

Culture shifts for fruitful parishes – Keynote talk by Ferdinand Degenfeld

Ferdinand is the Regional Lead for Western Europe (employed by Divine Renovation)

If we do not shift the culture in our parishes, nothing is going to change.

We are at the end of an era. Christendom is no more. But this is not *the* end.

We live in a post-Christendom world. Our methods, meant for another age, do not work anymore. Now we could argue that this is terrible – and to a certain extent, it is. We cannot keep doing what we have always done. However, I couldn't imagine a more fascinating time to be alive! Because the era that we are stepping into is a *new apostolic age*. It is an age that has more in common with the situation the early Church was facing, than anything we have known in the past ten centuries. We need to learn again what it means to go on mission.

So, this is good news: a new apostolic age is beginning. These are exciting times! We see similarities with the early church (30% annual growth for the first 200 years). There are huge opportunities to spread the Gospel.

Important: we need to learn anew to go on mission.

- The Great Commission at the end of the gospel according to Matthew: “Go and make disciples of all nations!”
- Evangelii Nuntiandi: “Evangelization is the deepest identity of the Church”

Divine Renovation wants to help parishes shift from maintenance to mission.

Why am I doing this?

Ferdinand's personal “why” has to do with the experience of walking past a closed church with a “for sale” sign. He says: “I am not a Christian who just sits and watches as we sell churches. Like this church in Boxtel (slide). If God blesses my wife and me with children, I want them to grow up in a vibrant church/community, with a living relationship with Jesus. I hope they will fall in love with him, because they know so many people who love Jesus. I hope they will share their love with others, and see their friends’ lives being changed as they introduce them to Jesus.”

I want to share with you **six culture shifts** that bear huge fruit around the world in parishes we coach. First, I want to talk about culture, which is difficult to define and difficult to name. It's like a fish in the water, who does not feel wet. But when it is out of the water, it definitely feels the difference.

Culture is the sum of all habits, behaviors and ‘unspoken rules’ of a parish community.

It is what you notice is “different from your home parish” when you go on vacation. It's the same Mass (worldwide) but definitely a different vibe.

Why culture? *If we do not intentionally shift culture, nothing will change.*

Culture is changed by what we tolerate and what we celebrate.

At DR, we coach into three principles, which we call the three keys of parish renewal. They help unlock your parish:

- The primacy of evangelization
- The best of leadership
- The power of the Holy Spirit

We have seen that all fruitful initiatives have all three of them. For each key, there are two relevant culture shifts: one at the parish level and one at the (more) personal level.

1. Shift: From Attendance to Encounter

From consumers to disciples. This has to do with encounter: parishioners encountering Jesus, and also, parishioners encountering new people. Ferdinand shared the story of meeting a young man from Gent, who walked into his parish for the first time (he was attending a conference and had Sunday morning off). Because Ferdinand and his wife invited him to lunch, they were able to have a deep conversation with him about 'the meaning of life', our human desires, faith, and other topics. Eventually, they pointed him to a community in/near his hometown that could help him encounter Jesus.

This is an example of the fruits of coffee after Mass.

Conversation – trust – testimony.

From encounter to trust to building a relationship (this is called *relational ministry*)

The powerful and personal testimony of someone you trust.

2. Shift: From Programs to Pathways

Instead of running a bunch of programs, we should focus on a succession of encounters, experiences that build upon each other. One relationship at a time.

It's not just about the liturgical calendar, feasts and sacraments. To illustrate this point, Ferdinand drew a picture of a road, with various onramps and gas stations. We need to lower thresholds (with regards to the events we offer), so people can 'onramp' onto the highway that leads them to Jesus (and eventually, to heaven). Parishes function like gas stations, because we need to be filled up in order to live and work. And we need "stepping stones" – these are the encounters that build upon one another.

3. Shift: From Doing to Leading

Ferdinand showed a slide of a shepherd walking up a hill, with his sheep following him, and he said: "A leader with no following is just a guy going for a walk."

Imagine a sacristan who teaches the altar servers bits and pieces (more and more) about his job. Then, if he gets sick (or something else happens), young altar servers can do his job, because they have been taught. Or Alpha small group leaders, who start out as participants, then table leaders, and take on the role of a small group leader during the next cycle of Alpha.

Imagine a priest who does not delegate tasks, but who delegates authority.

Important: a true leader is not an expert. He helps others grow into their vocation, forms leaders. "It cannot end with us". We need to 'form' and teach the next generation.

4. Shift: From Recruiting to building Leadership Pipelines.

We often hear about parishes struggling to find volunteers. They keep fishing in the same pond. If water ‘sits still’ for too long, it goes bad. Therefore, we need to consider building leadership pipelines. It’s important to realize that a pipeline goes from A to B. It has a flow, it needs to keep moving.

Sometimes it gets clogged and needs “unclogging” – this is necessary and messy. This also relates to people in certain positions who “clog” the pipeline (who stump growth).

Furthermore, we need to remember (or maybe hear for the first time) that a person does not need to be completely “doctrinally sound” to be given a (leadership) task. Let them take on tasks and help them grow! People with little experience can lead Alpha small groups. This is not a task of the priest or pastoral team alone. Let them lead in pairs (combine someone who is less or inexperienced with someone who is experienced).

5. Shift: From Talking about God to Talking to God.

Imagine if your parishioners would just start praying with each other. Or with other people. It is much easier than it might sound: try it out! Ferdinand: “I remember feeling a little awkward about this, but the awkwardness goes away over time. Out of the hundred times I have asked to pray with someone, only once did a person refuse. So, we have nothing to lose!”

Often, we share things with each other that we might desire prayers for. So ask: “How can I pray for you now?” and do it right away. “Let’s pray together now!” Simply, in your own words.

6. Shift: From “Bless what we do” to “Let’s do what You bless”

Discern what God wants. See where the fruits are and invest there! Come, Holy Spirit! Discerning together in light of the Gospel.

Next step: invitation to try out the Genesis Compass.

This exists of seven modules that give you direction on the journey of renewal. Like an actual compass, it adjusts to wherever you stand today, but always points in the right direction.