

One Big Learning in Parish Renewal

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If I had to sum up my biggest learning in parish renewal, it's this: the church is not a golf club — it's a field hospital.

That image has changed how I see almost everything about leading a parish, and I think it could spare others a lot of frustration if they're just starting out.

Golf Club Christianity

A golf club is built around membership and preference. You pay your fees, you get certain perks. If you don't like the service at one club, you can always drive down the road and join another. Everything exists for the satisfaction of members.

And if we're honest, churches often drift into that mentality. People want the service time that suits them. They want their favourite hymns, their style of coffee, their seat in the pews. They want clergy to keep them comfortable. We settle for what Dallas Willard called a Gospel of Sin Management.

It's subtle, but it's consumerism dressed in religious clothes. The problem is, that's not renewal. That's maintenance. And maintenance won't bring anyone out of darkness into the light of Christ.



Field Hospital Discipleship

A field hospital isn't a nice, big, well-funded hospital with a thousand staff, polished floors, and a pleasant waiting room.

It's a handful of people working in rough conditions — often close to the front lines — doing whatever it takes to keep the wounded alive. Supplies are short. The environment is dangerous. There's no luxury or safety, only urgency and compassion.

That, I've come to believe, is a far better picture of the church.

We are not a club tucked away from the battle — we are God's field hospital, operating in enemy territory, binding up the broken-hearted and tending the wounded in Christ's name.

It's messy and uncomfortable. You never know who's coming through the door next — sometimes it's your neighbour, sometimes it's you. Everyone's hands are needed, because lives are on the line.

And here's the truth: when you serve in a field hospital, you don't come for your preferences. You come to serve. That's what makes it powerful.

The Pain of Pruning

Of course, not everyone wants that shift. In renewal, some people leave when the golf-club perks disappear. That's painful, but it's also part of what Jesus meant in John 15 when he said the Father prunes fruitful branches so they bear more fruit.

Pruning hurts. You feel the loss. But without it, there's no growth.

I had to learn to grieve those moments but not to cling to them. The church belongs to Jesus, not to me — and my role is to steward faithfully, not to keep everyone happy.

Unity Over Cliques

There's another danger tied to the golf-club mindset: cliques. They form naturally when we cluster around our preferences.

It looks harmless at first — a group that prefers one style of worship, or one type of music, or one way of “doing” church. But over time, cliques fracture unity.

And unity is the soil of growth. Without it, the mission dies on the vine. Jesus warned the disciples about this in Mark 9 — when they tried to exclude someone “not following us,” he told them to stop drawing lines, because the tent of God’s kingdom is always bigger than our preferences.

A golf club narrows the circle: insiders and outsiders, members and non-members. A field hospital widens it: whoever’s wounded, whoever needs help, whoever comes through the door.

That’s renewal.

Slow Work, Lasting Fruit

So what does it look like in practice to move from golf club to field hospital? Honestly, it’s slow, often hidden work.

It’s eating together, not because the menu is perfect, but because relationships matter. It’s letting children make noise and chaos in worship, because their presence matters more than polished liturgy. It’s praying together, not for comfort but for courage.

Those rhythms don’t look impressive on paper, but they grow resilience and fruit. They remind us that church isn’t about us — it’s about God’s kingdom breaking in.

To Those Just Starting Out

If you’re just setting out on this journey, here’s my encouragement:

Don’t settle for golf-club Christianity.

It’s tempting, because it looks attractive and keeps people happy in the short term. But it won’t last, and it won’t bring renewal.

Instead, build a field hospital.

Messy, sacrificial, and full of purpose.

Invite people into something more dangerous and more beautiful than consumerism. Teach them that their preferences aren’t the point — their participation in God’s mission is.

It’s harder, yes. It means pruning, and it means some will walk away. But the fruit that remains is worth it.

Because once a community stops organising itself around what it likes, and starts organising itself around who it’s called to serve, it stops being a club.

It becomes the church.

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