

PREFACE



In the first book, Theophilus . . .

—ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 1:1

Even the best-known and most famous authors sometimes feel the need to explain why they are writing more. Readers of our first book, *Rebuilt*, might be asking that question. St. Luke's short answer in the Acts of the Apostles, his sequel to the Gospel of Luke, was, well, because there's more to tell.

When we wrote *Rebuilt* and published it in early 2013, we sought to cover a wide spectrum of parish life and ministry with broad strokes. While every attempt was made to leave the reader with practical help and hope, the emphasis was definitely on the big picture, the story we had to tell, and we're glad we did it that way.

But there's more to tell. The story told in *Rebuilt* is not the end of our story. As we stepped back from the project, and especially as we began talking with our readers, we recognized that there was interest, even hunger, for more practical information on what works, what helps, what specific steps we took, and which tools we used to grow disciples, develop a healthier parish community, and more intentionally and effectively serve the New Evangelization.

As we try with this book to further engage readers of *Rebuilt*, we also eagerly welcome readers unfamiliar with that book who are simply interested in “really, really practical ways to make your parish better.” Here you will find exactly seventy-five such ways, touching on virtually every aspect of parish life. And they’re mostly free.

We offer *Tools for Rebuilding* for those who are interested in their local church community, which Catholics call their parish. Here we present simple lessons that were for a variety of reasons not so simple for us to learn. Each of them represents a step forward for our parish and an important recognition of a better way of *doing* church by focusing on *building* church. Whether you are a pastor or pastoral leader, parish minister, consecrated religious, deacon, seminarian, or interested parishioner, these lessons can be useful to you in your community. We suspect that many of them will be useful to leaders in other settings as well.

We are presenting our practical approaches in the form of axioms. These are reasonable claims that are evidently true—at least to those who have learned their lessons through hard-earned experience. These are reasonable claims, and yet, where not honored, they easily become stumbling blocks and sources of conflict and division in parishes. Little things become big things and get in the way of our work. You won’t agree with everything we assert, and that’s okay. We just want to further the conversation. Take a look.

Introduction:

BUILDING



They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

—ACTS 2:42–43

The Church of Christ, in its earliest, purest, and most exuberant period—the age of the apostles—is described in the first chapters of the fifth book of the New Testament. St. Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, tells us how the Holy Spirit begins shaping the Church through the apostolic ministry. More than any other way, we learn that these efforts are fruitful in two ways: introducing people to Christ and helping them grow into fully devoted followers, that is, disciples, of the Lord. In exactly these ways they advanced the movement of the kingdom of God in their generation.

This is always and everywhere the fundamental and indispensable work of the whole Church. Currently fueled by the imperative of the New Evangelization, it is about bringing the Gospel to those who

have not heard it, or need to hear it again. And then, it is about helping them grow into fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ, especially through the Word of God and the Eucharist.

Probably nobody disputes that. The difficulty comes when we reach down into the details of building or rebuilding the Church of Christ. The legendary architect Mies van der Rohe is sometimes credited with claiming that in any building project, “the devil’s in the detail.” The detail is where all of us in “churchworld” can begin to look at things very differently. It’s also where we can get mixed up about what we’re even trying to do.

And, because of what it is we’re supposed to be building, that’s a problem.

Your Building Site

If you’re going to build anything, anywhere, you need to start somewhere, specific; you need a building site.

“Parish” is a geographical term; it is a location. It comes from the Greek *paroikia*, which refers to a collection of neighboring buildings. Your parish is a neighborhood, however compact or far flung it is. And your neighborhood is where you join the Lord in building the movement of the kingdom.

To be successful in building, you have to know your parish, because that’s your building site. Your parish—not just your congregation but your parish—actually includes people you don’t even know, people who currently aren’t in the pews.

We don’t know anything about your parish, but let us tell you about ours. Church of the Nativity is essentially equivalent to the 21093 zip code, a choice slice of north Baltimore County. Maryland is called “the land of pleasant living,” and it must be because of places like our parish. There are lots of things we could tell you about this community that might interest you, but here’s a fact that might surprise you: The

majority of people in our parish do not go to church—and they're Catholic. They don't go to church because they don't like the experience, they don't understand the Eucharist, and they're not interested in learning why they should. And no amount of wishing it was otherwise or demanding that it be different will change that fact.

In order to successfully begin building, then, we had to humbly learn about why they have left and what might bring them back.

