DISCIPLESHIP METRICS THAT MATTER

9 Measurements
That Will Increase
Your Parish's
Retention Factor

⫽P⫽ Pushpay

Let's face it: Metrics matter... even in ministry.

The shepherd doesn't say, "I have around 100 sheep." He knows he has exactly 100, and that is why he goes looking for the lost sheep when he only counts 99. Numbers matter because they represent lives.

Yet most people didn't get into parish ministry to look at spreadsheets or to become data analytics experts. Generally, a life change or conversion of the heart is the motivation. It's about seeing people become authentic followers of Jesus, not about beating the numbers from last year's event or those of the parish down the street.

Numbers aren't all bad, though. As the attendance and budgets of the average parish evolve, so has the need to understand, use, and measure metrics against your parish goals. Properly understood and utilized, numbers can help you in numerous ways: effective planning, decision-making, prioritizing, determining, and choosing.

Becoming proficient with metrics isn't easy for most ministry-minded folks. It can feel like a maddening shell game—no matter which number you choose, the meaning can be elusive.

Numbers, once properly measured and understood, can provide you with the kind of accurate information that will help your parish become more efficient and effective. Then you'll have more time to focus on people—thereby helping you build the authentic community of believers you've always desired.

9 Ways to Measure Retention

There are nine different dimensions to discipleship metrics that—when properly measured and tracked—offer you valuable intelligence about the health and vitality of your parish's community building efforts. If you've never tracked these before, you'll see why data is a valuable tool in making strategic decisions for your parish.

1

Attendance

Tracking attendance might seem like a no-brainer, but there are many parishes that don't regularly track attendance of any kind on a regular basis—Mass, worship services, small groups, faith formation, or events.

An accurate understanding of attendance data gives an overview of what's going on in each ministry. It's a 30,000-foot view. It's the pulse-reading of your parish, telling you how many people are involved, how often they attend, which ministries are growing, and which are in decline.

Tracking overall attendance isn't enough to grow community. However, without personal connections, many people will eventually stop attending your parish, and you will only have the change in numbers to tell you about it. That's because in larger parishes—say, 250 people or more—it's easy for individuals to get lost in the crowd. They can attend and then disappear without anyone else knowing about their daily lives. That's why raw numbers don't help you grow community. The unconnected people will disappear, become mere turnover stats—and you won't know why.

Since attendance numbers alone will not tell you why people come and go, you need to look at the other dimensions of your discipleship metrics to get a clearer picture of retention and turnover.
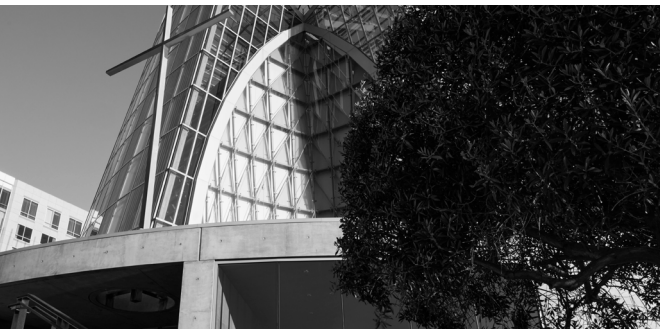
Compelling Question:

What can your parish leaders learn through analyzing the attendance patterns at your parish?

Tip:

Pushpay's [Church Management Software (ChMS)](#) allows parish administrators to regularly generate an Attendance Overview Report for insight into attendance trends across all groupings for a specific week or month.

2

Volunteers

This is where raw numbers turn into names and faces—real people who are connected and connecting to others.

In a parish community, it's the volunteers who are on the front line. They are the parking attendants, the greeters, the ushers, the nursery caretakers, and the children's teachers. Their roles are vital. Many of these people will eventually make their way toward evangelization-centered ministries—taking a direct role in expanding your parish's impact. Therefore, tracking their involvement and how well they serve will reveal a lot about the retention rate of your parish.

