

Building a Culture of Discipleship

LEADERSHIP, ENGAGEMENT & GENEROSITY AT ST. ANN



Building a Culture of Discipleship Through Engagement, Invitation, and Generosity

By Dave Smith, Parish Administrator, Catholic Church of St. Ann, Marietta, Georgia

When people think about discipleship in a Catholic parish, they often think first about theology, catechesis, prayer, or sacramental life. Those things are essential; in fact, they are foundational. Yet after more than twenty-five years as a parishioner at the Catholic Church of St. Ann and three years serving as parish administrator, I have come to believe something equally important: **People become disciples when they become connected.**

Connection leads to belonging. Belonging leads to participation. Participation opens the door to spiritual growth. Spiritual growth inspires generosity.

And generosity—of the time we devote to our spiritual lives and community, the gifts and talents we offer to others, and the abundance God has entrusted to us—strengthens the mission of the Church.

At St. Ann, a parish of nearly 4,000 families in Marietta, Georgia, we have learned that discipleship is not simply a program, ministry, department, or annual campaign. It is the environment we create as a parish community. It is the culture people encounter when they walk through our doors and the way they experience Christ through prayer, worship, service, invitation, and relationships with others.

That kind of culture does not develop accidentally. It must be cultivated intentionally.

CHAPTER I

Building a Culture of Discipleship

Transforming the Culture of the Parish

The work of forming disciples is often described as a bottom-up process: individuals encounter Christ, grow in faith, and become more engaged in the life of the Church. That personal response is indispensable. For discipleship to take root across an entire parish, however, transformation must also occur at the organizational level. Discipleship must become a shared priority among the pastor, staff, councils, ministry leaders, and parishioners until it begins to shape the culture of the whole community.

Before I became parish administrator, St. Ann had not had a formal stewardship program in more than twenty-five years. The parish was already known for its exceptional music ministry, vibrant Life Teen program, dozens of ministries, and welcoming environment for newcomers and visitors. These were tremendous strengths, but we did not yet have an

intentional, parish-wide pathway to discipleship. A parishioner's path toward deeper involvement was largely self-guided—or, in some cases, nonexistent.

In many parishes, including ours, I have observed three general patterns of engagement:

- **Early adopters** are trusting, adventurous, and willing to participate in new programs, ministries, surveys, and events.
- **Wait-and-see parishioners** are interested but often hesitate to commit until they see others participating.
- **Mass-only parishioners** limit their visible connection with the parish to Sunday Mass.

The last group can be especially difficult to reach. These parishioners may sit quietly in the pew, leave immediately after Mass, and never form meaningful relationships within the community. When this happens, their experience of parish life can remain transactional rather than transformational. We had many opportunities available, but we did not have an overarching process to help people discover them and take a next step.

In 2023, our new pastor told me that we would be attending the International Catholic Stewardship Council Conference that September with several key members of our staff. By the end of the conference, four conclusions had become clear to us:

- The central principles of stewardship remained relevant, but the way we presented them needed to change.
- The word *stewardship* was commonly understood as a synonym for money.
- Traditional stewardship drives tended to be active for only a few weeks each year.
- Stewardship is inseparable from discipleship: our lives, gifts, and resources come from God and are meant to be used in faithful response to Jesus Christ.

We realized that our parish needed to reevaluate its approach to engagement and, ultimately, to discipleship. For years, we had relied on a “build it and they will come” philosophy. We had strong ministries, excellent music, and a welcoming Sunday experience. Yet the opportunities themselves were not enough. We needed to help parishioners understand how those opportunities could lead them into a deeper relationship with Christ and His Church.

From Stewardship Campaign to Discipleship Pathway

Our first step was to create a framework that would foster sustained parish engagement and give our staff, councils, and ministry leaders shared responsibility for its success. We began with the traditional stewardship categories of time, talent, and treasure, but we renamed and reframed them around discipleship:

Prayer & Presence: What I do for myself. This phase includes the practices and relationships that nourish a person's spiritual life and sense of belonging, such as Mass, Adoration, Bible studies, small groups, faith formation, parish events, and community-building ministries.

Faith in Action: What I do for others. This phase includes outreach ministries, pastoral care, parish councils, and other opportunities to place our gifts at the service of the Church and our neighbors.

