

# Our Journey to Discipleship

STORY BY SEAN LAZZARI, A PARISHIONER AT ST. DANIEL THE PROPHET, WHEATON



In January of 2019, in response to the growing renewal efforts underway in the Church and in response to Bishop Emeritus R. Daniel Conlon's pastoral letter advocating a missionary spirit in the diocese, our parish, St. Daniel the Prophet in Wheaton, undertook to discern how to proceed as a parish in discipleship formation at both the parish and individual levels.



Efforts had been made in the past with various renewal programs, small group programs, and other attempts to introduce discipleship at the parish; none seemed to catch on.

Our pastor, Father James Dvorscak, and other parish leaders had attended Alpha, a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith, at a neighboring parish and found the program lacking in its Catholicity, its theology and its follow-up with participants at the conclusion of the program.

We were having problems finding a gateway to introducing our parishioners to the core beliefs of our Catholic faith as outlined in the Kerygma, which is the proclamation of the Good News.

The Kerygma can be defined this way: God made us for relationship with Him. We broke that relationship through sin. Jesus arrived to heal that relationship through His life, death and resurrection. We can respond by repenting and believing in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, becoming His disciples and going out and making other disciples.

Our hope was to activate the in-the-pew Catholic. We were looking to introduce the intimacy of the Kerygma and the lifelong formation as disciples to those cradle Catholics raised in the post-World War II period who had received their religious education in the cultural upheavals of the 60s and 70s.

We were recommended to checkout ChristLife (<https://christlife.org/>).

Our pastor went to work. He immediately gathered all the information he could on the apostolate. He paid his own way to a training conference in Baltimore last year and signed us up for the program. We formed a leadership team to organize and plan for the first sessions to begin in September of 2019.

The team started to meet in March of 2019, and it soon became apparent that

we lacked sufficiently formed disciples to serve as table leaders and assistant table leaders to guide our parishioners through the discipleship formation process.

A cardinal rule of discipleship formation is that "only disciples can form disciples." Our churches are filled with some very holy and pious people who are not disciples of Jesus; who participate in ministry after ministry; and who are always the first to volunteer to help out at the parish. This does not make them a disciple. A very small minority of the cultural Catholics born in the second half of the 20th century and the first decade of this century have heard the Good News of the Kerygma.

To help in our formation process, our team reached out to a group of individuals who had spent 72 hours with Deacon Keith Strohm, a well-respected evangelization/discipleship expert, being formed as disciples. They volunteered to act as our table leaders for the 21 sessions of the complete ChristLife program.

Before the fall 2019 kickoff, Father Dvorscak took to the pulpit and spoke about ChristLife in every sermon he gave; he continues to reference it every Sunday. Almost as important as "only disciples can make disciples" is the point that, without a pastor's total commitment and without making the renewal program the number one thing that the parish does, the renewal effort will be doomed to failure.

Every week, Father Dvorscak posted full-page invitations in the bulletin and encouraged all he met to sign up and give ChristLife a listen. We are a smaller parish of about 650 families. Our leadership team's initial goal was 30-40 participants. In the end, we registered 114 individuals.

The program's first phase — "Discover Christ"— was held in the fall of 2019. The seven-week experience was to help people, according to ChristLife, "enter into or renew a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,

experience the love of God the Father, and be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live as God's children."

At each session, participants shared a meal, prayed and sang together and had video instruction; there were also small group discussions where they could discuss, question and comment on what they had just been introduced to.

Starting in January of 2020 and ending in late February, approximately 75 of the participants participated in the second seven-week session, called "Following Christ," which is designed to help people grow in friendship and union with God. By the grace of God, this is accomplished through praying together, hearing discipleship-focused teaching, and growing together in small group community through discussion and accountability. The teachings are focused on helping people develop a lifestyle of living for Jesus.

The pandemic interrupted the next session, in March 2020, which was a seven-week session entitled "Sharing Christ" and which focused on personal or friendship evangelization. This means sharing our relationship with Jesus in our daily encounters with others at any time. We completed the sessions via Zoom.

ChristLife has given us a Catholic pathway to begin our formation as disciples of Jesus. We have found this process is not something to be completed in a 10-week video course. ChristLife is not just another program. It gives you the tools necessary to understand the true nature of your relationship with your Trinitarian God, your call to be a disciple of Jesus and to live your life with the heart of Jesus with all you encounter in this world. †

For more information about ChristLife, contact Sean Lazzari at 630-209-9464 or [seanlazzari@gmail.com](mailto:seanlazzari@gmail.com).

## THE IMPACT OF A MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS ON ST. DANIEL THE PROPHET CHURCH

STORY BY CARLOS BRICEÑO

**St.** Daniel the Prophet Parish, in Wheaton, has been impacted in a big way by ChristLife, a process that equips Catholics for evangelization so that all might encounter Christ and be transformed into missionary disciples.

Conversion of hearts has been occurring at the parish as a result of its implementation of the ChristLife experience.

Dave Nodar, ChristLife's founder, refers to three essential conversions that are needed in a Catholic's life as a disciple: a personal acceptance that Jesus is Lord; that just going to Mass is not enough for someone to be a disciple — in other

words, there needs to be a daily lifestyle of following Christ and the Church teachings; and the third one is the understanding that, once we become disciples, we have to go out and make other disciples.

