

PEP helps get parishes up to PAR

BY PHIL NERO

Six months after their first visit, Fr. Tom Sweetser, SJ and Sr. Peg Bishop, OSF arrive at St. Charles Borromeo parish on Milwaukee's South Side. Their work here qualifies them as missionaries of sorts. But rather than traveling to remote regions or distant countries, they're more likely to turn up at local churches like this one, spreading good news about how to reinvigorate parish and parishioners.

"Apathy is not the people's fault," Sr. Peg says.

Known as Parish Assessment and Renewal, or PAR, the program draws on Fr. Sweetser's almost 30 years of experience as co-founder of the Parish Evaluation Project.

"We've learned a great deal and fine-tuned a lot in that time," he says. "Now we have a well-proven method of gathering good information that helps people identify things they want to change." Then Fr. Sweetser and Sr. Peg help the parish develop a plan that works.

"Prior to 1997 I felt we were doing OK. I knew we

were helping parishes, but we weren't really getting underneath their skin. We weren't creating a real change in structure," Fr. Sweetser says. "People would get all revved up when we were there, but if they didn't have good leadership or staff in place, things just fell off until our next visit."

Now the process involves greater preparation and ongoing support, to tap more parishioners and generate common ideas, common goals, and a common vision. They create their own plan that is

Fr. Tom Sweetser, SJ and Sr. Peg Bishop, OSF review information gathered from the Parish Assessment and Renewal program.



individually tailored to each parish.

“When they called me, the timing was perfect,” says Fr. Tony Zimmer, pastor at St. Charles Borromeo since June 2000. “It was a time of many transitions for our parish. Hopes were high among the people here. They were ready to move forward. They needed permission and direction.”

Most Church leaders agree that, like St. Charles Borromeo, American Catholic parishes are in transition periods, often related to the ongoing priest shortage. Like many pastors, Fr. Zimmer is the only priest assigned to his parish. It’s a common situation that calls for a paradigm shift, says Fr. Sweetser, to a structure in which the pastor shares responsibilities, generally retaining pastoral duties while delegating the bulk of daily administrative oversight. PAR is geared to make the shift a smooth one, and preparation is important. The process begins in earnest with a day-long visit after a PAR Oversight Committee is in place.

“We’ll come in, meet the pastor, meet with staff, and go over what the oversight committee has to do before we come back,” Fr.

Sweetser says. Circulating a confidential Parish Life and Operation survey is the committee’s first major task. Parishioners respond and return their answers directly to PEP’s Milwaukee office. Months later, Fr. Sweetser and Sr. Peg return – sleeves up and ready to begin an

exhaustive 17-day process.

“We’re there together because you have to have different perspectives,” says Fr. Sweetser, the analytical partner in the process.

“I’m the feeling person. You have to feel your way into this. We are opposites. We make a good team,” adds Sr. Peg.

Typically the 17 days begin on a Friday by setting a schedule of individual meetings with pastor, staff, and lay leaders – usually about 40 people in all. They review the self-survey results and examine five parish activity areas: liturgy and worship; parish community life; edu-

cation and formation of all age groups; spiritual outreach (including pastoral care, social service, social justice, reaching out to inactive people); and general administration (including building and grounds, finance, stewardship and treasury, communication, and master plan).

“Often people are locked in on their areas and so close up to stuff that pulling away and beginning is very difficult. The interviews encourage perspective and help them see what the potential would be if

everything were working at its best.” Sr. Peg says. “What’s blocking it right now, and what can we do in a practical way to start working toward that potential? We’re laying the groundwork for an approach to strategic planning that stretches the possibilities and the people’s creativity.”

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Sr. Peg Bishop, OSF and Fr. Tom Sweetser, SJ listen to input from parishioners participating in the Parish Assessment and Renewal process at St. Charles Borromeo on Milwaukee’s South Side.

Next, the entire parish is invited to a 55-minute town hall-like gathering, usually on the second Sunday and typically attended by as many as 200 parishioners. They sit at tables in groups of 8-10 people, one of whom records the answers to three questions: What do we keep? What do we let go? Where do we start? Answers come in rounds, one person at a time, one response at a time, until the groups run out of ideas.

“The first time I saw it, I said, ‘no way we’re getting out of here in 55 minutes.’ But the genius of it is that if there are 200 who show up they’re in and out in 55 minutes, because the way it’s set up, nobody can take over,” Sr. Peg says. “There’s no discussion until everyone is finished, and we keep going around the room coaching everyone. We say we want

everyone’s wisdom. It’s important that what you came with reaches the leadership and influences the direction. Once all their thoughts are out, they can discuss whatever they want.”

‘It brought us together. Now we’re playing the music from the same sheet.’

– Janet Seizyk

The next two days are spent distilling the information into a report. Except for a day off each week, however, they attend liturgies, observe activities, and make themselves visible and available throughout the 17 days.