Generosity: How I share what God has given me. This phase encompasses offertory, second collections, annual appeals, capital campaigns, parish ministries, Catholic education, charitable organizations, philanthropy, and financial assistance offered to family, friends, and others in need.

We also decided that discipleship could not be confined to a short annual campaign. We designed the program to unfold throughout the calendar year:

- January through May: **Faith in Action**
- June through September: **Prayer & Presence**
- October through December: **Generosity**

Reframing stewardship as discipleship helped parishioners recognize that our purpose extended far beyond increasing offertory. The names of the three phases took more time to become familiar. We learned that pairing each name with a short explanation—for example, “Faith in Action: What I do for others”—made the framework easier to understand.

CHAPTER II

Creating a Year-Round Pathway

Creating a Year-Round Rhythm

Each phase follows a consistent rhythm designed to move parishioners from awareness to prayerful consideration, commitment, and celebration.

Introducing the Phase

At the beginning of each phase, we use the bulletin, weekly newsletter, Mass and campus screens, website, social media, and other channels to explain its purpose. We tell parishioners why the phase matters, how it relates to discipleship, how they will be invited to participate, and which important dates they should know.

Hosting a Mini Ministry Fair

A few weeks before each Covenant Weekend, we invite the ministries connected to that phase to participate in a mini ministry fair. Parishioners can meet ministry leaders, ask questions, and learn about opportunities in a relaxed setting. We schedule these fairs during Hospitality Sunday, when coffee and donuts already draw people into fellowship after Mass and give the ministries greater visibility.

Preaching About the Phase

One or two weeks before Covenant Weekend, the homilist connects the Sunday Gospel with the upcoming discipleship phase. This helps the congregation understand that the invitation is not merely organizational. It is a spiritual response to the Gospel and a call to discern how God may be asking each person to grow.

Celebrating Covenant Weekend

During Covenant Weekend, parishioners are invited to make a commitment to God through specific ministries, faith-formation opportunities, councils, committees, practices of prayer, or forms of generosity. We prepare distinct covenant cards for adults, teenagers, and children and distribute them as parishioners enter Mass. After the homily, we allow time for prayerful reflection and completion of the cards. Parishioners then bring their commitments forward in an altar call.

Gathering as a Parish Community

The week after each Covenant Weekend, we celebrate together. These events are open not only to parishioners but also to their relatives, friends, and members of the surrounding community. They are not fundraisers; they are offered at no cost as opportunities for fellowship and belonging.

- After **Faith in Action**, we host a parish festival with food, music, dancing, inflatables, pony rides, a dunk tank, and activities for all ages.
- After **Prayer & Presence**, we host an international festival where parishioners share foods representing their current or ancestral homelands. The celebration allows us to experience the remarkable cultural diversity of our parish.
- After **Generosity**, we gather for a Christmas dinner followed by a Christmas sing-along.

These celebrations are more than rewards at the end of each phase. They help people form relationships, experience joy in the parish community, and recognize that they belong to something larger than themselves.

CHAPTER III

Building the Parish to Support Discipleship

Building the Leadership Structure

Once the framework had been designed, we needed an organizational structure capable of sustaining it. A year-round initiative has many moving parts and cannot depend on one staff member or a few enthusiastic volunteers.

We created a Discipleship Council to oversee the parish-wide vision and annual execution of the program. The council includes three subcommittees—Faith in Action, Prayer & Presence, and Generosity—which plan the activities and Covenant Weekends associated with each phase. The volunteers serving on these committees do not need specialized credentials. They need a willingness to support the mission, collaborate with others, and help invite parishioners into deeper participation.

We also strengthened our commission structure. St. Ann has sixty-two ministries organized into five commissions:

- **Liturgy**, for ministries that directly or indirectly support the celebration of Mass;
- **Pastoral Care**, for ministries serving parishioners who are sick, homebound, grieving, or experiencing hardship;
- **Outreach**, for ministries serving those in need, primarily outside the parish community;
- **Community**, for ministries that foster fellowship and shared life, including Scouts, the women's council, the Knights of Columbus, and family-life ministries; and
- **Spiritual Enrichment**, for ministries devoted to prayer, formation, spiritual healing, and worship.