Your Building Project

But what are we building? Churches . . . right? Well, kind of right.

At one point in his public ministry, Jesus takes his twelve disciples on a road trip. It's one of the biggest journeys of his adult life and probably farther than any of the disciples would have ventured on their own. They go to an unlikely destination: Caesarea Philippi, which was sort of an ancient Las Vegas on steroids. The main attraction of this place was a temple located in front of an enormous cave that descended into a measureless abyss, a bottomless pit. The grotto temple was dedicated to the Greek god Pan. The cult worship of this particular god was wild, as in wildly hedonistic and even savage. Locals called the place the gates of Hades with good reason. It was believed to be the entrance to the underworld. Ironically, it is also the source, or headwaters, of the River Jordan. Jesus takes the disciples there, not to preach or teach, not to heal anyone, and not to convert a single soul. He takes them there to ask them two questions. The first question goes like this: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13).

The disciples have no shortage of answers: "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Mt 16:14).

In other words, there's a lot of confusion out there about who he is. Then Jesus asks the question he's really interested in: "But who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15).

Peter replies, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16).

This is the first time that any of them gets it right when it comes to understanding who Jesus really is. It’s a big moment, and Jesus takes advantage of it to make a big announcement. This is one of the biggest announcements of all time, like God’s announcement to Abraham that there is a God; his announcement to Moses that there is a law; his announcement to David that his throne would last forever; or his announcement to Mary that he’s sending his son. This announcement is like those announcements; it’s that big. He says,

I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build . . .

—Matthew 16:18

Now hold on, because if you grew up in church, you have heard this so many times; it’s easy to not really hear it at all or just take it for granted. You know this, so of course you know he’s going to say he’s building his. . . . Let’s slow down.

If Jesus was going to name the thing that he intends to build, it’s reasonable to assume that he would have called it by a traditional name, like “synagogue” or “temple”: “Hey guys, what I am going to build is a new temple.” But that’s not what Matthew tells us he said. Instead, Matthew uses a very interesting word, a word that is not previously found in the New Testament.

He said, “I will build my *church*.”

Okay, look at it again.

I will build my church
and the gates of the netherworld
shall not prevail against it.

—Matthew 16:18

Jesus says to the disciples in essence, This is the biggest news of all, the biggest thing ever; going forward, this is the plan, and this is the *whole* plan. For the rest of history, this is what God is going to be doing, and nobody and nothing, not even the gates of Hades (which we just happen to be standing in front of; how cool is that?) will not stop this plan. It's just going to keep growing and going and growing and going. And nothing is going to stop it.

The word Matthew uses is the Greek word, *ekklesia*. But the English word “church” is not a translation of *ekklesia*. The Greek word was used to describe assemblies or gatherings of people in a given locale, for some specific purpose, usually a civic or community-wide one. Typically it was used in reference to town hall meetings, or the coming together of a city council at city hall for some deliberate purpose that impacts the *paroikia* (remember parish/neighborhood) and not just the *ekklesia*. Here's what it did not refer to: a building. On the other hand, the English word “church” derives not from *ekklesia* but rather from the German word “*kirche*,” which is a building.

Father Michael: Sorry. Not trying to show off. I know absolutely no German, and I failed Greek in seminary. I'm just trying to make a point. There has so often been confusion and even conflict over this point that's it's worth emphasizing—Christ promised to build an *ekklesia*, not a *kirche*. Jesus was God, so he could do whatever he wanted to do, and he never built a single church; and he never asked anyone else to either. He never spent a minute of his ministry raising money to build or maintain churches. He came to launch an *ekklesia*.

An *ekklesia* is a movement. The building project we join him in is not the construction of a building, or the maintenance of a museum; it's not a monument to be viewed or a destination to be visited; it's

a movement. So, it has to *move*. And it is a *growing* movement of growing disciples who are gathering more people, who are not disciples, to become disciples.

This is the Church that is so strikingly described in the Acts of the Apostles: a dynamic gathering, a powerful movement with a world-changing mission.

We are indebted to Pastor Andy Stanley at North Point Church in Atlanta for exploring this point in his wonderful book, *Deep and Wide*. While we cannot agree with the whole of his interpretation of Church history, he does point out that, all too quickly in the course of history, churchpeople started to get in the way. Churchpeople so often want to control the ekklesia that Jesus is gathering; we want to contain it in the kirches we build, mostly for ourselves.

