

# Red Ink and Blue Skies: Planning For Renewal While Managing Decline

## Tom Quinlan

It's the elephant in the room. We're managing decline.

Let me clarify. We're managing declining resources, in particular, budgets. This does not mean we are managing decline of the Church. Such a mindset would be anathema to *The Joy of the Gospel*, to say nothing of the Gospel itself! The New Evangelization, or simply, evangelization calls for the opposite of managing decline. The Church's mission to go and proclaim a saving message of Jesus' *Good News* is grounded in an unconquerable confidence that the Holy Spirit is surely hastening the onset of God's Reign.

That being said, finances are clearly in decline. And this can foster a debilitating "managing decline" culture in our operations. Does this sound familiar to you? Are you currently fighting this dynamic in your ministry setting? Or worse, have you perhaps succumbed to it on some level?

If we think the finances of our parishes are in bad shape now, just wait another five years. My sense is that things will be much worse: 3% trimmed here, 10% slashed there. Another lost position coming soon. No matter how well we begin to execute an inspired plan for renewal, a sustained trend-reversal in contributions will be slow to achieve. There is more bleeding to come.

This is a daunting prospect for me as I try, in my role, to manage not for decline but for renewal. I'm sure this is the case for each catechetical leader determined to participate in a fresh evangelization and sow seeds for a second Pentecost. Who among us has committed the best years of their lives and their fullest commitment to the Church to acquiesce to *decline management*, to leading as if the Church were in hospice?

In 15 years as a diocesan director, I've learned a few things about living in the tension of shrinking budgets versus growing need, passion for mission versus institutional impediments to mission fulfillment. Here are some brief thoughts:

- *Resist falling victim to psychic/spiritual paralysis.* We can do something each day, each hour, that furthers the agenda of mission. . . . no matter the circumstances. That helps me to shift the virtue of hope from theory into action. And joy crowds out my anxiety.

- *Pray.* This may seem painfully obvious, but leaders can fall into the trap of operating as though they are really in charge. Prayer opens us to that infinite sea of God’s love and wisdom that puts everything into its right context. Jesus sends us an “Advocate” who is with us always and only requires us to cooperate with grace, not create it.
- *Keep your focus on the big-picture.* Even if you are often overwhelmed with the operational minutia of administration, do not allow it define your ministry. Somehow we must remain fixated on the horizon, where we can see what evangelizing renewal looks like. And stubbornly, even prophetically, we must point to that horizon and invite others in. (I suggest our greatest resource deficit today is actually of imagination, not finances.)
- *Be open to...indeed, seek and embrace new ways of operating.* There are always possibilities for being more efficient (and effective) in ministry. One example for me has been the use of gifted consultants in the religious education office to take on targeted roles at a much-reduced cost than full-time staff. Another is applying subsidiarity where possible, such as in the empowerment of parish leaders to function well in deanery groupings, with engagement from my diocesan office but not a controlling paternalism. And technology offers great promise for increased operational efficiencies.
- *Show your business and finance people that you and your ministry are valuable. . . . and that you understand the fiscal realities of your parish.* In meeting these good folks on their terms you show them that you are reasonable and responsible. In essence, you are building up good will that you will be able to draw upon when there is something you must defend or advocate for. Mutuality must be the goal in the ministry-finance relationship.
- *Find ways to form your business/finance people in the vision of evangelization and renewal.* We should not be frustrated that they don’t naturally gravitate to our perspectives. Provide them articles and books that speak to the Church’s evangelizing vision. Invite their participation in formation experiences that will enhance their understanding of evangelization as the great hope for renewal and growth. (This could mean attending a diocesan offering, reading a book like *Forming Intentional Disciples* or *Divine Renovation*, or participating in a webinar right at their desk.) Tell of the ministry successes going on in the parish, the lives being transformed, and need for continued investment toward the Church’s bright future.

Over the years my intentional engagement with the finance office here in the diocese has yielded both warm relationships and a sense of trust. We are “in this together.” We

communicate honestly. Sometimes my advocacy has a challenging dimension. But I know that my finance colleagues understand that the mission of the Church must drive our fiscal decisions. . . . and not the other way around. (They have, in fact, engaged in formation about evangelization and renewal.) We together hold a shared vision that the only path out of our current vicious cycle and into a virtuous financial cycle requires staying focused on the Gospel, trusting in God's providence and prudently making strategic investments for renewal.

Are we in decline? Using any number of metrics, certainly. Should we be managing decline? Well, to some degree, this is our fate today. But we should do so with one eye squarely on renewal, and trusting when we pray. . . .

. . . . *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done. . . .*

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