

Parish Planning for Pastoral Accompaniment

4 Conversations

Introduction

An “accompanying parish” is one in which the pastor and pastoral team intentionally portray a particular attitude and posture toward all members of the parish, both the active as well as the less active.

- The attitude is one of understanding that not everyone is perfect. Perhaps no one is perfect. People often struggle to follow the norms and policies of the church or of a given parish. In an accompanying parish, the leaders recognize that people can only respond as they are able to. They gradually grow toward the norms of the parish.
- The posture is, therefore, one of acceptance, love, and patience.

To decide to become an accompanying parish is a decision to have reverence for each person’s journey and, while clearly announcing the norms of church law, to allow each person to meet those norms gradually as they are able. In such a parish, as Pope Francis teaches, every effort is made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience formed by serious discernment, led by the pastor and pastoral team (*The Joy of Love*, 303).

Accompaniment is not a practice that can be applied successfully on a piecemeal basis in a parish. If two members of the parish team are enthusiastic about a Christ-centered approach to discernment and formation but two others want to either be church-law-centered (and thereby enforce the rules literally) or be individual-centered (and adopt an “anything goes” approach), a pastoral and muddy mess results.

Pope Francis is asking the parishes of the church to learn the art of accompaniment, and the parish team—whether paid or unpaid—must come together to embrace accompaniment as a pastoral strategy. Accompaniment must become the “theme song” of parish life.

- The tone of everything that is said in public within the parish, from the homilies to the announcements to the structure of programs, must reflect it.
- A parish, in other words, must decide to become an “accompanying parish.”

Accompaniment is not accidental in a parish. To succeed as an accompanying parish requires the pastor and parish team to sit down together and do some planning. In many parishes today, this will mean very little change. The pastoral team already has learned how to accompany folks on their journeys of faith. Patience and watchful love are already the stock and trade of everything from the sacrament of reconciliation to faith-formation programs. Everyone is welcomed to come in “just as they are” but also encouraged to grow in faith.

This planning process is designed to occur in four separate meetings but you could also cover all the material in a single, day or day and a half retreat. Here are the four conversations:

Conversation One

Accompaniment Defined

Begin in prayer with articles 1-4 of chapter one

View and discuss PowerPoint #1

Return to the text and read/discuss your way through the first Conversation

Conversation Two

Conscience Explained

Begin in prayer with articles 1-4 of chapter two

View and discuss PowerPoint #2

Return to the text and read/discuss your way through the second Conversation

Conversation Three

Discernment Understood

Begin in prayer with articles 1-4 of chapter three

View and discuss PowerPoint #3

Return to the text and read/discuss your way through the third Conversation

Conversation Four

Pastoral Planning Described

Begin in prayer with articles 1-4 of chapter four

View and discuss PowerPoint #4

Return to the text and read/discuss your way through the fourth Conversation

Accompaniment Defined

Becoming the
kind of parish
the church
needs today



The Art of Accompaniment

- What is pastoral accompaniment...
- ...and why does Pope Francis keep talking about it?

God is still speaking

- We begin with this tremendous and amazing reality
- God speaks through Scripture
- And also through:
 - Meditation on the Lord's Cross
 - The gifts of the Holy Spirit
 - The witness & advice of others
 - The ministry of the church

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God is still speaking

- And also through:
 - Nature and beauty
 - Music and art
 - In the quiet of our hearts
 - In the embrace of a loved one
 - At times we do not expect it
 - And at times when we wait for it...

4

God is still speaking

But sometimes we need help
to hear God's voice.

That's where an accompanist
steps in.

5

Grace

- God's voice
 - Echoing in our hearts
 - Guiding and forming us
 - Giving us courage and loving power
 - Leading us to be...
 - the persons we are created to be
 - forgiving, loving, and generous
- Is God giving us God's own very SELF

6

Definition

Accompaniment is

- “help given by one Christian to another
- which enables that person
- to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her...”
- This voice of God that shapes & summons us is what we call grace

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Definition

Accompaniment helps us

- “to respond to this personally communicating God,
- and to live out of the consequence of the relationship.”

William Barry SJ and William Connolly SJ
The Practice of Spiritual Direction
San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009

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Consequence

- What is the consequence of listening to God in this way?
- We become oriented toward the Lord
- We turn our hearts to Christ
- We come to realize (slowly at first)
 - That we are absolutely forgiven
 - That we are loved
 - And that God directs our lives

9

An accompanist

- Guides another along this pathway to hear God clearly
- In the depths of his or her conscience
- But how?