The commission model helps ministry leaders understand one another's work, share resources, reduce duplication, and develop new leaders. It also provides a reliable channel of communication among ministry leadership, the pastor, the parish administrator, and the Discipleship Council.

When I attend commission meetings, I emphasize the importance of being both intentional and invitational. Ministry leaders are not merely filling volunteer positions; they are opening doors through which parishioners may encounter Christ, form relationships, and discover their place in the Church.

Communication Is the Lifeline of a Parish

Communication is the lifeline of a parish, especially one serving multiple generations. When I became parish administrator, our communications department consisted of two part-time employees: a director and an assistant. At the time, we were trying to reach five generations of parishioners primarily through the bulletin, weekly newsletter, and limited social media. We were understaffed for the parish's existing needs, much less the additional demands of a year-round discipleship initiative.

Over the following year and a half, we expanded the department to five employees. We made the director and communications assistant full-time positions and added part-time roles in videography, podcasting, and technology support for the website, online giving, and ministry scheduling. This was a significant investment, but it gave us the capacity to communicate clearly and consistently across the channels different generations use.

This book includes a separate chapter devoted to communications, presented from the perspective of our communications director. That chapter explores in greater detail how

parish communication can become a form of accompaniment and how a coordinated strategy can support a culture of discipleship.

CHAPTER IV

From Attendance to Engagement

The Difference Between Attendance and Engagement

One of the greatest misconceptions in parish leadership is assuming that attendance equals engagement.

A full church and a crowded parking lot may look encouraging, but attendance alone does not tell the full story of a parish's vitality. A parish can have thousands of registered families and still struggle with volunteer burnout, limited ministry participation, weak community connection, and stagnant stewardship.

True engagement happens when parishioners move from being observers to becoming participants.

At St. Ann, we began evaluating parish life differently. Instead of asking only, "How many people attended?" we also began asking:

- How many people served?
- How many people connected?
- How many people joined something?
- How many people deepened their faith?
- How many people invited someone else?
- How many relationships were formed?

These questions reveal the spiritual health of a parish more accurately than attendance alone.

Engaged parishioners volunteer. They form friendships. They invite others. They remain connected during difficult times. They become generous with their time, gifts, and resources. Most importantly, engaged parishioners begin to see the parish not simply as "the church I attend," but as "my parish family."

That shift changes everything.

Hospitality Is Evangelization

One of the most underestimated ministries in the Catholic Church is hospitality.

Hospitality is not simply greeting people at the door. It is not merely coffee and donuts after Mass, nor is it limited to event logistics.

Hospitality is evangelization.

Long before people join a ministry, attend a Bible study, or make a financial commitment, they decide whether they feel welcomed. Within minutes, a person begins to sense whether a parish is warm, inviting, organized, and joyful.

This is especially important in a large parish. In a smaller church, connection may develop naturally because people already know one another. In a parish of nearly 4,000 families, hospitality must be intentional. At St. Ann, we work to create environments where people feel seen, welcomed, comfortable, included, and invited.

That includes the cleanliness of our campus, the clarity of our signs, the friendliness of our volunteers, and the follow-up someone receives after expressing interest. It also means creating opportunities for people to interact outside of Mass. Shared meals, festivals, retreats, ministry gatherings, service projects, and social events create settings in which relationships can form naturally.

Catholics are sacramental people, but we are also communal people. Relationships are a bridge to discipleship.

The Power of Personal Invitation

Communication and hospitality create the environment for engagement, but most parishioners do not become involved simply because they read an announcement. They become engaged because someone helps them recognize that the invitation is meant personally for them.

One of the greatest untapped opportunities in parish life is the power of personal invitation. A general appeal—"We need volunteers"—can leave people assuming that someone else will respond or that they are not qualified. A direct invitation communicates something different:

- You are wanted.
- You are capable.
- You have gifts to offer.
- You matter to this community.

Instead of asking broadly for help, we encourage staff and ministry leaders to invite people specifically: "John, would you consider helping with this ministry? I think you would be great at it." Many of our most dedicated volunteers became involved because another parishioner personally invited them into something meaningful.

In many cases, people are simply waiting to be asked. Invitation is discipleship in action. Christ called His disciples personally. He invited them into relationship before entrusting them with responsibility. The Church must do the same.

