



by Ellen Rhatigan

## The Inclusivity of Pastoral Planning

Back on the LIE, my mind also wandered into my own childhood, a memory of traveling with my brother's Cub Scout troupe to the city to see the circus for the first time. I got confused early on at the three rings, and asked my father why so much was going on and what I should be looking at. He told me that just as I was watching a different ring than my brother, we are all attracted to different things and I should follow whichever act draws me in. I remember thinking that was very considerate of them to think of both me and my brother.

I was daydreaming in traffic last week, reflecting on the latest series of pastoral planning training sessions. After a whirlwind month on the job, workshops and meetings swirled around in my head, in great need of some mental sorting. In the rhythm of the stop and go traffic, my mind wandered and I thought of PT Barnum's famous phrase, "Come one, come all to the greatest show on earth".

Wait! There are clarifications to be made about what goes on inside my head. While I love my new job, I'm under no delusion that pastoral planning is the greatest show on earth. Nor do I believe it a circus, despite some juggling. But, without stretching a metaphor too far, allow me to explain Barnum's entrance into my afternoon on the LIE.

It's a simple phrase, "Come one, Come all" but one that captures the childlike wonder of an invitation that includes everybody. I can just imagine a ringmaster with a big top hat and cane, excitedly calling in "Children of all ages!" While as adults we bring with us the immeasurable wisdom of our experiences and education, it seems to me that planning for the future of the church also needs a little bit of childlike wonder; the ability to not only accept such an open invitation but dream wildly about the wonders within. "Let the children come to me...for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." (Mark 10:15) Perhaps the openness of a child brings with it not only the innocence of sincerity but the creativity of renewed faith.

For years, I've been hearing about the crucial role of hospitality, the need for our parishes to focus on the invitation. I was recently reminded by a planner that, "we are transitioning from a Church of coercion, to a Church of intention." It is no longer generally expected that people will attend Mass, let alone take an active role. We must be intentional in our hospitality and welcome. Whether or not we accept that image, we cannot deny the power of a good invitation, whether it is to a parish assembly or into Sunday liturgy. Sometimes, we just need someone really excited about what's happening to welcome us in, leaving us to wonder what's so great inside! I'm convinced it's not about show, complete with top hat and cane. True evangelizers live the faith in such a way that we cannot help but want what they have. We cannot help but accept the invitation of involvement.

What excited me early on about pastoral planning was the careful consideration of every level of interaction and relationship in developing the process. One of the first things one learns in group dynamics is that a person's response to a situation is largely determined by the environment in which the response was elicited. Quite simply, we all respond differently to various combinations of groups. We all know parishioners who speak their mind no matter who is in the room, but the truth is we all have different comfort levels at which we will be most open and honest. The model presented in the pastoral council training begins very intentionally with the most basic form of conversation, the "One to One." It extends outward on many levels, including opportunities for small group reflections, large group interactions as well as table discussions and opportunities for written communication.

There is literally something for everyone, with enough variation and flexibility to account for cultural variations. It all extends from the premise that the council really wants to draw forth from parishioners their values, needs and observations, and they will seek do this in a variety of ways until the people are effectively heard. Only then can we step back and really look at the big picture, taking in the complexities and colors of people's vision of parish life. When I think of the process in totality I can hear my brother shouting at me all those years ago "You watch that ring and I'll watch that one. No Wait. You watch THAT one and we'll describe them to each other later..."

As the traffic cleared and my mind was brought back to reality, I thought of the holiness of this process. We could easily remodel any corporate action plan to work for the church, but our approach is steeped with prayer. Our journey through pastoral planning is completely imbued by our faith and the depth of our Catholic traditions. When I think of the excitement of the call "Come one, come all to the greatest show on earth" I think of my years in ministry and know deep in my heart that whenever we sincerely invite the Holy Spirit into a process, we can't help but to expect to be amazed and surprised. Without trivializing the work involved, the grand idealist in me wants to believe that in parishes around the diocese, we can throw out such an invitation with excitement and with prayer, and fully expect something incredible to emerge.