

BEFORE YOU BEGIN



The officers went through the camp and issued these commands to the people: “When you see the ark of the covenant . . . follow it, that you may know the way” . . . Joshua also said to the people, “Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will perform wonders among you.”

JOSHUA 3:2–5

This is a book about the local community church that Catholics call their parish. We’re two guys who have been working in a parish for a few years. That’s probably our essential qualification for writing this book. Actually, it’s our only qualification, and to tell you the truth, for a long time we weren’t even any good at it.

REBUILT, XV

R*ebuilt* tells the story of what happened to us, what we learned, and what we now know about growing a healthy parish. It is all about the twin exercises of discipleship and evangelization, or what we have come to call awakening the faithful, while also, and at the same time, reaching the lost—oh, and in the process, making church matter.

The formation, composition, and publication of the book were a challenging, surprising, and ultimately thrilling experience. All of it was unlikely and therefore unexpected. It was also life changing.

One of the things that changed markedly about our lives was the sudden interest we attracted and the new demands on our time. It quickly became commonplace for visitors from other parishes to show up

at our church any time of the week and throughout the weekend. We actually started regularly assigning staff to be on visitor duty. There were plenty of calls and cards, letters, and e-mail too. Invitations to speak throughout the country and even further afield began arriving.

Basically, all the interest came down to the same thing: “Tell us how to do it; tell us how to grow a healthy parish.” And that is something we very much wanted to do. The only problem was, despite our best intentions, we simply could not help everyone who reached out to us (and run our own parish at the same time).

In our second book, *Tools for Rebuilding*, we shared many practical tools to getting started in parish renewal when it comes to discipleship and evangelization. More recently, it occurred to us that a guide to rebuilding in the deep weeds of parish life might also be helpful. That’s where this book started taking shape.

In it, you will find very little that comes as news, perhaps nothing at all that you didn’t already know. We do not pretend to suggest there are many original insights here. In fact, it’s all rather simple and straightforward. We just want to share with you what works when it comes to evangelization and discipleship in our parish in Timonium, Maryland.

We’ll tell you exactly how we did and continue to do things here. Then, you apply or adapt what you think might work in your setting and, in the process, learn more about what actually does work for you. It matters not at all what kind of parish you have: big or small, urban or rural, affluent or struggling. To undertake these exercises, you don’t need any particular resources, additional staff, or budget, and you won’t have to hire a consultant. You really only need one thing: *a team*.

Rebuilding your parish is not a solitary effort. Ideally, it is a team exercise led by the pastor or parish pastoral leader. It also includes at least a few people who are willing to think creatively while speaking honestly about the problems and opportunities that really exist. The team must understand that there are no quick fixes or silver bullets. Neither are there any grand strategies waiting to be discovered.

The ten steps we suggest here are not ten *weeks*, nor are they ten *meetings*. They are ten starting points that introduce your team to exercises for rebuilding.

Taken together, these exercises are a disciplined march in a single direction. The team must have a commitment to a sustained, long-term effort in parish renewal and rebuilding.

Most of all, the team must have trust in one another, and be willing to work collaboratively and with mutual respect. Listening and learning will be essential for such trust, and humor and humility will help a lot too.

That’s the complicated part. Once you’ve got a team in place, the rest is simple. It’s not *easy*. Like any exercise regime, the one suggested here will require a lot of hard work and heavy lifting, and that won’t be easy. But it is simple.

Each section or chapter of this field guide will walk you and your team through a series of exercises. Each begins in prayer and includes storytelling, to help the team understand the history and the context

of what is happening. And the exercises end in some specific resolution, or steps to take toward introducing change and moving forward.

Finally, we offer what we're calling the "rally cry," a term we're borrowing from our friend Patrick Lencioni. The rally cry is a phrase that brings your team together to support a shared idea or undertake a common cause. It best represents what your team is trying to accomplish. The rally cry is the main thing, perhaps the *one* thing, that must be done now.