- The ekklesia is messy; kirchepeople want to make it neat.
- The ekklesia is unpredictable; kirchepeople want to systematize and codify it and generally make it entirely predictable.
- The ekklesia is a work in progress; kirchepeople want a finished structure; they want a building that houses a well-ordered, stable community. The ekklesia is under construction. It's a building project.

And don't think this is ancient history. It goes on in parishes everywhere, every day. We've done it ourselves for more wasted years than we'd like to admit. On the other hand, when we give building ekklesia a try, it will not be easy.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are we making a measurable difference in our community or simply serving our members?

- Are we mobilized for mission or insisting on business as usual?
- Are we here to preserve our broken systems, or are we willing to go where God is blessing?
- Are we simply meeting or are we moving?
- Are we kirche or ekklesia?

If your parish project is building, renovating, refurbishing, or redecorating a kirche, it can be a very commendable, even noble, project. However, this book is largely useless to you in that undertaking. Actually, it will be worse than useless; it will be disruptive to your kirche building project. It will likely make you grumpy, so you should stop reading now.

But if you want to join Christ as he builds his ekklesia (and he is, at this very moment), keep reading; the following tools will help you build better.

STRATEGIC TOOLS

1

DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING, STAND THERE



Be still and know that I am God.

—PSALM 46

If you're working in parish ministry, you probably do too much. There is a lot to do; it must get done; and who else is going to do it?

You have to, right?

Father Michael: I vividly remember a Saturday one spring when I had agreed (reluctantly) to preside at a wedding. I was reluctant because the wedding was at a neighboring parish. The bride, who thought the other church was prettier than our church, wasn't really a parishioner but joined our parish because she needed a priest. The pretty church wouldn't supply one. It was a huge hassle, but I agreed to do it.

That same day, I also had another wedding at my own church, as well as confessions and the evening Mass. I was expected to preach at both weddings, in a warm and personal way, even though I knew neither of the couples very well. And, of course, I had to preach for my weekend Masses.

In the midst of this juggling act, a man I had never met managed to get hold of me to demand (that's how it sounded anyway) that I drop everything and come to anoint his elderly father who was actively dying. (Just for the record, his father had already been anointed several times.) This kind of demand is not uncommon. A relative, who has been absent from the situation, shows up at the eleventh hour when there is nothing left for them to "do." Their urgent insistence for the sacrament becomes their contribution to the situation. It's what they do for the dying.

I struggled to imagine how I could fulfill that request and, unbelievably, decided to try. I jumped in my car and took off. Unfortunately, I got lost trying to find the address, probably because—like the wedding at the pretty church—it wasn't in my parish.

Eventually I gave up on this wild goose chase, since I risked being late for the wedding, which I nearly was. The bride's mother was freaking out because I was cutting it close on her big day, and as I was on unfamiliar terrain, all did not go very smoothly with the ceremony itself. Nobody there was very happy with me, even though I had done my best.

When I returned home, just in time for confessions, the man with the dying father was waiting for me. His father had died in the meanwhile, and he was there to let me have it; and he did, at length. I just stood there and took it; what else could I do,

faced with a grieving family member? I missed confessions entirely, much to the chagrin of waiting penitents, and I was so stressed out and shaken up by the time I got to the evening Mass that my homily was largely incoherent. I went home sad, sorry, and spent—and I still had Sunday ahead of me.

Here's the lesson I needed to learn: I did not have to try to do everything I tried to do that day. I could have done less. If I had, what I set out to do could have been done better. You might ask what I could possibly have taken out of that scenario. That's a very good question. The answer probably begins with establishing proper boundaries.

I could, perhaps, have found someone else to do the pretty-church wedding, or to help me out with my obligations back home. I could have told the man demanding the house call that it just wouldn't be happening that day and prayed with him over the telephone. He probably wouldn't have been satisfied with that answer, but at least I wouldn't have been setting up unrealistic expectations and wasting time trying to fill them. I certainly could have carved out more time during the week to prepare properly for my weekend homily, so I wasn't trying to juggle last-minute preparation along with everything else. I absolutely should have set better boundaries and operated more successfully within them.

This is a common mistake among so many people involved in pastoral ministry. Most of us are motivated to help parishioners and be of service to others, and that is surely why we are here. Many of us are also people pleasers; we want to make others happy. This trait will always be a problem, and it is aggravated by the fact that people can be very demanding, especially in churchworld (where the price is right and access is easy).

