

5 Ways to Prepare Our Hearts to Serve

from ParishSOFT

Inspiration for this month's column came from a wondrous collision of happenings in my life—events that aligned so perfectly, it was surely part of the Lord's plan to save me. At ParishSOFT, here we are, rolling with momentum from last month's users' conference with so much to share. Advent has just begun. God has blanketed Southeast Michigan with our first notable snow of the season. It's also my son's 12th birthday.

Grating against all this goodness is the media and secular world, which has been forcing Christmas advertising on us since before Halloween. The shopping frenzy is creeping into my world in a most irritating fashion. And if I hear Christmas referred to as “the holidays” one more time, it's quite possible a wise judge may require I attend anger management classes. This wasn't where my heart should be during Advent. I knew something had to give.

So this morning, instead of doing my usual crazy-person routine to get everyone ready for school and work, I took the time to thank God for the beauty of the snow and the gift of my son.

Calm settled in my heart. I slipped on my boots and Walter-Matthau-in-Grumpy-Old-Men hat and shoveled a path for the dog, whose short legs make crossing the deck in four inches of snow an expedition of Edmund Hillary proportions. I lit a candle

in my birthday boy's breakfast, got him to school on time, and was at my desk ready to take on the day by 8:30 A.M. Did I forget something? Only my morning nagging, which usually goes, “*No, son, you can't wear shorts to school in 23 degree weather. Have you never seen Survivorman? You could die out there!*”

In Whoville, they say her small heart grew three sizes that day

It seems God was just waiting for me to turn it all over to him. One little prayer changed the course of my day. Stress over my task list was gone. My pre-teen dressed in long pants and cheerfully put on the winter coat he's called “dorky.” Peace continued through my workday, as I shifted from deep-thought tasks to phone calls and back again without being the Grinch Who Stole Christmas to one single person.

This got me thinking: What if you and I could meet every day with calm hearts, ready to serve in kind ways? Imagine how that would pay forward through our interactions with families, coworkers and fellow Christians. This holy season of preparing for the birth of our savior is the perfect opportunity to reflect on how we're answering God's call to stewardship in all the places in which we live, work, and play. And it just might be a lot easier than you think.

1. Recognize your impact

In his keynote at the ParishSOFT Conference earlier this November, [Fr. Daniel Mahan](#), executive director of the O'Meara Ferguson Center for Catholic Stewardship at Indiana's Marian University said, "God gives us each a role to play that cannot possibly be played by someone else. It is in these roles that you are called to live out your faith and proclaim the Good News."

His words struck a powerful chord with the 200 parish and diocesan staff in the audience. Many remarked that in their busy work-places, it's easy to lose sight of how their day-to-day work answers their personal call to stewardship and evangelization. We need to recognize the unique role that God has given us, as well as how the work we do is part of the greater mission. This awareness lends perspective and affirmation and, especially for church staff, it reminds us why we came to work for the church in the first place.

2. Find peace

Wherever you work, finding peace should be at the top of your task list each day. Because, let's face it, we cannot be Jesus to others if we're running around in a panic or acting like a crankypants.

Here's the secret: remember that God is God, and you are not. When we place our trust in God, he will always find a way to keep us tuned in to what's really important and what we can control. When we keep God first in our lives, our families and careers—everything else—falls into place.

The inner peace that God wants to give you can be found everywhere, not just in this season of Advent, but all year long. Close your eyes (unless you're driving!) and breathe deeply. Say a prayer. Step outside for two minutes and clear your head. Brew a cup of coffee or tea. Let the calm settle in your heart. Then get your positive, new attitude back to doing the Lord's work.

3. Learn new things

Think you're too busy to interrupt your to-do list for a webinar? Training class? Retreat? Conference? We've got breaking news: the world will find a way to survive your short absence. And the busier you are, the more you need to invest in learning.

Nurturing your God-given talents is like tending a beautiful garden of fruits and vegetables. We cannot toss seeds onto rocky ground, stand still, and expect to harvest a bounty. Learning pre-



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pares and enriches the soil. It renews the spirit. It helps you identify which areas need pruning, weeding, or a bit of extra TLC for a nourishing yield.

The annual ParishSOFT Conference brings hundreds of staff and volunteers who use our technology together for three days of learning and spirituality. Year after year, our attendees tell us they arrive expecting to learn about the software but experience something that feels much more like a spiritual retreat (read what they had to say on www.conference.parishsoft.com/news). Morning Masses, inspiring keynotes, and workshops take learning beyond the nuts and bolts of software functionality to give staff fresh perspective and a greater understanding of how their data, tools, and day-to-day work in the church office connect with the stewardship of their parishes and dioceses.

An experience like this, shared with other people who walk in your very shoes each day at the office, is mighty powerful. Learning together gives us affirmation, new knowledge, and the realization that we're a part of something much greater.

Now, in your state of calm (see item #1), resolve to incorporate regular learning experiences into your work life. Choose a conference or two to attend with other staff from your church—plan for them in your budget, and take your pastor with you! Take advantage of the training classes and webinars your software vendor offers (some are even free). If your parent organization offers users' group training, participate! If not, ask your leaders to coordinate learning opportunities, and suggest some topics for your first session.

4. Share with others

Interacting with people who also work for the church opens doors to the exchange of many ideas and best practices. And often, the best learning happens in this setting. Think of what you can accomplish when you get two or three people working together. Get 200 mission-minded people in the same space to learn, pray, and laugh together, like we do at our conference, and you get an experience that Msgr. Bill Hanson, keynote speaker and pastor of St. Gerard Majella Parish on Long Island calls, "Mindblowing." Collectively, we awaken to new possibilities and all the things that are working really well in other churches.

Lisa Sliker, who serves as business manager at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Ellicott City,

MD, told her workshop attendees at the ParishSOFT Conference, "One of the greatest benefits of working for the Church is that unlike the secular business world, our knowledge is not proprietary but meant to be shared. It's a blessing to work with people who are so willing and able to help each other."

In fact, if we're serious about stewardship, sharing what we've learned with others—not just in our own offices, but with churches across town and across the country—is a practical step toward returning our abundant harvest to God. Sharing is a learning opportunity in itself, one that creates a sustainable, renewable energy that fuels your stewardship and never depletes.

5. Be grateful

When was the last time you said to a coworker or volunteer, "Thank you for sharing your talents with our church. You did a wonderful job of [handling that difficult phone call, putting together the parish newsletter, organizing the craft show, etc.]"? Has your pastor ever heard, "Thank you for dedicating your life to God and leading our church"?

Gratitude, expressed sincerely and with grace, recognizes the God-given talents in others as well as their gifts of time and treasure. And your thanks serves as positive reinforcement that encourages people to give again. It also keeps us humble. Acknowledging the contributions of others means, "I do not do it all in my church. I rely on the talents of many others to do God's work."

Until next year

It's been our pleasure getting to know you through CCMag over the past year. On behalf of the ParishSOFT staff, I wish you all a beautiful, peaceful Advent and a blessed Christmas.

Stacey Anttila
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