

Community, Compassion and Hope

By Jim Newman O.N., Christ's Church Cathedral

In tough times, people are drawn to churches. “People are looking for community, compassion and hope”, says Dr. Kennon Callahan, Presbyterian pastor, researcher, professor, and church consultant. The author of 15 books, Callahan also observes that “people are motivated by a theology of service, not a theology of survival.” His fundamental message is therefore: be a place of compassion, community and hope; and focus on mission and service. Though many of us might describe our parishes in these terms, too many parishes are static or declining, so clearly our message isn't getting through, at least not to the outside where it matters. And with conditions expected to get tougher, we can't sit idly by waiting for the economy to recover. This is no time for a theology of survival.

Learning from the experts

Have you noticed that hospitals and universities have their own messages of compassion, community and hope, and they're especially aware of their mission and service? They promote, inspire, and advance their causes continually. They project enthusiasm and excellence in their public campaigns. The results are evident. They are highly respected and their fundraising thrives. Hardly a week goes by without a major gift of a million dollars or much more to McMaster, the University of Toronto, The Hospital for Sick Children, or some other educational or health care institution. They may or may not know about Callahan, but they utilize a Callahan-like approach supported by expertise in public relations, marketing, and advocacy.

Our biggest need is Advocacy

There's a role for public relations in every parish – “this is who we are, and what we do” web sites, ads, signs, posters, flyers, and it's where your published parish story and narrative budget pay off big time. And there's a big role for marketing in every parish too: “how can we change (change?) to be aligned better with what people want and need.”

But we must go further. Our biggest need is advocacy. Parish advocates enhance awareness, appreciation and support through relationships and partnerships in their communities. Some advocates tell stories, such as their own early childhood memories that encourage new families to get involved. Others create displays of parish history along side posters of current outreach ministries to confirm and promote parish identity. Advocates respect the views and priorities of others. They give generously and are positive about the future. In all things they model the vision of their parish as strong, viable, and valuable. They are willing and able to make a difference; and they take our message of mission and service to the community and the world.

There are barriers to advocacy, of course. Some will say – that's someone else's job; or it shouldn't be necessary. Others will think it's too commercial, too flashy, and just not acceptable for a church. And we're much too busy, too powerless, and unskilled. But none of these statements is accurate.

Advocacy is the responsibility of all leaders, and by definition, all of us. Every one of us can learn to be a better advocate, and every parish in Niagara can be a place of community, compassion and hope.