By engaging in the ChristLife experience, the parish experiences community and relationships to help form a new culture there, Nodar said.

"We need to get back to the basics, back to the foundations of what Christ has called us to and what the Church since Vatican II has been constantly calling us to: embrace evangelization and the call to be and make disciples," Nodar said.

That mindset and the ChristLife experience appealed to Father James Dvorscak, St. Daniel's pastor. It also has had a profound impact on him and his priesthood.

"It has affected me in such a way," Father Dvorscak said, "that the journey I am leading other people through helps me to focus on being a priest, on my baptismal priesthood, and what I need to do to be a better Catholic Christian and an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ as me, not just as a priest, and also how to be fruitful in my personal living of the faith and in my priestly ministry, as well."

ChristLife has even impacted his preaching. "I have moved from a more static and didactic approach to preaching and ministry," he said, to one that is "more dynamic" with "fresher approaches."

Parishioners who have gone through the ChristLife experience have also been transformed. Here are several of their responses to a survey:

*"It has made me feel that, no matter what I do, God loves and supports me. That I don't have to earn it. He loves me anyway. Before, I felt unworthy and 'damaged.' Now, I know God accepts my humanity and forgives me so I can grow. My faith is stronger. I'm not just going through the motions of being Catholic. I am fully and deeply Catholic."*

*"This program has fostered community. There is a special way that numerous topics speak to the heart in this course. It has been a program where beliefs and views have been challenged and enriched by the people I have met. I am 28 and my girlfriend is 27, and, even though we are younger than most by 30 years, we have bonded in the wisdom of the timeless God."*

*"An amazing peacefulness has been awakened in me, and I was able to forgive and move on with a close relative who was degrading me and everyone she encountered. The Lord has opened my mind and heart to devotion to the Sacred Heart."*

*"I have had a deep appreciation for the Eucharist for many years, but through 'Following Christ' I have come to recognize the importance of [the sacrament of] reconciliation as well. Although a cradle Catholic, I found that my CCD experience in the 1970s, coupled with spotty Mass attendance in high*

*school and college, and a passive approach to the Church and its teachings as a young adult, had left me severely under-catechized. The more that I've studied and understood the Church's teachings (even before ChristLife), the more I've come to realize the true genius of Catholicism. It's not an easy path to take, but at the same time there isn't a more rewarding path that you can take. ChristLife has helped solidify this understanding for me and will hopefully help me take it to the next level."*

*"In addition to meeting new parishioners during the sessions, it has been wonderful getting to know my tablemates on a deeper, more personal level. This understanding makes our interactions before, during and after weekend Mass [this was shared before the pandemic struck] more meaningful than simply a casual, 'Hi how are you today.' I think everyone at our table is looking forward to the opportunity to continue meeting in small group or other settings after the ChristLife program is completed."*

*"I am happier when I pray [on a daily basis now]. I thank and praise Him for my daily trials. Even though it feels awkward to thank Him at times, doing so opens my heart to receive even more of His love." †*

# Discipleship Formation Tips and Pitfalls

*The following list was compiled and shared by Sean Lazzari, a parishioner at St. Daniel the Prophet in Wheaton*

1. Use the power of intercessory prayer. Have the intercessors and your parish-at-large pray daily for the transformation to discipleship.
2. It is the Holy Spirit who will guide the parish as a community and its individual members to conversion as disciples. Books and programs can assist, but it is only through the Spirit that we can truly come into proper relationship with Jesus and our Father in heaven.
3. Find your formed disciples. These are not necessarily the most active parishioners or the most pious parishioners. Look for those with the heart of Jesus. Deacon Keith Strohm, a discipleship expert, speaks of six attributes of a disciple: (1) daily Scripture reading; (2) daily prayer life; (3) living a Sacramental life, such as daily Mass attendance and frequent reconciliation; (4) fellowship and community with others in the parish; (5) service — tending to the poor, the needy, the sick, elderly, living with the heart of Jesus; and (6) an evangelizing spirit — the sharing of Jesus with others.
4. Do not just run another program. Programs need to be viewed as an introduction to the concepts of discipleship. The real formation starts with the follow-up where formed disciples will accompany those seeking a personal relationship with Jesus and assist them as they grow in prayer, in Scripture, in the sacraments and in living a life with the heart of Jesus.
5. Find formed disciples to plan, run and lead your formation programs. “Only disciples can make disciples.”
6. Whatever path you choose, it must be communicated clearly as THE NUMBER ONE PRIORITY OF THE PARISH. It should come before all other ministries and parish activities to include religious education. (How many formed disciples do we have teaching our children???)
7. The formation process must be front-and-center in every homily, every bulletin, and every bulletin board and brought up at every meeting of every committee.
8. Pastors must take the lead in all of this, not just hand it off to the adult faith formation leader or parish council leader. The pastor must be disciplined, invested, relational, accountable, surrendered, and empowering to the process.
9. Parish staff must be made accountable to the process and assist the pastor in making the transformation. The status quo is not acceptable. The fact that something has been done this way forever is probably a good reason to change it.
10. There has to be a continuing follow-up to the formation process, from the introduction to the formation, to the actual formation of disciples, then to the formation of missionary disciples, to the sending out into the community of the missionary disciples and to their bringing in new individuals to start the formation anew. †

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