In our parish, we fell into the same trap. Early on, we developed and hosted myriad activities and programs (in addition to what was already expected). The thinking was that more programs, more events, and more stuff would make our parish more meaningful and have a greater impact in people's lives and in the life of our community.

Perhaps this was most strikingly exhibited each December. We ran around doing a bunch of different activities loaded onto our schedule to "celebrate the season": Breakfast with Santa, Advent Wreath-making, a program we called "Holiday Traditions," and the seemingly inevitable Lessons and Carols. All of these fueled a frenetic pace during an already crazy, busy time of year. In the end, they didn't lead anyone into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ, but it sure did burn us out.

Tom: Some church workers are notorious for keeping up a frenetic pace—always having one more thing to do. We often wear our busyness as a badge of honor; being busy seems to prove our ministry matters.

Sure, there will be busy seasons. There will be days and seasons and special projects that demand we pick up the pace and work harder. But when we spend ourselves in unproductive activities—achieving only fatigue—we are of little use to anyone, and we are not exercising proper self-care. Being busy to the point of distraction or exhaustion certainly does not mean we are living out our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was the Savior of the world and yet he consistently kept a sustainable pace, despite demands to do otherwise. One time, he spent the whole day ministering to people of a certain town. When the day ended, there were still more people who wanted to and expected to see him. Sound familiar? Nevertheless, Jesus got up early the next

morning and took time to be alone with his heavenly Father. Peter and the other apostles sought him out and asked: What are you doing out here? There are still more people to heal. The whole town is looking for you. But Jesus refused to go back: “Let’s go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come” (Mk 1:38).

Jesus wasn’t too busy. He knew enough to withdraw and take personal time to set clear boundaries and conduct his ministry within them. He directed his pace of life, rather than allowing the demands of ministry to do so. He wasn’t crazy busy, but he was the most amazingly fruitful, prodigiously productive person in history.

To be less busy and more fruitful (and more effective and successful), we need to be more thoughtful and strategic about what we do. We probably need to do less. Here are some rules we follow in our parish to make that happen.

FOLLOW A SCHEDULE

Make a schedule for yourself each week, share it with the people you work with and care about, and keep it (as closely as you can). At the end of the week, evaluate how well you did: What didn’t work? Where were you unrealistic? How could you improve your schedule? Where else can you do less, so you can be more effective in your ministry?

SET BOUNDARIES

Use your schedule to set boundaries. Within the year, where is your vacation time? Take it, and keep it, no matter what. Within the week, where is your day off, your Sabbath? Take it and keep it, no matter what. Within each workday, where is your quiet time, your private time, your prayer time? Take it and keep it, no matter what. When scheduling, also allow enough time between things. Create and maintain margin. Whether you’re a priest, religious, or lay minister, you have family

and friends as well as a personal life (or at least you should have those things); don't allow ministry to eclipse your relationship with them.

KEEP OBJECTIVE

Do not let the demands, emergencies, or crises of others become *yours*. At least, don't do it often. You will always want to, but don't. It is true that there will be exceptional events in the life of your community and true tragedies that will require you to recalibrate your schedule and your time, but you have to apply your best judgment, not allow others to make that judgment for you. If you have already built margin into your schedule, you'll be able to absorb these events when they do arise. Take a close look at everything you do and decide what you don't have to do, what is beyond your scope, and what someone else could do instead.

After watching the incessant gesticulations of an aspiring young actress, the great playwright and stage director George Bernard Shaw shouted, "Don't just do something, stand there." Sometimes it takes more discipline and dedication just to stand there. Don't just do something; stand there. You have to stop doing stuff in order to pray, think, grow, observe a Sabbath, be still, and know that God is God.

2

AND THEN, FOCUS



[Christ] gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, and others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.

—EPHESIANS 4:11–12

A person is a professional, an expert, an excellent craftsman, or an Olympic athlete not simply because of talent. Lots of people have talent. Those who strive for, and perhaps even reach, greatness have something else: focus. Focus is all about clarity and concentration.

If your job is guest services or consumer complaint, then the focus of your job is what is presented to you by telephone calls and foot traffic. If you're a firefighter, you're waiting for a fire. If you're working in an ER, you're all about the next emergency. If you are working in parish ministry, you are not focused on any of those things (at least you shouldn't be). Be careful what you are focused on. Your focus is on ministry for the long haul—keep it there. It won't be easy, but try.

