My family and I plan a summer vacation every year. For many years, we used to go to the same 2 or 3 spots, but as the kids got older, we began going places we have never been before. Instead of the beach and lake, we started going to Texas, Vermont, and Quebec. Of course, the planning for these later vacations were more involved than those in the past. We had a certain familiarity and comfort level going to the same beach resort every year, and we simply counted on our previous experiences. In order to travel to new destinations, we needed research and data. How long would it take to get there, or how much would air travel cost? What is the average temperature in a given time frame? What are the best attractions to visit, and how can we do it on a budget?

The path to anywhere new requires us to gather information. If we fail to get the correct data or no data at all, we may find ourselves lost, angry, or even in danger. Of course, if we want to stay where we are and go nowhere, not much data gathering is needed. We can just sit and watch the sun rise and set, day after day.

In my experience, too many parishes choose to stay at home and not travel anywhere new. Most church communities do not take the time to plan. They operate with a process of decision-making that is driven by emotions, following one’s gut, and serial idea implementation. Operating in a climate of “let’s see what happens” is neither smart nor good stewardship. There is always data available to you that can provide insights and a clearer picture of what is going on in your community. However, crafting a good plan does take time and effort to collect that key data. Let’s look at some of those key data points that any mission-oriented church community should gather.
HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE REALLY IN THE COMMUNITY?

Too often, parish rolls are bloated with the names of people who haven’t been to the church in years, have registered elsewhere or in multiple places, or are deceased. I worked with one parish that had the opposite problem of have rolls that probably missed 25% of all those households that participated in some way in the community. The bottom line is that you cannot have a reasonable goal with a concrete metric and target if you cannot say with clarity how many people are in your parish.

Parishes need to take more seriously the value of their parishioner database. This may mean that some households need to be contacted to see if they still desire to belong. As Church, we have done a poor job of calling people to accountability or reaching out to those who drift away. Not only does an inaccurate database provide little data to build upon, it also represents lost opportunities for evangelization and community building.

MASS ATTENDANCE

When working with a parish, I am no longer surprised that they only count the people who attend the weekend Masses once a year. They only do that because of a diocesan mandate! What do you really think you can learn from looking at Mass attendance just one day a year? You cannot identify trends. You cannot make judgements about how each Mass time is meeting the needs of the community. You cannot make an educated decision about what month is better to hold certain events or promote important projects.

I spent over 20 years working in a parish where we collected Mass attendance numbers for every Sunday. We could look at the numbers and see the effects of circumstances within and outside of our community. We could forecast more effectively offertory trends and make decisions with confidence concerning those rare times a Mass time change was needed. People who chose to express what they thought about how certain Masses were attended throughout the year were faced with facts that could not be disputed.

WHAT ZIP CODES ARE REPRESENTED?

If you truly have a community that is feeding people spiritually and communicating clearly a mission and vision, then people will travel a decent distance to join you. How healthy is the spiritual life of the parish that only has parishioners who are willing to travel 5 minutes? When people find something worth belonging to, they are willing to travel great distances to get there. I know of some parishes that have parishioners travel over 60 miles to attend Mass or participate in formation programs.

I was once working with a parish in Pittsford, New York, and we were discussing the question of whether someone from Rochester, some 15 miles away, would travel there to attend Mass or join the community. A woman expressed her concern with the discussion asking, “Surely we are not talking about going to Rochester to try and get people to come to Pittsford?” I answered saying that was not the question at hand. The real question was if this parish’s light shone bright enough that it could be seen in Rochester. When making a pastoral plan, the community needs to ask itself, “How bright does our light shine?”

MEDIAN AGE

Much about the health of a church community can be seen in looking at the median age of the population. More important than the current number is looking at that number over the last 5 years. In those numbers are clues to the effectiveness of reaching out to millennials, young families with children, and singles. Did those formation program changes made a few years ago bear fruit? Are we effectively evangelizing in our area to bring people into full communion? The median age does not answer anything definitively, but it is a key part of the puzzle.

