

Parish Communication: Reaching the Marketplace

Matteo Ricci, a 16th-century Jesuit missionary in China, became a top official at the court of the emperor.

St. Paul preached in the midst of the Greek markets.

Jesus taught using familiar stories about farmers, wedding parties and brutal muggings on the road to Jericho.

All these figures knew something about communication. All were unafraid to use popular culture and concepts to spread the Gospel.

It's something to keep in mind when we long for more simple times. Now, with so many technological marvels at our fingertips, communication seems to be relegated to the scary world inhabited by 14-year-old computer geeks (not a disparaging term anymore).

But the more things change, in many ways the more things remain the same in the world of parish communication.

Looking for rules? The frightening thing is, and the liberating aspect as well, is that there are few hard and fast rules anymore and, if some still linger, one can bet that a 14-year-old is working on a new innovation that will render them obsolete.

Still, there are approaches that work, some seemingly quaint and old-fashioned.

For example: your parish likely offers a printed bulletin each week. It's handed out to your prime audience, regular churchgoers. It remains a highly effective vehicle for getting the word out on parish events.

Better yet, nothing works better than old-fashioned word-of-mouth testimonials. Want to get a crowd to a parish meeting? One of the most effective ways is to have people talk their friends. Best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell notes how effective small groups are in creating action.

You likely continue to have that old depository for dead trees, the local newspaper. Your parish is probably one of the largest voluntary organizations in your town, if not the largest. Community newspapers are interested in what you have to offer. Establish regular contact with the person who puts together the newspaper's calendar of events and, if they have one, a reporter who covers the church beat. Good communication develops out of good relationships.

The diocesan newspaper, the Star Herald, is the largest circulation weekly in South Jersey, reaching 67,000 homes. If your parish has an event that might have wide community interest, contact Carl Peters. The best way to reach him is via email at cpeters@camdendiocese.org.

If you are reading this online, you are already familiar with electronic communication.

There are many technological tools to help you. If your parish has a website, learn to keep it updated (a good example of a parish website can be found at stanthonycamden.org). But you don't want to confine your news to your parish website. The diocese has a website (camdendiocese.org) which is a vehicle to spread news (items can be sent to mdantonio@camdendiocese.org).

Maria D'Antonio of the diocesan communications office welcomes updates to parish information. Check your parish on the diocesan website, and see if names, Mass times and other items are updated.

Facebook is another vehicle to get the word out about your parish. It combines all sorts of elements of electronic communication, including opportunity for instant feedback. Find some friends for your parish on Facebook. It's a good way to reach a new generation who demand communication that is not simply one-way. Expect to have some good discussion, which can even become feisty if you begin to make an impact. A good example of outreach using Facebook can be found through our diocesan outreach to young adults at camdendiocese.org.

More news is good news, at least most of the time. Almost all parish communication is intended to spread the word about events that we want the world to know about. Sometimes, however, reporters call seeking information about difficult parish situations, such as a school closing or legal action. Whenever your parish faces a crisis communication situation, it's best to let that hot potato pass to the diocesan communications office.

The communications office is always ready to assist parishes. Peter Feuerherd, the diocesan director, can be reached at 856-583-2851 or at Peter.Feuerherd@camdendiocese.org.

Otherwise, feel free to venture forth in new ways to communicate the gospel message. Even if the rules of the road continue to change, you will be traveling in some elite company.