Ministry as a Pathway to Belonging

Ministry is sometimes treated as an operational necessity. We need lectors because Mass requires lectors, ushers because people must be welcomed and seated, and catechists because faith-formation programs need teachers. But ministry is much more than staffing. Properly understood, ministry is itself a form of discipleship formation.

I believe every parish ministry should accomplish three goals:

1. Support the mission of the Church.
2. Build relationships among parishioners.
3. Deepen the faith of those who serve.

If a ministry completes its tasks but does not foster relationships or spiritual growth, service can eventually become exhausting rather than life-giving. We therefore encourage our ministries to include community, prayer or spiritual reflection, and opportunities for outreach whenever appropriate.

This does not mean that every gathering must feel formal or overtly religious. Social events have real value because they create joy and friendship. Nevertheless, the culture of the parish must continually direct people toward Christ. Volunteer gatherings can begin with prayer. Ministry meetings can include reflection. Service can be connected explicitly to the Gospel. Social events can reinforce the mission of the parish. Over time, parishioners begin to understand that faith is not one compartment of life; it is the foundation of life.

The Role of Parish Staff

Parish staff play a critical role in shaping culture. Every interaction matters. The way we answer phones, respond to emails, greet visitors, and treat volunteers contributes to the spiritual atmosphere of the parish.

Staff members are not simply employees; they are ministers. At St. Ann, we emphasize relational ministry alongside operational responsibility. Competence matters greatly, but so do kindness, hospitality, and approachability.

People remember how the Church made them feel.

A warm interaction in the parish office can shape someone's perception of the Church just as much as a homily. That reality should humble all of us who serve in parish leadership.

CHAPTER V

Generosity and the Fruits of Discipleship

Generosity as the Fruit of Discipleship

Our understanding of discipleship also reshaped our financial practices. In many parishes, every event, sacramental preparation program, retreat, or faith-formation experience carries a separate fee. Over time, this can make parish life feel like “Church à la carte.” Constantly passing costs to parishioners can undermine the welcoming and generous culture we are trying to build.

At St. Ann, we do not charge adults or children for costs associated with Baptism, First Communion, or Confirmation, including Confirmation retreats for teenagers. We do not use fundraisers to cover parish operating expenses; offertory supports our operations. Any fundraiser held at the parish must clearly identify the outside organization or charity that will receive the net proceeds. We also offer major parish events—including our parish festival, international festival, Trunk or Treat, Christmas dinner and sing-along, and other community gatherings—at no cost to attendees.

Our Generosity phase is equally intentional. When we first introduced it in 2024, the homily focused on the many ways parishioners already share God’s gifts with others. We spoke about the Archbishop’s Annual Appeal, parish ministries, charitable and philanthropic organizations, Catholic-school tuition, and financial assistance offered to relatives, friends, and neighbors. Rather than beginning with a request for more money, we invited parishioners to recognize the generosity already present in their lives.

The Generosity Covenant Card asked parishioners to identify the ways they were already giving. It also offered them the option to indicate what they planned to contribute to offertory in the coming year, since that information helps us budget responsibly for operating and capital expenses. We did not ask for a specific increase. Our goal was reflection, intentionality, and faithful stewardship—not pressure.

I have consistently observed that generosity grows from engagement. Parishioners who are spiritually connected, relationally invested, and actively involved see firsthand how the parish changes lives. They know the ministries, the people, and the mission. Their question begins to shift from “What services am I receiving?” to “How can I support the mission of my parish family?”

Financial stewardship also requires trust. Parishioners want to understand how resources are used, why projects matter, and how their giving supports ministry. Clear communication about priorities, improvements, outreach, capital needs, and operational realities strengthens confidence. Confidence, in turn, supports generosity.

In 2025, we began mailing quarterly donor letters in addition to the annual statement required for tax purposes. Each letter showed the household’s contributions for the quarter, offertory given to date, and annual offertory pledge. This change addressed two practical needs. First, it gave households a regular opportunity to review their pledge. If we did not

have a pledge on record, the pastor's letter invited them to prayerfully consider completing an enclosed Generosity Covenant Card. Second, it alerted online donors to potential problems with recurring gifts, such as an expired or canceled credit card, before an entire year had passed.

The process of creating these quarterly letters was demanding, but the practice strengthened both transparency and accountability.

