

Reflections on the First Weekend of Shaping the Parish in the Diocese of Washington.

The new Shaping the Parish in the Diocese of Washington had its first weekend February 18 - 22. We're already learning from the experience. We're also learning a few things as we see what is happening among some of the people registered for the national program to begin in June.

What we'll be looking for

Maybe the first thing to say is that it's all very early in the process. Let's see where we are about a year after the first program is over. By that time - what will we be looking for?

We'll want to see things such as:

1. Did it jump start parishes into a revitalization process? Did it create momentum?
2. Are those parishes staying with it?
3. Are there tangible and significant improvements that have been made in the parishes? Have they shown short-term pay-off, long-term commitment, and an integration of new ways into the parish culture? How does that look 3 months after the program, 6 months?
4. Have participants increased their competence for emotional & social intelligence, spiritual practice, and change theory and methods? To be seen in both their individual lives and in the corporate life of the parish.

What we did and saw; a few tentative learnings

We're not going to attempt to share everything we're learning but here are a few highlights.

1. The first weekend was a long one (Friday - Monday). It focused on emotional and social intelligence and made use of T-groups. As far as we know this is the first diocesan based program of its kind to make substantial use of T-groups (at least in recent years).¹

Some assumptions we started with:

-That people would accept the T-group method because 1) they understood its relationship to emotional and social intelligence; 2) had registered knowing it was part of the program; and 3) had a strong enough investment in the well being of their parishes that they would be willing to try new things.

-That the learnings of participants wouldn't be as deep as possible in a week long HI lab or even an intensive weekend HI. We assumed this would be a "light" version.

-That we needed to go light for political reasons. That if a few participants were unable to engage the process and learn in it, we might have a political problem with diocesan leaders (because they'd have a political problem with those participants).

-That we would set the climate we needed for future learning and work by beginning with an emotionally demanding event and one in which feedback skills were stressed.

A few learnings and insights:

-The overall depth of learning was far beyond what we expected.

-Coming in teams with a set of common expectations regarding the approach to parish development generated a lot of energy and a significant level of focus around the work to be done. People seemed very invested.

-Even though the work was quite challenging, complex, and emotionally demanding, participants seemed to be applying it directly to the parish situation with relative ease.

-Structuring the T-group time with specific presentations and information that would ordinarily unfold over the life of a longer group did appear to allow the participants to access the material more quickly and more deeply than we would have assumed.

The program's take-away assignment element involved each person identifying one behavior they wanted to change, something they would act on several times in the two weeks after the first weekend of training. Here are some examples: "Validating the person by acknowledging in concrete terms what I heard another say, even if I don't agree with it." "Remaining engaged even when I want to check-out." "Speaking up for myself while continuing to listen to the others."

The report back so far indicates that participants experienced some degree of success and saw clearly the process before them – "it felt risky and uncomfortable." ... "to develop this habit, continuing to use this learning and make it more second nature so I don't come across as stilted or fake."

Shaping the Parish and CDI Trainers

Our hope remains that the CDI Trainers Coordinating Team will accept our offer to make Shaping the Parish an affiliated program, seeing it as a kind of incubator program. It could be very exciting for all of us and a way to better serve the church.

Bob Gallagher & Michelle Heyne March 8, 2011

¹ For more on [T-groups](#). The three networks offering such training on a regular basis are [LTI](#), [NTL](#), and [EQ-HR](#). The last group doesn't call them T-groups but acknowledges that's the method used.