The involvement patterns of this group tell a story. When a volunteer drops out, it is a yellow caution flag. It might be a sign of a behavioral change or a personal issue. When visitors rarely become regular attendees or parishioners, it might be a sign that your front line is lacking in friendliness.

By tracking and ministering to its volunteers, a parish can reduce unnecessary turnover. Regular contact with this group will avert crises, and sudden changes can be quickly handled.

However, without a way to track individuals, the issues they are facing might never be addressed.

Compelling Question:

What are the prerequisite steps for someone to be a volunteer?

Tip:

Nurture discipleship paths in our ChMS *with Process Queues that help parishes keep track of parishioners through the volunteer vetting process, and, through automations, guide them to sacraments and positions in liturgical or catechetical ministry.*

3

Missional Participation

There are two primary ways people get involved in a parish—service projects and ongoing ministries.

Service projects are event-driven. This would include a service day at a local homeless shelter or nursing home. People might work in short-term disaster relief or participate in a work day at church or other community service organization.

Ongoing ministries happen week after week, requiring a deeper commitment. We often think about faith formation for children and youth, small group leadership, liturgical ministers, and so forth. These people are key players in executing the weekly events of a parish.

From a retention perspective, you'll want to know who is involved and at what level. Through data management, you can track individual records and watch for sudden changes in participation. This will help you see if people are sticking to their commitments or if they are hesitant to commit at all.

People who are involved in service projects are more likely to serve in an ongoing ministry, if given the opportunity. By tracking participation, you can determine individual interest level and invite people to participate in a ministry that matches these interests and abilities, as indicated by their individual track record.

Compelling Question:

What is your strategy for moving people from marginal to missional engagement?

4

Online Activity

Tracking your parish's digital presence offers great insights into engagement. This can be a tough change for some leaders because they remember a day when parishes didn't have websites and dynamic online content. Today, however, parishes are using technology to create opportunities for people to worship, give, and study. Most people use and appreciate online resources and the access to the information it affords.

The availability of analytics for your website makes it easy to know what the people in your parish community are viewing and what they are missing (or ignoring!). If you don't know what people are doing online, you can't adequately plan your online presence. If you have web pages people aren't visiting, you need to know why. Are you answering questions no one is asking? Or do you need to find a way to make important information a priority to your community? Are people updating their online profiles and regularly returning to the member portal? For today's digital generation, this is the same as involvement.

As for potential visitors, your website is often their first interaction with your community. If visitors find your online community difficult to navigate, they may choose to not visit your church in person. Your website should be as welcoming as your physical building.

Think of your online presence like an onion. It must be layered so people encounter the most important messages or ministries first. The secondary messages require peeling into a deeper layer through a click.

By monitoring online activity and providing a friendly online gathering space, you can gain valuable information about your retention efforts.

Compelling Question:

How would you rate the effectiveness of your online presence?
What can you do to improve?

Tip:

The Usage Stats report in Pushpay's ChMS shows who has logged in to your online community in a given month, and also shows the total and average number of logins in your site. If engagement is low, consider promoting participation in a fun and inviting way—like offering a technology bar after each Mass for people to sit, drink a cup of coffee, and complete their profile on an iPad.

5

Financial Giving

People who are growing in their relationship with God are likely to support your parish financially. Though the analysis of financial data is a touchy subject, there are some valuable trends that can be identified by taking a look at the frequency and consistency of an individual's giving pattern.

When someone gives regularly (weekly, twice a month, monthly), you can conclude that he or she is engaged in the mission of the Church, at least to the point of offering financial support. When people stop giving, it often represents some degree of attitudinal change. This is when a close look at the individual and the timing of the change in their giving habits will be beneficial.

Did someone stop giving to your parish when a new initiative was introduced or a longtime staff member was replaced? Was there a homily that contained a controversial message? When someone gets upset, often the first reaction is seen in their giving. But it doesn't typically stop there—after they stop giving, they will discontinue serving, then participating, and eventually attending.

You can help create a culture of givers by thanking them for their faithful stewardship. People want to know their contributions are making a difference. This helps people feel appreciated and encourages them to stick with it, even during difficult economic times.

