are itching, and use that as leverage. To motivate people to change in the face of challenges, blame changing circumstances, not people.

Repeat the vision in teaching and leadership sessions regularly, too. Say “Imagine if...” a lot. Be strategic about being strategic.

It is easy to write a vision statement, but the true test of a parish’s vision is where it places its resources. Is there a budget for evangelisation? Is there a staff member responsible for adult faith formation? What are the buildings mostly used for? Are there more employees engaged on pastoral work than in administrative tasks?

When you have a plan, the pastor leads the implementation of it. This needs a low control, high accountability model. Don’t micromanage but expect reporting in. Delegate as much authority as you can, as a matter of principle. Make sure your finance committee is balanced – you need people with a strong sense of the vision as well as those with financial acumen.

Investment in your parish leaders is crucial. Leaders need to be affirmed, supported, listened to, equipped and encouraged. It is good, three to four times a year, to gather all parish ministry leaders and their heirs apparent with the parish council for a morning of prayer and reflection.

Note that parishes of different sizes need different leadership structures. Dr Timothy Keller [has written](#) about this, pointing out that the move from smaller to larger churches will mean experiencing increasing complexity and shifting lay-staff responsibilities. There will need to be a deliberate focus on helping new members become part of the community and communicating clearly to all stakeholders. The larger parish needs high ‘production values’ for liturgy, printed and visual material; the role of ministers will change and there needs to be a culture of openness to change.

In a small parish, the Pastoral Council can be a management committee. In a mid-size parish, it can have ‘reporting in’ from key roles but not actively manage the details. In a large parish, the Council can only look at broad strategy, while individual officers take day-to-day decisions, and the pastor becomes a leader of leaders. Helping those officers (employees or volunteers) share the vision is an essential part of their induction.

Meetings need to be used wisely, and there is much wisdom on good and bad use of meetings from [Patrick Lencioni](#). He encourages four different kinds of meetings: the daily check in, tactical meetings, strategic meetings, and quarterly off-sites. Often meetings aren’t effective because people don’t say what they really think.

Expect to be a leader who makes an impact. Have a vision not for what you achieve, but for what God can achieve through you. Be prepared for constructive criticism from those who ‘get’ the vision and take it seriously. Be prepared for destructive criticism, including anonymous letters, and don’t waste energy on these since you can’t change your opponents’ minds. Create a culture where the people know that they CAN make their disagreements known and it is right and proper for them to do so, honestly and openly.

THE APPLICATION

In August 2010, Mallon became pastor of [St Benedict's](#), Halifax, Nova Scotia, three months after the opening of a new building which replaced the three churches now amalgamated into this new parish. He had enough pastoral experience to know that just buying good catechetical textbooks or making applicants jump through hoops to demonstrate "Mass attendance" before receiving the sacraments would not be enough.

In his opening sermon, he warned the parish that if they did not stop the rot which had forced them into this situation, the same thing would happen again in 20 years. He challenged them to take part in an [Alpha Course](#), and had an overwhelmingly positive response – 160 members out of a congregation of 2000 responded immediately. Since then, Mallon's church has been transformed by a tight focus on running the *Alpha* Course; it is an integral part of the parish vision.

The *Alpha* format allows guests to belong in small groups and even say outrageous things while trust is being built up. *Alpha* is designed to communicate only the basic Gospel message - the fullness of Catholic doctrine will come at a later stage of discipleship. All members of the parish council and those in other key leadership roles must have attended *Alpha* and read a certain number of books and articles that have affected and shaped the culture of the parish.

Stopping the rot requires a change in culture of the whole parish, not just running one or two programmes. It's not enough to run an *Alpha* Course with excellent hospitality, great music, amazing and relevant talks, and a transformative experience of community in small groups, if these are not reflected in the wider life of the Church. So this was his vision – to expect these values to be part of the way St Benedict's 'does church'.

The entire process at Saint Benedict Parish, from identifying Mallon's own vision, refining it with the community, and writing a formal parish vision statement, took about two and a half years. The statement they arrived at was this:

Saint Benedict Parish is a healthy and growing faith community that brings people to Christ, forms disciples and sends them out to transform the world. Every member is committed to worship, to grow, to serve, to connect and to give.

It was also necessary to draft quite a lengthy document about the Staff Culture Ethos and work hard on building up trust, good communication, and mutual care among staff.

In the four years since becoming Parish Priest, Mallon has successfully embedded ten core values into the life of the parish. He is now working on renewing the sacramental programmes to help applicants who are not yet church members become drawn into the life of the parish, but this is still very much a work-in-progress.

TEN VALUES

1. The Sunday Experience

St Benedict's is committed to making Sunday Mass the best possible experience for those who attend.

