
Patrick Brennan, a Catholic priest from Chicago, here shows how parishes can invest in structures and strategies designed to encourage church growth rather than wait for initiatives from diocesan or regional levels. He identifies target areas, specifically in ministry with children, youth, marriage, and family, describing in detail his own parish. Brennan draws on a wide range of technical and popular religious, sociological, and psychological materials to develop his theory and praxis.

Brennan's theory and methodology start with outlines of activities that should be present in mission work, drawn from the work of Bevans and Schroeder, which he then subsumes into his own reflections on how a parish might interpret and live the reign of God. This reign, in his view, is best expressed and worked out through relationships. Central to this is the separation of parochial work into distinct areas that are coordinated by parish governance encouraging a lateral, enabling ministry rather than a vertical hierarchical one. Despite defending this parochial model through papal encyclicals, Brennan is highly critical of the institutional church, with which he has clearly had a number of difficult encounters. He criticizes in particular the rigidity in restoring pre-Vatican II elements and the pursuit of high status in the life of the church. He also expresses discontent with official declarations on clerical celibacy, priestly formation, and women's ministry, and discusses the failure of liturgy and worship to respond and answer the needs of a changing world. Brennan's criticisms are terse, provocative, and entertaining, and he believes the reign of God is far more important than any ecclesiastical ideology.

A couple of points need to be mentioned. First, there is a fair amount of repetition as projects are described in different chapters of the book. Second, in his discussion of justice, which includes commutative, distributive, and social aspects, he hardly refers to environmental issues, a strange omission in a work claiming to show its connectivity to issues of importance in contemporary societies.

Finally, the parish described, Holy Family, is a major operation able to raise six million dollars in a fundraising campaign and to sponsor its own degree-awarding educational center. Many may feel that this describes a reality far removed from their own. Yet even with this disparity in scale from many of his potential readers’ worlds, there is much in Brennan's description of his parochial context to entertain, instruct and envision.

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