There is, however, a danger in focusing too much on giving. How do you know if this is happening in your parish? It's simple: Giving and money will be at the center of almost every discussion. There will be clever ways to persuade people to give. The pastor will address the issue on a regular basis. The list goes on and on. But hounding people doesn't turn them into faithful stewards!

The answer to the giving problem in most parishes is discipleship. People can't be expected to out-give their level of spiritual maturity. When people are in a vibrant relationship with God, they will want to give and serve. This is evidence people believe in a parish's mission and will continue to support it. Don't fall into the trap of begging people to do what they should do naturally.

Compelling Question:

What are the demographic and psychographic profiles of your most committed givers?

Consider sending out an email every quarter encouraging your parishioners to view their giving history and access their giving statements. History has shown that a reminder once per quarter actually keeps givers from procrastinating until tax season.

6

Event Outcomes

Many parishes are event-driven. They have a women's event in the spring, events for kids and students in the summer, and a men's event in the fall. They can't explain why, and they measure engagement only by attendance. They've never considered what the outcomes should be and what those outcomes teach about retention.

Events should work in tandem with the vision of your parish. If the two don't sync up, scratch the event. It's a waste of valuable resources to carry out an event simply because you've always done it.

When planning an event, take some time to project the anticipated outcomes. How many people do you expect to attend? What is the makeup of the expected audience? What are the anticipated results of the event? How does this event move people toward deeper engagement?

Once you've done the planning, then you're ready to track the outcome. You can learn a lot if you track participation by individuals. In other words, encourage people to register for the event and then check-in when arriving.
What does event participation tell you? First of all, it shows who is interested. Second, it reveals the perceived value of the event. Third, it communicates to you the viability of subsequent events.

Unfortunately, event-driven parishes often see the events as ends in themselves. The event is the purpose. Therefore, getting a lot of people in the room is paramount. They'll blitz social media with attendance updates, but they haven't clarified why they are having the event and how it connects with their vision. Connect your events to retention through data analysis and you'll begin having events that encourage participation, enhance retention, and carry out the vision.

Compelling Question:

What were the anticipated outcomes of your most recent events?
How can you make sure you measure meaningful results in the future?

Tip:

Using a Form for event registrations allows you to gather demographic and attitudinal information about the attendees. Additionally, a post-event survey can help you determine the event's success against its vision and goals. In ParishStaq, *Forms can easily be matched to individuals and recorded in a profile.*

7

Assimilation

Assimilation is a way to measure how well we keep up with faces and names. This is the test of familiarity. Typically, new people are directed to a registration form and they'll contact the parish office when necessary.

What happens next? Is it possible for people to fall through the cracks and drop out of sight? Absolutely. If you don't have a church management software that allows you to track people throughout their journey in your parish, you will find it impossible to keep up with everyone.

By analyzing assimilation, you'll be able to discover the differences between the behaviors of members and attendees. This is important because the behaviors of members establish the culture of your community. Tracking assimilation allows you to differentiate between occasional attendees and those who are being retained.

Without an awareness of assimilation, you will struggle to accurately determine the retention rate of your parish and its ministries.
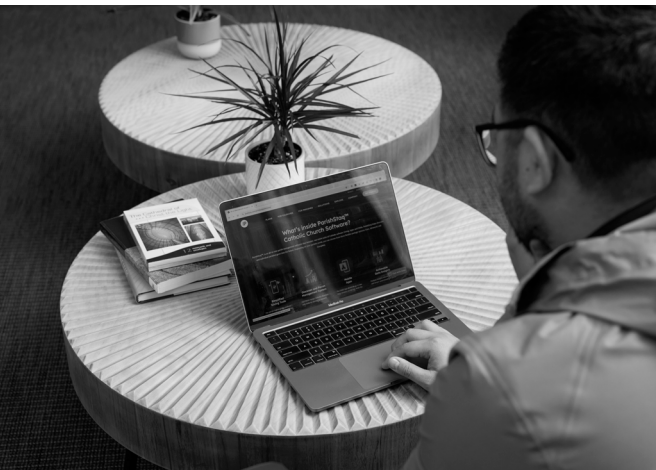
Compelling Question:

Why is it important for you to know the people in your parish?