Parishes who pay little attention to this data point may age themselves out of existence. The reality of the greying of many of our church communities is clear to all. However, assumptions based upon looking at a congregation during a Mass are simply assumptions. I have seen parishes surprised that either the actual median age is lower or higher than they expected. Assumptions can doom us to possible missteps, but facts can help us chart a more fruitful path.
WHO IS RECEIVING THE SACRAMENTS?
If there is one bit of data that the average parish does keep and use is the number of people receiving Sacraments. The number of baptisms, marriages, and first Communions are listed in bulletins across North America. Unfortunately, most of these numbers tell us little about the health of a community and give us little to use when creating a plan for the future.

Let’s face the facts. Having 100 young people receive Confirmation or Eucharist for the first time does not usually mean 100 families are fully engaged or led by intentional disciples. There is something wrong when a parish pats itself on the back because a ton of 2nd graders just received first Communion but there are very few children in the 3rd or 4th grade formation classes. Smiles are all around when all those teens receive their Confirmation, but the truth is there were more original Apostles than young people coming to Mass or involved in youth ministry.

So what sacramental numbers matter more? How about how many people are coming to the sacrament of Penance? How many people in the last 12 months have been anointed? How many adult neophytes are still active in the parish today who came into the Church three Easter Vigils ago? The numbers we all keep on sacramental records do have value in terms of the big picture. However, if we stop there, we miss out on the data that can give us real feedback of how well we are bringing people into a more mature faith.

Parishes are called to be more than places where you receive sacraments. They are to be places where people encounter God and learn how to use that sacramental grace received to live as faithful mature disciples in a world that desperately needs to hear the Gospel.

OFFERTORY TRENDS
The data collected week after week about your offertory is a valuable barometer of the parish’s level of engagement and buy-in to a mission and vision. This data becomes even more valuable when looked at in the light of additional data such as we have discussed. Unfortunately, finance data tends to be the primary or singular data used in most parishes.

When a congregation has bought into a mission and taken ownership of their parish, there is rarely a need to ask for increased giving. Looking at how your offertory numbers are trending will provide insight into what the majority of your congregation is thinking and feeling. However, too much focus on these numbers can wear on a congregation’s morale. In the pastoral planning process, goals that look to affect the many other data points positively will then have a direct effect on the offertory. In all things, including planning, remember who you are as a parish and why you exist. Money helps us accomplish many things, but it will not be the thing that ultimately brings people to Christ.

WHAT IS GOING ON AROUND YOU?
When planning, we are setting goals based upon a forecast of the future. Either that forecast will be based upon hunches and feelings or current facts and trends. Your diocese and local government have data that will help with creating a good forecast. What are the trends in population growth in your area? Will there be changes in diocesan structure that will directly affect your community in the next few years? Are there plans for more housing near you? Will a large employer of many of your parishioners be shutting down and leaving your area?

Imagine spending so much time on a long-range plan only to find out six months later that a dramatic change in your city or town alters everything in your plan. You had the opportunity to procure that information but simply assumed it would not matter that much. It really comes down to what kind of foundation you want to build upon. Building your plan on a foundation that considers all the data available out there means taking seriously the firmness of that foundation. The data is there for you to receive. All you need to do is ask.

BE WISE AND PLAN, BUT HAVE A WISE PLAN
The baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t know where you are going, you will end up someplace else.” Unfortunately, too many parishes find themselves someplace else. A planning process is not easy and requires commitment, research, hard work, and time. However, to not plan may doom a community to years of struggle and disappointment.

If a parish is willing to do the work in creating a plan — whether it be for one, three, or five years — it should do so in a wise manner. Data helps us see where we have been, and where we are now, and can help us dream of where we could go. We will not get there by simply seeing what happens next. God has given every church community gifts and a command to use them to proclaim the Gospel. If we are good stewards, we will use all that has been given to us wisely. The Holy Spirit will always lead us, but the path will be more easily discerned if we have a plan.