Tom: When I first came to work here, I was the youth minister. I took that to mean I had to create lots of youth activities to get kids to show up and keep them coming back. In order to cover the cost of these activities, I inevitably had to run fundraisers (I didn't have much of a budget). Since the fundraisers were more time consuming and labor intensive than anything else I did, they eventually took my focus off the work of youth ministry. Instead of my ministry, I was doing car raffles, silent auctions, and spaghetti dinners. Ugh! No wonder so many youth ministers get out of ministry at the first possible opportunity. I'll be honest; I seriously considered moving on to find another job, though the sad irony was that I didn't even really know what my real job was.

Anybody who is going to succeed at anything needs focus. The more you have, the more progress you'll make and the further and faster you'll go. When it comes to ministry, the question shouldn't be, What else can I do? The questions should be, What can I do that no one else can do? and What can I do that no one else is doing?

What is the contribution I can make that others cannot or will not make? What can I offer that will make the greatest impact on the overall efforts of the parish's mission? If you are a pastor or associate pastor, the answer is clear: the celebration of the sacraments and the preaching of the Word. Why? Because that is the work no one else is doing: forming the whole congregation in faith for the work of ministry.

If you are a catechetical leader, youth minister, or pastoral life director, perhaps the answer seems less clear, but it need not be; the same lesson applies. If you are in any kind of parish leadership, your focus should be on leading parishioners into ministry and equipping them with the skills and opportunities they need to succeed. You should

evaluate everything you do, and are asked to do, through the prism of this priority.

- As a catechetical leader, preparing for and presenting a catechist training session is more important than one-on-one meetings with parents demanding special treatment (e.g., because they missed the sacramental prep meetings you generously offered multiple times, none of which worked for their schedule).
- If you're a youth minister, investing time in potential youth ministry leaders is more important than tracking down the kids who didn't, couldn't, or wouldn't come on the Confirmation retreat. We're not saying that the retreat is unimportant; we're just saying leadership development for your youth ministry is more important to the ministry itself.
- If you're a pastoral associate, there will always be a line of people at your door who insist on meeting with you about their problems, and they will often be the *same people* who talk about the *same problems*. It must be *you* that they talk to because they want your attention (and the price is right). You can do that until you retire; then they'll find free talk therapy somewhere else. Or you can just say no to needy attention seekers and expand your pool of well-trained ministers.

As the apostle Paul instructs us, whoever you are, whatever your position at the parish, your focus should be exactly and nearly exclusively on preparing the people of your parish for the work of ministry, so that the Body of Christ is built up. Your focus is on building.

3

KNOW WHY, WHAT, AND HOW



Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

—MATTHEW 28:19–20

As churchpeople, we are familiar with religious rules and canon law. Our studies in history and theology help us to know what those rules and laws are, why they're in place, and just exactly what their values are.

Running a local parish means we need to become familiar with something else as well. We need to know our mission, vision, and strategy and then we need to know them better. Mission, vision, and strategy are words we didn't understand when we first began working at the parish. But we've gotten to know them and now know their critical importance.

Mission is *why* we exist. Every parish exists for the same reason. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus said, “Go, therefore, and make disciples.” Disciples are students of Jesus Christ. We’re in the disciple-making business. That’s our *why*. Every parish’s mission is the same, but you can say it in different ways. North Point Church, a church in Atlanta we like, expresses it this way: “To lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.” Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago says it this way: “To turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.” And at Nativity we say, “Love God. Love others. Make disciples.”

Mission is *why*. Vision is *what*. Vision is a picture of what could be and should be. It is a view of a better or preferred future. Proverbs 29:18 says, “Without a vision the people lose restraint.”

Without a vision for our churches and the impact God wants to have through us, bad things can happen—maybe not physically but certainly spiritually. People go off course; they become mixed up and messed up and maybe don’t get to know their Savior.

As a church, vision means looking to people we are not reaching but should be. Vision is about solving problems and removing the lids that keep our churches from reaching new people. To only reach the people you’re reaching now, just keep doing what you’re doing now. But, as Pastor Craig Groeschel says, “To reach people no one else is reaching we need to be doing things no one else is doing.” We need to be looking to a future in which we are bringing new people into a relationship with Christ by doing new things.

At the same time, vision is about identifying ways your members should be increasingly transformed by Christ. Vision looks beyond the past and the present. It sees the future and how the future could be and should be better and then rallies people around that preferred future. Vision is about where we should go and inspiring others to want to get there. Vision is about the unique impact a parish thinks it should have.