Tip:

Pushpay's [ChMS](#) allows leaders to create an assimilation Process Queue that moves first-time visitors through different phases of assimilation and retention. Tracking the percentage of people that move through the process can help reveal the effectiveness of your parish's engagement strategy.

8

Growth

How do you measure spiritual growth? And how do you identify the places and ministries in which spiritual growth is likely? Answering those questions may seem a bit elusive. It can be measured—but not by numbers, attendance, or some mathematical matrix. People need to be known. When they are, you can ascertain their propensity toward obeying what they know God has said. The pace of movement toward obedience is the number one indicator of spiritual growth. Knowing people personally is the only way to know if they are on pace for a life of obedience.

Many parishes today substitute participation for spiritual growth. They point to the number of groups they have and the number of people in groups as a sign of spiritual health. That's not an accurate measure.

Real spiritual growth results in life change. You want to know, for each individual, how they move from uninvolved to involved, from non-givers to givers, from watching to serving. This is the evidence of spiritual growth and results in higher retention because people are engaged in their relationship with Jesus, in their own hearts and in the lives of others.

Real spiritual growth is a long-term journey. It is a lifelong pursuit and involves both internal and external elements. Growth is a process and, in particular, spiritual growth is a customized process.

Understanding that spiritual growth is unique to the individual, you can give freedom to an individual to take responsibility in a particular area. Then you can simply focus on how to best provide a context and an environment in which spiritual growth can happen.

Compelling Question:

Where do you see life change or conversion taking place in your parish?
What are you doing to capture those stories and expand those ministries?

Tip:

In [ParishStaq](#) by Pushpay, parishes can set up significant events, such as sacraments, within an individual's profile to keep track of those events which are important for participation and spiritual growth. Administrators have the ability to update profiles so that when a report is needed, the data is accurate and extensive.

9

Attrition

Attrition is the opposite of retention. If you know how many people you are retaining, you can determine the attrition rate.

When people leave a parish, some may not want to know the reasons. Finding out and tracking why people have left can help you adjust and create a better future. Sometimes you have to measure failures to discover new opportunities. Don't speculate about a person's reason for leaving. You need to talk to people and analyze the data you collect. In the process, you might discover a huge hole in your staff or an area of ministry that isn't effective. If you hear a reason once, take note. Twice, investigate. A third time, change. When you talk to those who've left, try to gain a clear picture of what happened. Learning is sometimes tough but it will bring great results as you adapt where you can to meet the ever-changing needs of your parish community.

When done properly, the analysis of the attrition in your parish can lead to new ministry opportunities that might otherwise never have been considered.

Compelling Question:

How can my parish use data to connect with people and build community?

Tip:

Create reports regularly to find people who haven't been to Mass (or small groups) in a while. Give them a call, send them an email, or write a little note to find out if they're okay. In Pushpay's ChMS, you can create a custom field within their online profile that captures why they left, and you can build a custom report to analyze and glean trends from that specific field. Our LEAD App also allows parishes to work closely with group or ministry leaders to do this so that you aren't left with all the responsibility.

Conclusion

Parishes that are doing amazing work in their communities and connecting with people in advanced ways are not content with just knowing how many people show up to Mass every week. They truly care about who those people are, why they showed up, whether they will come back, and what works best in terms of getting them more deeply engaged. These parishes are also thinking critically about how they can better measure, monitor, and manage the process of moving their people and ministries to the place they believe God is leading.

The questions these leaders ask of themselves are tough, but the answers lead them to a whole new level of growth and impact. They understand community matters in the discipleship and growth equation. Retention is a numbers game—and one you don't want to lose. It isn't about keeping people from leaving by external means or manipulation. It's about engaging people in the community to create meaningful relationships and to ensure people stay.

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Insights, and Apps for parishes and dioceses.

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