2. Hospitality

- Ensure the venue is clean and tidy, especially toilets.
- Appoint welcomers who enjoy welcoming and who can cope warmly with awkward visitors (e.g. the mentally ill)
- Don't be constrained to one hour if you need to preach or sing longer - adjust Mass schedules if need be.
- At a Mass when you know many non-Catholics are present, explain some of the ritual as you go along.
- Offer those who want to keep in touch not a membership form but a 'Communications Card'.

For those who complete a Communications Card, a member of the parish welcome team will call and arrange to meet them. The new person is given an info pack about the parish and what it means to belong. They are invited to a New Parishioner Event. This takes the form of a "cheese & wine" on a Saturday night every two months. After informal mingling, guests are given an opportunity to fill out a formal registration card at the end of the evening. Their assigned welcomer will make a point of spotting them at Mass or keeping in touch if they are not attending. The whole process is geared to building relationships.

3. Excellent Music

Make the music at Sunday worship excellent, and don't reject anything old or new on merely ideological grounds. Catholics CAN sing (try 'Happy Birthday') but may need encouragement even to the extent of having to repeat something. Prioritise hymns which speak praise directly to God (though other styles have their place and are represented in Scripture). It's OK to sing "I" rather than "we" sometimes. To avoid banal love-song hymns apply the 'Brenda' test - does the song make sense if you were to substitute the name of Jesus with 'Brenda'? There's no reason to shun 'praise and worship' music from the evangelical tradition unless a particular lyric has a theological problem.

Ensure the sound system works well and consider good use of visual screens. Good usage of visuals probably requires two screens, either side of and outside the sanctuary, not distracting from the liturgical action, and with a seasonal 'default' slide rather than a blank white screen when not otherwise in use.

4. Excellent Preaching

Give a sound homily which doesn't sound scholarly but communicates the joy of the Gospel. 20 minutes is not too long, if it is engaging. Use humour. Know what you are trying to communicate: can you sum up the message in a 140-character tweet and the desired response in another? Preach warmly and not out of frustration or anger. The homilist must have spent time listening to the Word; you are not preaching to 'them' but a congregation which includes yourself.

- Use personal anecdotes, but do so sparingly.
- Do reflect on issues in the news or questions raised by parishioners.
- Use the set readings, however much they challenge you.
- Make a strong opening - ask a question or tell a story.
- Have a clear ending, which sometimes recalls the opening hook.
- Use bullet points rather than a full script, except on topics requiring precision.
- Pray
- Get feedback on your preaching style and content.
- Use visuals to reinforce your point, if the technology is available.

Have a programme of preaching which all your parish preachers are aware of; preach in series (within the constraints of the lectionary), and use those series to unpack the vision and pastoral plan of the parish.

5. Build Community

Today's culture follows a "belong > believe > behave" pattern. There are unavoidable problems in what it means to "belong" as a Catholic because of the ritual structure of the Mass, and the need to wait for initiation before taking communion. Nevertheless, we have to find ways for people to "belong" at Mass.

Alpha techniques have been applied to the experience of Sunday worship: once a month, people are asked to put on name-tags.

Prayer ministry teams are available to pray with people after each Mass (60-70 people receive prayer ministry each weekend).

After previous experiments with 'say good morning' or 'ask someone's name' at the start of Mass, Mallon now invites people to partner with someone they do not know, if possible, and to pray for that person by name during Mass. Each week, at the end of the Prayer of the Faithful, they pause in silence to pray for the person we met at the beginning of Mass.

How do we make a large parish a place where you can be known by name? Foster a culture of engagement, and that can be measured - see [*Growing an Engaged Church*](#), by Al Wiseman. Gallup tools enable a church to survey its membership and discover the percentages of engaged members, non-engaged members, and actively disengaged members. The survey developed by Gallup is called the ME 25; it assesses 25 indicators of membership engagement. A FRUITFUL community needs 4 engaged parishioners for every 1 actively disengaged.

Three years after implementing an engagement-based strategy at Saint Benedict, the number of adults in programs of evangelization and faith formation has tripled. The number of parishioners in ministry has doubled, and the weekly collection has doubled - the overall number of parishioners in the pews has not grown, though there has been significant turnover.

6. Have Clear Expectations of Parishioners

All members at Saint Benedict are expected to worship, to grow, to serve, to connect and to give. Anyone who wants to become a parish member is given a brochure which says: "Saint Benedict Parish is a Catholic Christian community of disciples of the Lord Jesus. We believe that everyone is called to be on a spiritual journey and what matters is not where a person is on that journey, but that they are actually on the journey itself. Therefore, we seek to welcome all people regardless of the stage of their spiritual life, their struggles and failures. We are a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for Saints. We simply ask that you walk with us and be open to what God is calling you to. To be a member of this parish is to enter into relationship with the other members of the parish who are also on this spiritual journey. We do this together. Clear expectations are at the heart of every healthy relationship."