It's a cry to do things differently, creating a kind of discontent that is meant to motivate. Because the rally cry springs from our Christ-given mission to make disciples, that discontent is, in a sense, sacred. We'll be calling it a "holy discontent," a phrase we also borrowed, in this case from Pastor Bill Hybels.

Parish life is currently changing quickly. So, like life for the people of Israel in the Exodus, all of us in parish ministry find ourselves in a place we've never been before. And, like Joshua, effective parish leaders will form the resolve to move forward in strategic and bold ways. We hope what follows helps.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



Tom: If you are like Father Michael, you'll obsess over this guide and each of its "how tos."

Father Michael: And if you're like Tom, you'll skip over the "how tos" and just dive right in.

Don't do either. In view of the following, take time to consider how you will proceed and then do so confidently. Each chapter of this guide is intended to form an exercise or a series of exercises for your team. Depending on your circumstances, any particular exercise might require multiple sessions to work through. (It may even take months.) Don't rush these exercises; take the time you need. Here are some additional steps that will make this guide more useful and your work more successful.

Assemble the Team

The pastor or pastoral leader needs to put in plenty of thought and prayer on the front end about who joins the team. Just because someone is on staff or they simply want to be a part of the team doesn't mean they qualify. Just because someone agrees with the pastor doesn't mean they qualify either. More useful qualities include a lively faith, a commitment to the parish, demonstrated willingness to serve, emotional health, and an ability to think creatively. Together the team should present a balanced cross-section of your parish, mindful of ethnic diversity.

Though not everyone on the team needs a long-term relationship with the parish, at least one member should have solid institutional memory. On the other hand, a newcomer, who brings fresh perspective, would be especially valuable too. The team should not be less than five or more than eight, a size intended to accommodate robust discussion.

Set the Ground Rules

Your team is not going to be very effective if they just show up for meetings and start shooting from the hip with a lot of preconceived notions and intransigent opinions. These exercises will not be fruitful if

individual members are only concerned with what they think, what they like, and what they want. The team is not even a team, and will go nowhere, if people are only there to advance their own agendas or defend their silo ministries.

Before the very first session, you will want to set rules of engagement for your time together. You also might need to review these rules before each subsequent session. A short list should include confidentiality, trust, a commitment to speaking the truth in love, and active listening. Invite team members to study Patrick Lencioni's excellent resource *Death By Meeting*.

Prepare the Exercises

These exercises require preparation, much like any good workout requires a warmup. Most chapters come with a reading assignment from *Rebuilt* that should be read before the exercises begin. Also read the "Consider" sections in each chapter and come with prepared notes to address the sections marked "Tell Your Story." The best way to tell your story is to *prepare* your story.

You will need to decide who will facilitate meetings. By the way, it doesn't have to be and maybe shouldn't be the pastor. Perhaps, someone with leadership experience or listening skills can perform this task best. This can free other team members to focus exclusively on the work at hand rather than everyone trying to work out the process details as you move forward. Or you may decide to take turns leading entire meetings or various parts of meetings. For example, one person might lead prayer, another guides the storytelling, and a third directs brainstorming and setting priorities.

Additionally you will need to decide as a group, or as individuals leading particular activities, just how exercises such as brainstorming, prioritizing, planning next steps, and reaching resolutions will be structured. These don't need to be complicated processes, but someone should come up with a plan for how to prioritize a list of desired changes. We simply prompt you to "prioritize," assuming you will come up with the best method for your own group. Start by deciding if an exercise should be done first by individuals and then as a group or by simply launching into the exercise as a group activity.

Facilitators will also need to decide simple things such as if you will need a flip chart, whiteboard, or PowerPoint and what needs to be made ready ahead of time. Snacks and drinks help; a comfortable well-lit setting is essential. Without careful planning for the little things (think who, what, where, when, and how), the bigger tasks of rebuilding will be frustrated.

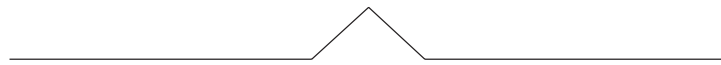
Think and Pray

Team members should be talking to parishioners and others in the community about the exercise topics. You will do well to challenge yourselves to think about the parish in new ways, perhaps to think bigger.