10

To clarify

- We walk with each other day in and day out
 - Families, friends, co-workers, neighbors
- But merely “hanging out together”
- Or meeting for happy hour
- Or even going out for lunch
- Isn't necessarily Christian accompaniment

11

To clarify

- What makes it into Christian accompaniment
 - Is when we transform our daily chatter
 - Into an intentional desire to lead others closer to the heart of the Lord
- Key word: intentional
 - We intend to lead others to Christ

12

Parents and kids

- Parents accompany their children
- Often later in their lives, children accompany their parents
- Or other family members
 - We watch out for each other
 - Very informal method
 - Listening and seeing with our inner eyes and ears

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Spouses

- One spouse accompanies the other
- And vice versa
 - Through thick and thin
 - Paying close attention to each other
 - Walking together no matter what
 - Dying to self over and over again
 - Gently telling the truth
 - And openly hearing it from each other

14

Friends or neighbors

- Friends accompany friends
- Neighbors accompany neighbors
- And others
 - Colleagues
 - School mates
 - Even strangers while traveling
 - Or in hospital
 - Or during war, immigration, or flight from famine and suffering as refugees

15

Spiritual direction

- Spiritual direction is a form of accompaniment
- One in which two parties form an agreement to walk together within a structured set of conversations
- We aren't talking here about spiritual direction as such

16

Pastoral accompaniment

- Parish level pastoral accompaniment
- Our main concern in this workshop
- What is it?

17

In a nutshell:

Pastoral accompaniment

is

a pastoral strategy aimed at helping parishioners form their consciences well, live by them, and celebrate the consolation of good discernment

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Conversation 1

1. Accompaniment Defined

Becoming the kind of parish the church needs today

2. The Art of Accompaniment

With this first slide it is important to let your audience know the topic of this presentation, which is a general description and definition of pastoral accompaniment as envisioned by Pope Francis. The practice of accompaniment is an ancient one in the church. From the first centuries onward, Christians accompanied each other on the pathway of faith. From this practice emerged the role of the sponsor for the catechuminate (RCIA), baptism, and confirmation. Sponsors are, in fact, accompanists and the movement today to restore them to a more meaningful role in the life of the one receiving the sacraments reflects that.

So today as Pope Francis calls on us to learn this art and practice it in our parishes, we understand the on-going nature of growing in faith. Accompanists walk with and guide other Christians after baptism and confirmation, throughout their lives, as the need arises.

3. God is still speaking

Scripture

Pope John XXIII said that, of course, we believe that the words of Scripture do not change. We believe that they contain what God is revealing to us. But while Scripture itself does not change, what it demands of us changes in every generation. Our task is to peer into the texts and ask what God calls us to be and do in today's world and church.

The Lord's Cross

When we speak of meditating on the Lord's Cross, we return to the central and ancient kernel of faith, the Paschal Mystery. We are called to practice the art of self-giving love, to learn to die to ourselves out of love for others. We are called, in the words of Scripture, to carry our own crosses. But what does this mean practically for us? Here is where an accompanist can help us understand the deep meaning of this Cross in our own daily lives.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1831) lists the seven gifts as follows:

- **Wisdom:** It is the capacity to love spiritual things alongside material ones and to see them all as holy.

- **Understanding:** This gift teaches us how to live as followers of Christ. A person with understanding is not confused by the conflicting messages in our culture about the right way to live.
- **Counsel (right judgment):** With the gift of counsel/right judgment, we know the difference between right and wrong, and we choose to do what is right. A person with right judgment avoids sin and lives out the values taught by Jesus Christ.
- **Fortitude (courage):** With the gift of fortitude/courage, we overcome fear and take risks as a follower of Jesus Christ. A person with courage is willing to stand up for what is right in the sight of God, even if it means accepting rejection, verbal abuse, or physical harm.
- **Knowledge:** With the gift of knowledge, we understand the presence of God. With this gift we *know* that light is stronger than darkness; that love overcomes hate; and that fear is driven out by love.
- **Piety (reverence):** With the gift of piety/reverence, we have a deep desire to connect with God and turn our hearts to Christ.
- **Fear of the Lord (wonder and awe):** With the gift of fear of the Lord/wonder and awe, we are aware of the tremendous power of God's love. We honor God because of God's endless forgiveness and love for us, which brings a sense of awe into our hearts. Such awe is the beginning of wisdom.

The advice of others and the ministry of the Church

These go hand in hand and comprise the heart of accompaniment.

4. God is still speaking

Invite participants to say how each of these occurs in their own experience of hearing God speak. Take plenty of time for this discussion. Understanding how God speaks to us is the basis of all accompaniment. Our goal is to help others hear the voice of God and follow it, which is something we rarely do alone.

5. God is still speaking

As we said on the last slide, hearing God's voice can sometimes be difficult. In the din of modern noise and advertising, news and media, we can often lose track of which voice is of God. By sharing and discerning with others to guide and walk with us, we can more clearly hear what God calls us to be and do.

6. Grace

From the Catechism (these are direct quotes)

The grace of Christ is the gratuitous [free] gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. It is the sanctifying or deifying grace received in Baptism. It is in us the source of the work of sanctification: [See the Gospel of John 4:14; 7:38-39]

From Scripture (as quoted in the CCC at this point in the text)

Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself. [See 2 Cor 5:17-18]

7. Definition

Grace is defined in the Catechism (as we just saw on the last slide) as God communicating or giving God's own self to us. Grace is like an energy or power that comes from God alone and through which we have the strength to do what needs to be done.