“Our recommendations are about 30 pages long, including a summary of the interviews and town hall notes. We just hole up and do it. Leadership, staff and the pastor get a copy of everything gathered in the interviews and the town hall,” Fr. Sweetser says. “We get away from it and take a day off while everyone reads the material. Because of all the work leading up to the

HOW THE PAR APPROACH WORKS.

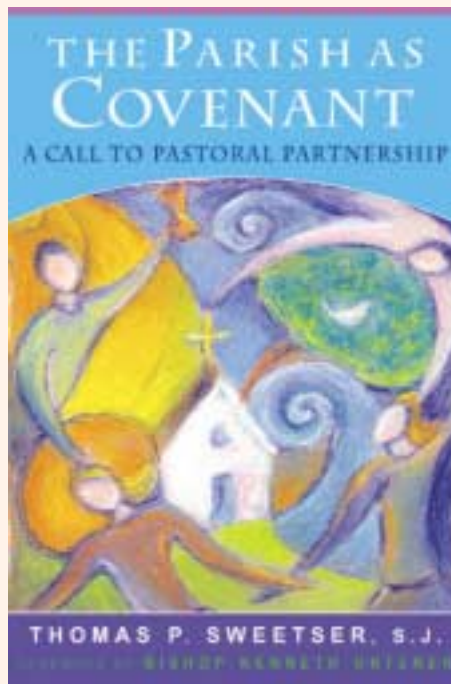
Configuring parish leadership under the Parish Assessment and Renewal (PAR) program requires a shift from a top-down leadership model with a pastor at the top to a dual-focus leadership structure in which the pastor works with a parish administrator or other lay leader.

Neither sits atop a pyramid or at the center of a circle. The structure is more like an ellipse with two foci occupying different places on the middle linear plane. Staff, committees, and parishioners occupy the elliptical sphere.

A three-year action plan comes together and is adopted, but initial steps are short-term, focusing on one goal in each of a parish’s five activity areas: liturgy and worship; parish community life; education and formation; spiritual outreach; and general administration.

“The areas are guided by separate commissions. The commissions identify one goal each and adopt plans to reach them,” says Fr. Tom Sweetser, SJ.

“This is like a trial period or practice time to get the feel for success,”



says Sr. Peg Bishop, OSF, who teams with Fr. Sweetser to help parishes work through the PAR process. “The beauty of it though is that in each of the groups there are co-leaders who are working together with the staff. Staff

does not run these groups, the co-leaders do. They enter as full partners. It’s not a power play; it’s about a collaborative effort.

“We suggest that they try it for 6 months. If there are things you want to change we can change them and move forward from there,” Sr. Peg says.

Long-term, the five commissions are feeder groups for the Parish (or Pastoral) Council. There are no general elections. Service on a commission is a prerequisite. Two parishioners from each commission area serve on the Pastoral Council.

“They discern the pastoral council from the membership in the commissions,” Sr. Peg says.

“You get on the council by serving on the commission first,” Fr. Sweetser says. “Instead of leadership being sent to a group, the various groups send leaders to the Pastoral Council. That’s a key piece. It helps create an active environment in which action is important. It’s staff- and people-driven, not administrator- or pastor-driven.” n

report, there are no surprises, but it is important that the parish has time alone to absorb the information.”

When the team returns, the final days comprise a rush of activity. Pastor and staff are now in a different place. Internal and external barriers are removed.

“There are no secrets,” Fr. Sweetser says.

“We’re not strangers anymore. They know us, we know them, and they know far more than ever about each other. We settle into a partnership,” Sr. Peg says.

Pastor and parishioners at St. **Charles** Borromeo are happy with the way their partnership is working.

“We had the energy. It gave us the process,” says Deb Barchus, chair of the parish Christian Formation Commission.

“It brought us together,” says Janet Seizyk, chair of the Pastoral Council. “Now we’re playing the music from the same sheet.”

“Our energy was exploding, but you just can’t go with the flow. You need a common direction and a vision. Process is everything,” says Fr. Zimmer. “The PAR process taught us how to consult, how to listen, how to get input, and how to implement the dream and the vision.”

Their testimonials give credence to what Fr. Sweetser has to say to parishes willing to give PAR a chance:

“It has evolved over years into a system that works.” n

*For more information about the PAR program or to order a copy of Fr. Sweetser’s book **The Parish as Covenant**, call (414) 483.7370 or e-mail PEP@pitnet.net or go to www.pepparish.org*



Fr. Sweetser, SJ and Sr. Peg, OSF deliver a shared homily and report during a Mass at a parish participating in the Parish Assessment and Renewal program.

Deb Ebratt, the third member of the PAR team, inputs survey results that team members will analyze and use to evaluate needs at a client parish.