The team must be lifting up each exercise in prayer, and the parish should be praying for the team and the exercises as well. An especially helpful approach is to recruit a prayer team to pray while you are meeting. Or consider offering holy hours for the whole parish that coincide with meeting times. That way everyone is invited—even encouraged—to play a crucial part in the rebuilding.

1

BE HONEST ABOUT THE REAL PROBLEMS



You see the trouble we are in:
how Jerusalem lies in ruins
and its gates have been gutted by fire.
Come, let us rebuild.

NEHEMIAH 2:17

We seek to thoughtfully address all of you who are concerned that things in many parishes do not seem to be going well these days. A single, simple fact establishes the problem: One in three Catholics has walked away from the Church, making “former Catholic” the third largest religious designation in the country.

REBUILT, XVI

PREPARE BY READING

Rebuilt: introduction and chapter 1

Consider

The point of *The Rebuilt Field Guide* is to help you create and sustain change that will enable your team to grow a healthy (or healthier) parish. Change happens when you develop both an intellectual understanding of what needs to change as well as a heartfelt desire to actually do it. And then you need a plan to make it happen. That's the story of Nehemiah, who learns about the distressed condition of Jerusalem, comes to grieve this situation, and determines to rebuild.

This first exercise should help you develop the intellectual understanding of what the situation really is in your parish. But of equal importance is your team's willingness to consider why the status quo or business as usual is no longer acceptable to you.

If this is an honest exercise, it will be a painful one. Try to establish a professional tone, keep the discussion above personalities and recriminations. Strive to maintain a frank dialogue about the facts. But even if you accomplish these things—if it's an honest process—it is going to be painful. And that's okay. As is often said in recovery, "When the pain of where you are is greater than where you need to be, then you'll move." If you're reading this book, the pain of where you are is probably greater than the pain of what you need to do.

Change in our parish began when we came to recognize the pain we were experiencing. We were working very hard, but nothing was ever any different *after* than *before* all our efforts. We were used up and burned out despite our very best efforts. Through this step, you will reflect on your parish's history and identify the problems that you need to address.

Pray

Pray together. Begin in silent prayer; then add spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving and petition. Include intercessory prayer for current problems and needs, as well as prayer of thanksgiving for those who have helped make the story of the parish happen. Then pray:

Heavenly Father,
 you gave your servant Nehemiah a heart to serve you
 as he led the great project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.
 Lead our own rebuilding effort
 and give us the heart to serve you wisely and generously
 here in our parish, in our generation.
 We pray through Christ, our Lord.
 Amen.

Tell Your Story

Members, in turn, should share with the rest of the team a little bit about their background, family life, professional pursuits. Invite everyone to tell the story of how they came to the parish and what they've been involved in since then.

Rebuilt describes some of the history of Church of the Nativity. Knowing your community's story can be very helpful when it comes to uniting your team and making progress toward your goal (not to mention avoiding past mistakes). Take a moment to recount anecdotal stories from the life of your parish. If it seems helpful, bring in senior members of the congregation who have longer institutional memories and ask them to share stories too. Try to work your various memories into a more cohesive narrative, identifying themes that might emerge. Have one team member write these themes on a flip chart or whiteboard so you are all looking at the same words.

Does the history of the parish, especially its successes and achievements, suggest anything when it comes to what God wants to do in the future of the parish? Brainstorm ideas, again posting them where everyone can see.

Read Aloud

The following is excerpted and modified from Rebuilt, pages 5–7. We suggest breaking the reading into parts and having more than one reader. Check the boxes corresponding to your experience.