The brochure first says what members can expect of the parish: dynamic liturgies, tools for spiritual growth; recognition of your gifts and talents; a place of love and support, and where your financial giving will be used honourably.

Then it sets out expectations of parishioners: attending Sunday Eucharist (to worship); attending at least one program of faith formation each year (to grow); being involved in at least one parish ministry each year (to serve); deliberately reaching out to network

with other parishioners (to connect), and making a financial offering as an integral part of worshipping God (to give).

Inspired by evangelicals, Mallon has taken the oft-quoted triad of “Time, Talent and Treasure” and given it a new focus: TIME is specifically the time we invest in worshipping God or growing ourselves as disciples (rather than in serving others, which is now exclusively an aspect of TALENT). But the sick and housebound were included by recognising praying at home and “offering up suffering” as a ‘talent’.

One month each year is devoted to each T - September is the TIME season, TALENT runs from Epiphany and TREASURE (financial giving) is in the early summer. Each season runs over 5 weeks as follows:

1. Letter to every family in the parish;
2. Major homily on the topic, and overview;
3. Short homily, lay witness and booklet given out;
4. Short homily, lay witness and Ministry Fair Week;
5. Homily on the topic, and Commitment Cards brought to the altar.

Experience from other churches shows that this kind of initiative takes 7 years to bed in, reaching a plateau with around 60% of parishioners engaging. It is not about gathering data but transforming expectations.

7. Strength-Based Ministry

There is a business personal strengths analysis tool called the [Clifton Strengths Finder](#), which has been developed into a Christian version, ‘Living Your Strengths’, which even comes in a Catholic edition. Volunteers will thrive if they are using most of their top five strengths in a ministry, and St Benedict’s now has a staff member who helps members identify theirs.

8. Community Groups

Holy Trinity Brompton used to run small groups for members who had completed *Alpha*, but small groups (8-12 people) can be too small for the shy to hide in, and can easily peter out. Now, they run groups of 25 to 35 people. These are small enough for people to be known, cared for, loved and called forth. They are big enough for people to sit at the back and not be put under the kind of pressure that might exist in a group of eight. They would be big enough to admit new members and grow.

St Benedict's therefore runs similarly sized "connect groups", led by lay people. Groups meet twice a month in the homes of church members. This can be a squash, but if you can cope with having a party for that many people, you can cope with a Connect Group. Each evening consists of a shared meal, a time of singing and praying, a talk by a member and a time of praying for and with one another. All members take turns to present or give a testimony. Some of the current ten groups are based on age, some are mixed generations, and some are "family friendly," with children and parents gathering together. Once a group grows beyond 35 people, parish leadership will identify, call forth and equip new leaders and split the group into two.

9. Experience of the Holy Spirit

It is normal for human beings to get emotional at a football match or a pop concert, to wave, shout, cry out... but in our Western Catholic culture, we are emotionally constipated at church, despite the Bible exhorting us to cry out with joy and sound cymbals and drums! The *Alpha* Course has openness to the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit as an integral part, so at St Benedict it is normal for parishioners to call upon the Holy Spirit in prayer times and in meetings.

10. A Culture of Invitation

Although Mallon has not yet moved the parish to a conscious focus on inviting others, implementing the previous nine points has already generated a natural culture of inviting new people to church.

When we become deliberate about this, we must recognise that most invitations will be to people we are already in relationship with. We may need to be persistent. We must be ready to invest practical effort in helping them get to church... and be canny about what to invite them to. Sunday Mass? *Alpha*? Something else?

Fear of rejection must be overcome by the Lord's constant refrain, "Do not be afraid." The person with the most rejections also garners the most successes! Inviting others will not feel awkward if we have had a good experience of parish that we would naturally enthuse about. A compelling vision for the parish will generate enthusiasm, too!

REQUESTS FOR THE SACRAMENTS

Many non-practicing or even non-Catholic people approach the church asking for a sacrament. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that liturgy and sacraments "must be preceded by evangelization, faith and conversion." (CCC 1072) Mallon's approach is to walk every applicant through the path of discipleship; receiving a sacrament comes when there is evidence of sufficient conversion.

We have a Catholic theology of grace *ex opere operato* given in the sacraments. This theology was developed at a time when there was great concern about the worthiness of the minister, as reassurance that the sacrament was valid whatever the weaknesses of the priest. This lulls us into an expectation that the sacrament will 'do some good' whenever it is conferred. But in fact fruitful reception depends on the readiness and receptiveness of the person receiving it.

At the time of the writing his book, Mallon's parish has concluded the second year of their new process with children and youth. They are in the second year of the process for marriage preparation and are just implementing the model for baptismal preparation.