All accompaniment works only in the light of grace. The words and actions we take to accompany others are not of our own making. We open ourselves to the power or grace of God as it flows through us and in the life of the other. If we fail to cooperate with grace in this way, then we end up guiding others to what we think they should do, what we believe, and what we want. But this is not accompaniment. Accompaniment helps the other hear the voice of God echoing in his or her depths.

8. Definition

Once we hear God's voice echoing in the depth of our conscience, what response do we make to it? Here again is what an accompanist can help us. It takes courage to follow the pathway of God, courage and self-giving.

On the next slides we examine what we mean when we speak of the consequence of our intimate and graced relationship with God.

9. Consequence

From the book:

[26] And even more, the consequence of being given grace is that we begin to realize, ever so slowly at first, that God loves us. God has forgiven us even if we have not forgiven ourselves, even if other people or the church itself has failed to forgive us. This is where real faith is needed. Do you believe that God has forgiven you and still loves you, even as a sinner?

[27] "No one can be condemned forever," Pope Francis reminds us, "because that is not the logic of the Gospel!" (*The Joy of Love*, 297). "The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone forever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart" (homily at Mass celebrated with the new cardinals, 15 February, 2015).

10. An accompanist

11. To clarify

From the book:

[16] To accompany others is a sacred task but one that occurs in our daily lives very often. We walk with one another day in and day out. Parents with their children. Spouses with each other. Friends, colleagues, teachers, neighbors, and even strangers may appear in our lives as companions.

[17] This daily “walking with” becomes “accompaniment” only when we lead others ever closer to the heart of God. If all we do with others all day is “chatter,” then we are merely standing side by side without that all-important common, inner force that is the Spirit. Our task as accompanists is not to affirm everything in each other’s lives, but to invite each other to the freedom of God. This means that we invite each other to follow the pathway of love and joy that leads us, deeply and truly, to become the persons God creates us to be.

[18] Without this orientation toward the desire of God for us, we quickly become drifters in a world lacking meaning. We become spiritually homeless. Walking with each other without calling one another to the heart of God is counterproductive. It’s a sort of self-absorbed therapy, but it is not a pilgrimage to the Father (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 170).

12. To clarify

13. Parents and kids

For parents

- The light touch of guidance they offer can allow a child to also discover her or his own way by making their own mistakes
- But during illness, especially when the child is dying, this is very strong
- When parents intentionally help their kids see how Christ is present, how forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and love reflect the face of Christ, then they are truly accompanying their children

Likewise, later in life when the children accompany their parents to old age and death

- It truly becomes Christian accompaniment when they help their parents look back with gratitude and look forward with the hope of Christ

Likewise also with other family members

14. Spouses

Often spouses find it difficult to discuss their faith, or to ask each other about faith matters or questions

- But when they have the intention together of being forgiving,
- Or looking out for each other
- Of seeing life through the lens of love and light
 - Then they are accompanying each other
- This requires an openness
 - To be part of a parish
 - To donate and volunteer for the poor, the rejected, and all those whom Christ loves
 - And so forth
- Over time, faith talk emerges naturally and the couple lives more and more in loving, faith-oriented ways

15. Friends or neighbors

- Friends may not want to impose their faith on each other
 - But they may still call each other to generosity, love, forgiveness, and to have a heart for the poor
 - They may carefully watch out for each other
 - They take each other's part in difficult situations
 - They're there over the years, even when regular contact drops off for a while
 - We walk together through life
- Tell a short story about your experience of this or invite them from the group
- Neighbors likewise, especially if we live near each other a long time
- Tell a short story about your experience of this or invite them from the group

16. Spiritual direction

"Most people would agree that spiritual direction means companionship with another person or group through which the Holy One shines with wisdom, encouragement and discernment.

Some, however, expect this companionship to be of a **professional nature**, with a trained, supervised, and perhaps even certified spiritual director. Others see it as spontaneous and gifted, strongly resisting signs of professionalization.

Spiritual guidance can happen authentically in a vast variety of forms. The many forms can be divided into two major groups: **Formal spiritual direction** and **informal spiritual companionship [or accompaniment]**.

Formal spiritual direction includes relationships that are explicitly defined as spiritual direction with a clear separation of roles between spiritual director and spiritual directee. Meetings are usually scheduled in advance on a regular basis, and a spiritual directee normally has only one formal director. Informal spiritual companionship is characterized by a lack of structure and role definition. These relationships are not considered exclusive, and most people have several such companionships. Meetings tend to be irregular and spontaneous. There is nearly always some atmosphere of mutuality, and each person retains his or her own locus of discernment. There is no notion of providing a service, and fees are out of the question."

Gerald May, MD. Excerpted from *Shalem News*, Volume xxii, No. 1, Winter, 1998, "Varieties Of Spiritual Companionship"

17. Pastoral accompaniment

Having defined accompaniment as it occurs in daily life when parents, friends, and spouses intentionally offer each other guidance and insight into what God wants, we now turn to define accompaniment as a parish pastoral activity.

18. In a nutshell

With this point, we invite you as a group to pause and turn to the text in order to read & discuss chapter one. There are additional discussion questions within the chapter.