CHAPTER VI

Outcomes & Lessons Learned

After two and a half years, we have seen encouraging results, but we have also learned that cultural transformation takes patience. A parish-wide discipleship initiative must be defined, planned, executed, evaluated, and refined. The pastor, staff, councils, and ministry leaders must work toward the same goal and, as much as possible, move in the same rhythm.

We also learned not to underestimate the resources required. Covenant cards take time to develop and improve. Paper responses require manual data entry, handwriting can be difficult to interpret, and online submissions contain errors that must be corrected. The information must then be standardized, organized, and distributed to the appropriate ministries. Finally—and most importantly—ministry leaders must follow up with the people who expressed interest. Collecting a person's name is not the same as accompanying that person into parish life.

Communication must also be planned as part of the initiative from the beginning. A year-round discipleship process creates significant demand for writing, design, digital tools, video, web support, data management, and consistent messaging. These are not peripheral tasks; they help make the invitation visible, understandable, and accessible.

The outcomes have made the effort worthwhile:

- Covenant Card submissions have increased consistently.
- Participation in the celebrations connected with each phase has created anticipation and excitement.
- Ministries have experienced increased engagement, and new ministries have begun.
- More parishioners have expressed interest in leadership roles on committees and councils.
- The number of new parishioners joining St. Ann has far exceeded the number leaving.
- Annual offertory increased by 12 percent in fiscal year 2026, compared with a 1.2 percent increase in fiscal year 2025.

These numbers matter, but they are not the mission itself. They are signs that people are becoming more connected to Christ and to one another.

Earlier this year, I received the following email from a first-time visitor to our parish. Sometimes we need to pause and see ourselves reflected through the eyes of others:

Hi,

I visited from Virginia at the end of Feb. and attended the 8:30 Mass. I just want to let you know how impressed I was with EVERYTHING about your church. I wish I could teleport you back to Virginia. The church is soooo welcoming; it exudes love in every single part of the Mass—from the angelic singing, to the smile on the faces of the ushers, to the tangible salutation of the Eucharistic ministers, to the reverent dimming of the lights during the offertory. People welcomed one another, greeted one another, and joyfully shared the sign of peace. I was so touched I literally had tears in my eyes multiple times during the Mass. This is a time when love is so desperately needed. I even took notes :) after Mass to share with my husband all the things I noticed about your church. Please pass on to your pastor my gratitude.

The growth in our parish and parish community is showing the fruits of our discipleship efforts. Parishioner engagement, enthusiasm, spiritual enrichment, and fellowship are on fire and will continue to permeate our parish as we cultivate this culture of discipleship.

The experience this visitor described was not created by one program or one person. It was the fruit of many people—clergy, staff members, musicians, ministers, volunteers, and parishioners—choosing repeatedly to create a reverent, welcoming, and loving community.

A Parish Where People Belong

At the heart of this work is a simple truth: people are searching for belonging. Our culture is increasingly fragmented, and many people feel both spiritually adrift and relationally isolated. The parish has an extraordinary opportunity to become a place of community, stability, prayer, service, healing, joy, meaning, and purpose.

But this requires an intentional culture of discipleship. If we merely maintain buildings, schedules, and programs, we risk missing the mission Christ entrusted to the Church. People do not need another institution to consume. They need an authentic Christian community in which they can encounter Christ through the sacraments, prayer, relationships, service, and invitation.

As I reflect on my years at St. Ann—as both a parishioner and parish administrator—I remain deeply hopeful about the future of parish life. The Church still has the ability to transform lives profoundly.

I have seen parishioners discover faith through ministry involvement.

I have seen friendships form through volunteer service.

I have seen struggling families supported by the parish community.

I have seen generosity grow through spiritual engagement.

I have seen isolated individuals become deeply connected disciples.

None of this happened accidentally. It happened because parishioners invited one another into community. It happened because volunteers gave generously of themselves. It happened because ministry leaders created welcoming environments. It happened because parish life became more than attendance; it became belonging.

At St. Ann, we continue striving toward that vision every day—not perfectly and not without challenges, but intentionally.

Discipleship is not ultimately about increasing participation numbers or financial giving. Those are outcomes, not the mission. The mission is to help people encounter Jesus Christ and become active participants in the life of His Church.

When that happens, community grows, faith deepens, generosity increases, parishes thrive, and lives are changed.

That is why this work matters.