Adults - Initiation

Two common problems with adult initiation (RCIA) groups are that they can be isolated from other parishioners, and might be seen as offering 'superior' formation compared to that available to the parish at large. There is commonly a quick falling away of church practice among those who receive initiation, once their group stops meeting.

At St Benedict's, the catechetical presentations are open to the whole parish, but the RCIA candidates form a distinct group within the audience. Candidates for the sacraments might attend several different courses on offer in the parish, which are typically offered in 8-week blocks. It is essential they attend something kerygmatic, such as *Alpha*, which presents the basic Gospel message. In January, it is discerned which candidates are ready for the catechumenate, and these have additional meetings to look at the rites they will be taking part in. Those who have completed their initiation into the Church are then invited to attend a Connect Group.

Adults - Marriage

All couples seeking marriage are asked to take Alpha as the first step in their marriage preparation. This is followed by an evening for engaged couples using the Clifton Strengths Finder, and a Friday evening and all-day-Saturday event on the sacrament of marriage in particular. Now about 30% (from the previous rate of 10%) of couples continue to live out their faith.

Couples currently receive a letter from Mallon outlining the process and then meet with a deacon or other staff member. The next phase of development will be to assign mentoring couples who would accompany, support and pray for the engaged couple as they follow this process.

Youth – Confirmation

The primary preparation for Confirmation is engagement with the general activities of the parish - Sunday Eucharist and Youth Group. In the spring, leaders identify likely young people in families already attending and invite them to consider confirmation. Those who wish to go forward will be mentored, attend a few classes about the theology of confirmation, and take part in a retreat.

When families approach seeking the sacrament for young people who do not yet have a church connection, St Benedict's asks them to take part in Youth *Alpha* and sets out clear expectations of church and youth group involvement. If the young person becomes semi-regular at Sunday Eucharist, they will be confirmed.

Under this approach, the total number of confirmations is only 50% of what it was previously, but 80% of those confirmed remain in church practice. The previous system typically had a 75% dropout rate.

Children – Reconciliation and Communion

Preparation for First Communion is done not with children alone, but with whole families. These families are asked to engage in three ways:

1. The parish runs a family faith formation day once every two months called GIFT: ***Growing In Faith Together***. This is an open-ended, all-are-welcome program where no attendance register is taken and is accessible whatever your starting point of faith or commitment might be.
2. The First Reconciliation program runs in groups of around 10 families at a time. This is 8 weeks long and runs three times a year. Each session is a morning-long family retreat, and there are also home assignments. Within sessions, some activities involve parents and children working together; others have parallel tracks for parents and children. The course leaders get to know each family personally and journey with them. A family can enrol for this as soon as a child is mature enough to make First Reconciliation, and children of different ages can go through the course together. The family must complete First Reconciliation, ideally with the Catholic parent(s) also going to confession, before they can enrol on the First Communion course.
3. A family requesting to have a children enrolled in the First Communion program must be participating in the GIFT program, attending Sunday Eucharist and have gone through the parish New Member Process. Then a similar 8-week format is used for families to prepare together. When appropriate, parents who have not been receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to begin again.

Infants - Baptism

At St Benedict before Mallon came, 80% of applications for infant baptism came from non-churchgoing families. Despite keen teams running a preparation course, NONE of the 80% became churchgoers afterwards. The new approach described below was only just being implemented at the time the book was written.

Under Mallon, the application process for churchgoing families is straightforward: they attend a 4-session course which takes place before or after Sunday Mass and then book a baptism date; if they have already done the course, they can immediately book a date.

Non-churchgoing families are expected to have the Catholic parent(s) reconnect to the sacraments before the baptism can be scheduled. They will be invited to an **information evening** which runs once a month... the goal of such an evening is to show applicants that they are loved and welcomed, and to invite them to something bigger. One or more of the team members will speak about their own faith journey and present the basic Gospel message. No mention will be made at this stage of classes or baptism dates.

Mallon writes: "When couples are willing to move forward in the process of 'getting ready,' we welcome and work with them, no matter how messy or 'irregular' their lives may be. No circumstance needs to be an obstacle if they are sincere about moving forward from where they are. We commit to accompany them in prayer and assign a young couple to support them as a mentoring couple. Mentoring couples pray for the families, invite them to join them for Mass, and keep in touch with them. We do not necessarily require weekly attendance, but some kind of 'stickiness' to the community. It is important to avoid taking attendance or being overly rigid on this, but we are looking for a connection to be made."

Parents seeking an infant baptism also need to go through the welcome process for new parishioners, and are encouraged to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation before their children are baptized.

Mallon only baptises infants at a designated Baptism Sunday once a month (not Lent) and does so at Mass; to keep timing tight, the prebaptismal anointing is done before Mass begins, and the water could be blessed then too.