

# Rebuilt changing parishes near and far

**By Maria Weiring**

In July, Nick Hjorth flew from Southern California to Baltimore with the sole purpose of visiting the Church of the Nativity in Timonium. The 36-yearold was convinced the Baltimore County parish was onto something unique, and had the key to revitalizing his own faith community.

Hjorth packed the book that inspired his trip: “Rebuilt: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost and Making Church Matter.” Written by Nativity’s pastor, Father Michael White, and pastoral associate, Tom Corcoran, the book has sold more than 80,000 copies and received widespread acclaim from Catholic leaders, including Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori.

“If you love your parish, read this book,” New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan wrote in its introduction.

Published by Ave Maria Press in February 2013, the 320-page book describes how Nativity’s leaders remodeled parish life, from Sunday homilies to monetary donations, with the goal of transforming fallen-away Catholics into disciples.

The book has drawn visitors such as Hjorth to Nativity from across the U.S. and other countries; each weekend at least one person or group attends because of “Rebuilt,” said Kristin Costanza, Nativity’s communications director and many visitors’ first contact.

“People are very hungry to change things up and not leave things as they were,” she said. “Sometimes it’s not even the specific programs they want to see, or the specific ministries; sometimes they just want encouragement that things don’t have to stay as they are, with parish churches closing and rapidly losing members; it’s not a lost cause.”

Nativity - which draws 4,100 people on weekends - is also constantly trying new things, Costanza said. Its model will be at the heart of the parish’s Matter conference, Nov. 6-7. Once geared for parishioners, the conference is now directed outward, to parish leaders elsewhere seeking to revitalize their faith communities. More than 515 had registered as of Oct. 30.

## **Timonium Tim’**

At Nativity, parishioners introduce themselves as former “Timonium Tims,” a sign for Costanza that its approach is working. Hjorth says he relates to the character the book’s authors use to describe Nativity’s target audience - a person who grew up in the Catholic Church but doesn’t attend, and hasn’t for years.

After confirmation, Hjorth left the Catholic faith and didn't return until his girlfriend - now wife - brought him to Mass in New York. During that time, Hjorth was involved in Protestant ministries and deepened his faith, he said. It wasn't until he re-encountered the Eucharist that he realized he was missing the sacraments.

The pastoral council president at St. Philip the Apostle Church in Pasadena, Calif., Hjorth wants to invigorate other Catholics' faith. In March 2013, he organized a presentation from Catholic speaker and author Matthew Kelly at his parish. He was thrilled to find a packed church. He wondered what it would take to make his parish like that every weekend.

Hjorth couldn't put down "Rebuilt." He encouraged other parish leaders to read it, and it sparked the development of a parish-wide plan to change its approach to ministry.

"Like any organization, you have to re-examine your 'why' every so often to make sure you're still moving," he said.

Sharing best practices seemed popular among Protestant churches, but not Catholic parishes, said Corcoran. He knew "Rebuilt" would resonate with parish leaders, but said was still surprised by the large response.

"There's a movement coming of how to reinvigorate the parish, and we're just part of that," Corcoran said.

### **Rethinking church**

Father Mike Jones, pastor of St. Pius X in Bowie, identified with the struggles of Father White, who was unavailable for comment for this article, and Corcoran at Nativity before they initiated changes.

He heard the pair speak at the Mid-Atlantic Pastoral Conference in Baltimore last March and appreciated their practical approach. He asked his 10-member parish staff to read "Rebuilt," and to incorporate some of Nativity's philosophy.

St. Pius X registered 70 new households within a year.

"Unlike so many other conferences or books I read, it was practical," Father Jones said. "In the past year, we figured we started about 12 new things. Our goal is to go deeper into it and people in their different ministries."

Father Peter J. DiMaria, pastor of Sacred Heart in Royersford, Pa., has visited Nativity twice and appropriated some of its ministries, including a welcoming center and cafe. Parish leaders started small groups, are revisiting the religious education model and adding an annual mission project. Reaction has been "a mixed bag," Father DiMaria said, but with a positive response among the "more devout."

With only two full-time staff members - in contrast to 18 full- and part-time staff members at Nativity - the southeast Pennsylvania parish is limited in what it can do, Father DiMaria said. He also doesn't think his parish - which he describes as "more traditional" - would adopt Nativity's use of Christian rock. Still, he said, parishioners

who have read “Rebuilt,” including the entire parish council, are grateful for the roadmap.

### **Not for everybody**

“Rebuilt” won a first-place 2014 Catholic Press Association award in the pastoral ministry category. It inspired a sequel, “Tools for Rebuilding: 75 Really, Really Practical Ways to Make Your Parish Better” (Ave Maria Press, November 2013).

“The biggest impact ‘Rebuilt’ has had on our parish is that it’s made our parishioners very excited and proud of where they worship,” Costanza said. “There’s an increase of spirit in our congregation and they recognize, because we shared it with them, that we feel like God has placed a call on our church to encourage other churches, as well as be a local church in Timonium.”

In “Rebuilt,” Father White and Corcoran are clear that not all their practices translate well elsewhere. Deacon Greg Kandra, author of the “The Deacon’s Bench” blog, reviewed a series of Nativity Masses and offered some criticism: At times, he said, the use of screens and rock music was distracting, but acknowledged he’s not a “Timonium Tim.”

Costanza said Nativity knows that its worship style, message-series homilies or environment won’t resonate everywhere.

“Our goal is not to please everybody,” she said, “but to reach the unchurched.”

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