

# September Initiative 2016: The Time for Outreach Continues to be...Now

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Well, there is good news and bad news. Our enrollment numbers for parish faith formation in the Diocese of Joliet were down just over 5% year over year in 2015-16. I rather suspect that other dioceses are experiencing one degree or another of erosion, too. But there is good news, too....like there are things we can do about it.

Below, you will pick up a message of mine to catechetical leaders in our diocese already-in-progress. I invite you to read on and consider the relevance of this effort for your parish or diocese. I'll rejoin you at the end for some closing thoughts....and to provide an exciting evangelizing practice that one of my parish leaders has already shared on this front!

....We have and will continue, as a catechetical leadership community, to explore the reasons for this trending downward. There are many factors in play here, some that we can control or affect, others that we cannot.

Recruitment and retention are words that often go together. In our ministry, I would assume that we all are committed to doing what we can to attract families into our formation programs and then keep them with us...so that families can grow in Catholic faith and practice during the grade school years (and hopefully beyond).

I would like to offer a practical and achievable action-step that each parish in our diocese can take right now to give attention to the recruitment end of the equation. Below is a simple template I've created. It provides you with wording you can draw upon to craft an outreaching and invitational message to families in your area...right now...through any number of means. (I've included reference to the diocese. Feel free to use it or modify it, as you deem best.)

## **Outreach and Invitation Message Template**

*The Roman Catholic Diocese of Joliet and your local parish (or parishes), ..., want(s) to invite you and your family to explore learning about the Gospel good news of Jesus and Catholic faith. Come be a part of our growing in faith together! Give xxx a call at xxx or email her at xxx. Regular religious education sessions for children start soon so be in contact now. All Catholic families are encouraged to connect with us. And a special message of welcome is extended to non-Catholic families interested in learning more about faith programming at our parish.*

I don't claim to be an expert at what ways you can communicate with families in your community or area. I invite you to imagine and explore what means are available to you and your parish. Community newspapers, local radio stations, social media and any number of literal and virtual community bulletin boards (grocery stores, libraries, hair salons, pediatricians' offices, etc.), and many other means could be explored.

*September should not be considered too late in any of our minds for attracting families into Catholic faith formation. Frankly, if it is then we have become far too institutional to suit Pope Francis or Jesus.*

Rather than lamenting and feeling helpless at the continuing decline most parishes are experiencing in terms of affiliation and practice of Catholic faith, let us, as a diocese try to take the initiative right now and use this September as a time of opportunity to reach out and invite Catholics and non-Catholics alike to experience the fine faith formation offered in our parishes. **Let's get the word out by broad means....and let's also ask our own families, already registered, to try to invite their friends to sign up for this new and wonderful year of learning about Jesus and Catholic faith.**

I have no doubt that each parish that engages in this September outreach will attract families that otherwise would not have registered. Collectively, we can bring hundreds, almost certainly thousands of children into formation for the rest of the year....by our actions now! And who knows how far the ripples will reach!

Please take up this invitation of mine to go out and find families in your area and bring them into your program, into the parish. This is at the very heart of the New Evangelization, right here and now! Not rocket science, not speculation and theory. Simply doing what Jesus did...going out and finding the lost and marginal and bringing them in, bringing them home. And then, of course, give them a great experience of what Catholic faith and Catholic community is all about!

Thanks so much for what you are already doing and going to do in this regard. Remember, you don't have to do *everything* to do *something*. I pray you all will do *something* on this outreach front. (And please enlist others to help. This important effort should not all be on you alone.)

So here is the wonderful evangelizing practice at Holy Ghost Parish in Wood Dale, IL, in CRE Kathy Grant's own words:

*We have sent out approximately 5000 flyers advertising our faith formation program to our community school districts. We requested permission from the superintendents and as long as the flyer has the disclaimer that it is not a school district sponsored activity, they graciously distribute the flyers to all students. Those with the capabilities, also post the flyer on their virtual backpacks. I believe this to be a worthwhile effort, as we generally get quite a few more inquiries, and our enrollment did increase in 2015/2016! Hoping to grow even more this year!*

In this intersection where parish faith formation crosses evangelization and outreach, what can you do in these weeks (through September and *beyond*) to bring families into the program...and hopefully, over time and most importantly....meaningfully into the Body of Christ?

God will bless your efforts!