Our own lack of excitement and vision about being at the parish perfectly matched the attitude we found here. What we discovered at Nativity in the late '90s was a languid community aging in place. To better assess the situation in our first year, we engaged Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate to survey our congregation. When asked what attracted them to this church, 96 percent of parishioners identified "convenient parking" as the number one reason they were here. Here are a few others things we discovered (as you read through this list, check off every one that describes your parish right now):

- Kids hated our religious education program, and it was nearly impossible to find all the volunteer teachers we needed; nobody wanted to do it.
- There was no youth ministry; teenagers and young adults were no-shows at the church.
- The music wasn't bad: It was painfully, ear-achingly, "please, please, please, for the love of God stop!" bad.
- A line-up of rotating priest-celebrants guaranteed an uneven quality of preaching and, sometimes, conflicting messages.

- ❑ The experience of weekend Masses was moribund and depressing. We wouldn't have attended this church if we didn't work here.
- ❑ The congregation's level of giving wasn't paying the bills (and we had a bare-bones budget to say the least). Some recent years had actually seen small deficits. The parish had virtually no savings or reserve. In a well-heeled community, we were a relatively poor parish.
- ❑ The physical plant was dirty and no longer functional in significant ways. Deferred maintenance seemed to be the maintenance plan. A surprising amount of useable space had been converted to storage space, although no one was sure what we were storing. The grounds were neglected and overgrown. The entrance looked as if the place were permanently closed.
- ❑ The small staff was divided and deeply dysfunctional. Their work was done in complete isolation from one another. They were a singularly unproductive group, but nearly everything that was done in the parish—from answering the phone to arranging the flowers—was done by them. Gossip and lunch were the only tasks they lent themselves to with enthusiasm. It should be noted, however, that they were paid next to nothing.
- ❑ Signs posted everywhere from some unidentified authority issued emphatic instructions always punctuated with exclamation points: "Keep these doors closed at all times!" "Do not move this table!!" "No lemons in the garbage disposal!!!"
- ❑ Bulletin boards and posters everywhere tried to attract parishioners' attention to everything from lost puppies to the latest fundraiser. As far as we know, no one even once paused to survey these posts. There was a weekly bulletin, but it was widely acknowledged that "no one reads it." So, most weekends it was read for them from the pulpit following communion. Perhaps that's why most people left after communion.
- ❑ The volunteers were a law unto themselves, answering to no one (except, perhaps, the former pastor). They included:
 1. *The ushers/money counters.* These men (there were no women) were the pastor's police force, invested with the responsibility of enforcing the pastor's house rules.
 2. *The religious education teachers.* Nobody really knew what these women (there were no men) did in their classrooms. And no one seemed to care either.
 3. *The cantors, lectors, and eucharistic ministers.* They had the job of sharing the spotlight with the celebrant and looking like the ultimate insiders.
- ❑ Clergy and staff were treated by parishioners as employees—sometimes with hostility, often with indifference, and, when we were doing what they wanted us to, with condescension.
- ❑ Complaint was a standard form of communication. Anything from failing to announce the Mass "intention" to the temperature inside the building would bring it on.

Inexplicably, there was a self-satisfied, self-congratulatory attitude the congregation as a whole seemed to share. Little else united them.

Besides the people who had been showing up for years, out of convenience or habit, the church was irrelevant and unknown in the community. The number one comment we heard in talking to people outside our congregation was, "I didn't know there was a church back there." A new non-denominational church in our neighborhood was meeting in a warehouse. It was half our age, twice our size, and growing. By their own acknowledgment, something like 60 percent of their congregation were former Catholics, including their pastor. As such, they were drawing more baptized Catholics than any Catholic church in north Baltimore.

These discoveries surprised and shocked us. But there was another little-known fact that was more shocking still: Our parish was dying. In what was already at that point a twenty-year pattern, between thirty and fifty people a year were literally dying or moving away, and nobody was replacing them.

Reflect and Resolve

1. Looking at the problems you checked off, prioritize the top three problems you believe must be addressed at your parish.

2. Which one do you think will be easiest to solve?

3. Which is going to be most difficult?

4. What's the most important problem you can address at this time? Write it down as simply as you can state it.

5. The team must now resolve to address this particular problem. Make sure everyone on the team embraces this resolution. What, specifically, are the next steps to be taken?

6. Who, particularly, is responsible for them?