

**Robert E. Mayer**  
**WRITING A PARISH**  
**MISSION STATEMENT**

Parishes in renewal often begin or end the process by drafting a parish mission statement. It is usually composed after a good deal of prayerful study, time, and effort by the parish council or pastoral staff, sometimes after taking a survey of parish needs.

In trying to come up with a parish mission statement, our pastoral staff began by reviewing the mission statements of other parishes, as models. In general, we found them theologically precise, reflective of the documents of Vatican II, tersely written, often well-perpered with sophisticated theological idioms ("mystical union," "mystagogia," "eschatological fulfillment), meant to be enshrined on some plaque or memorial.

In helping to formulate mission statements in three previous parish assignments, I have attempted to discern how mission statements affect parish life. With rare exceptions, I have discovered that the effect is minimal, if any.  
Why?

**Whose Statement Is It?**

In the first place, the term "parish mission statement" is often a misnomer; it is not a statement of the parish at all. Even if a survey of parish needs has been taken, the parish as a whole is seldom involved in the actual composition of its own mission statement.

Usually the statement is composed by the parish staff, parish council, or pastor (admittedly, all more biblically and theologically sophisticated than the average parishioner), then shown to the parish. Parishioners may read it in the bulletin, see it on the bulletin board, or notice it as the logo on parish stationery, but it is not theirs. Without owning the statement, the parish is not energized to act on it.

**A Statement or a Declaration?**

Second, parish mission statements often end up being exactly what they claim to be, statements, neat and accurate theological analyses of a local church rather than rallying declarations of missionary ambitions. Or they are tidy descriptions of parish goals, rather than calls to action. Not in itself a bad thing. But language is very important when you are on a mission; you should use language that rallies the troops. The mission statement is supposed to arouse the imagination and fervor of the parish. It is supposed to offer a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction. It is supposed to empower by its imagery. It is supposed to give a parish a sense of identity. Statements written in near paralegal style, however, neat and compact to a fault, do not empower. Notice the difference between concluding that "exercise is important to good health" and coaxing a friend with "Let's go work out!" I find the word "statement" cold and not particularly moving. Perhaps the word "proclamation" or "declaration" would be more appropriate.

**Does It Need a Translator?**

Third, while it is good to be biblically centered, theologically accurate, and reflective of Vatican II the average parishioner does not always live within such a context. "To be the mystical body in time"; "to live the Gospel"; "to put on Christ" are idioms of time honored Christian ambitions, but do they speak forcefully to the Sunday morning crowds who make up the parish? The statement should reflect the terms people in the parish use to describe themselves and their purpose.

**How Is It Used?**

Fourth, the parish mission statement is rarely referred to again, rarely renewed. Part of that is because there is usually a sigh of relief when the staff or parish council has finally fashioned the parish mission statement. Typically, it has been rewritten several

times, made concise and precise, and approved by the pastor once a consensus is formed. Sometimes more time and energy is spent on preparing the statement than in working on the parish programs that would make its goals come true. Consequently, there is a feeling of finality once the statement is written. As it is promulgated to the parish in the bulletin, the writers can finally sit back, another job well done. It looks good enough to be framed, often it is, mentally or literally. Such framing, however, can lock the statement out of the flow of parish life. It lies dormant.

It is not used to set the priorities of staff meeting agendas. It does not become a theme for liturgical preparation. It does not provide topics for a sermon series. It does not enter the dynamics of the school and CCD. It is not used to judge the success or failure of parish ventures. It does not become the cutting edge in determining the quality of parish Leadership.

**When To Write It?**

Timing is important for making up the mission statement. I suggest it is best done at the beginning of the new school year, September, or at the beginning of the calendar year, January, when people think seriously about personal resolutions.

**Ask the Parishioners**

If a parish mission statement is to fulfill its purpose, it must be taken seriously and used effectively. It must be the parish's own statement of its mission. Hence, as many parishioners as possible should participate in its creation. They should be asked how they see the parish and in what direction they would like it to develop. Parishioners can be prepared for this in part by solid catechizing from the pulpit. Ultimately, however, the parish must be

Challenged to take a good Christian look at itself and what it means to be “parish” in this day and age and place.

The process can begin with a short series of Sunday sermons on what it means, in terms of Vatican II teachings, to be a Catholic today; what baptism empowers and obligated us to be; what it means to be a member of a parish community called both to worship and be of service to all God’s people. Printed questions on ballot like bulletin inserts can be answered by parishioners and returned.

What is the most important belief to you as a Christian today?

What do you think should be our parish’s top priority for the coming year? What should parishioners expect from each other? What should the parish expect from each parishioners?

What should our parish be able to offer the larger community, society itself?

In this way the congregation becomes involved in self understanding and goal-setting. As it owns the process, it will likely feel some sense of obligation to help fulfill those goals.

When the responses are gathered the pastoral staff and/or parish council reviews them and publishes a synthesized majority viewpoint as the mission statement. All parish organizations and committees are then requested to do their part in helping to fulfill the mission for the year.

### **An Annual Event?**

It is surprising to discover how similarly parishioners think about the parish and its objectives. Their responses also provide clues about deficiencies in parish preaching and catechesis. As statements change year by year, overall parish self-consciousness may be raised to higher and higher levels. I think it is important that a new or revised statement be written annually and in a consistent way. After a few years of the process, parishioners begin to see that they are taken seriously, that the parish is developing, that its goals and direction give impetus to parish programs, and that there are norms for judging a parish’s health as a Christian community.

### **Consider:**

We are brothers and sisters in the Lord and have discovered that we are unknown to and even alienated from each other and we therefore pledge ourselves to become a friendlier and more hospitable community this coming year.

This declaration may not be suitable for framing, but it clearly reflects where parishioners actually see themselves at a given moment in their history, and in what direction they would like to go. The tangible results of their efforts toward these goals could readily be seen in weekend liturgies and organizational meetings. If only one mission resolution each year is fulfilled, still, a remarkable development in the parish could occur once a decade.

Finally, to keep the mission statement alive and active, it must be referred to again and again. Its phrases can be part of prayers that begin meetings and included in the general intercessions at weekend liturgies. It should be used as a frame of reference for parish and liturgy planning. All parish organizations should take their cue from the mission statement as part of the planning of their objectives. Evaluations should be made with some regularity over the course of the year, by staff and parish council, as to how the mission is being accomplished. At year’s end, an evaluation should be made public before a new mission statement is planned.

The American Declaration of Independence certainly set a lot of wheels in motion. Similarly, though on a smaller scale, the mission statement is to energize the parish community according to its own agreed-upon objectives.

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