

“Nick Wagner has once again written a practical and insightful book for those directing or supporting the RCIA in a parish. This book provides RCIA teams and directors with a place to start, where to go, and a good idea of what seekers need. Nick is a great storyteller and this book is rich with stories that enlighten and inform us. In particular, the parallel he draws between the demise of the steel industry and what we do in RCIA is thought provoking and accurate. The importance of the Kerygma is central to this book as Nick leads the reader through an uncomplicated core content focused on Jesus and aimed at making not just Catholics but ‘Catholic Disciples.’”

— Cathy Marbury
Associate Director of Religious Education
Archdiocese of Atlanta

“Starting from the ground up is just what Nick Wagner does in his newest book. Our RCIA processes have become encumbered by false understandings that the ‘program’ needs to be a graduate course in theology, and not about a time of catechesis on changing hearts for living the life of a disciple of Christ: a process. So often our contemporary Church is lured away from the wisdom of lived experience by the newest and shiniest ‘program’ on how to enliven our parishes. Nick starts with what the Church teaches, and he stays the course regarding his solid experience on presenting the richness of the RCIA process for changing hearts. Nick lays out the fact that the RCIA process is not about knowledge only, but about discipleship.”

— Dean Daniels
Office for Worship
Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Field Hospital Catechesis

The Core Content for RCIA Formation

Nick Wagner



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Chapter 1

Disrupting the Church

Clayton Christensen, author of *The Innovator's Dilemma*, likes to tell business leaders the story of the transformation of the steel industry:

Most of the world's steel has been made by massive integrated steel companies. The other way to do it is to build a mini mill. In a mini mill, you melt scrap in electric furnaces, and you could easily fit four of them in this room. The most important thing about a mini mill is that you can make steel for twenty per cent lower cost than you can make it in an integrated mill. Now, imagine you're the C.E.O. of a steel company somewhere. In a really good year, your net profit will be two to four per cent. (quoted in Larissa MacFarquhar, "When Giants Fail," *The New Yorker*)

So if you were that CEO, wouldn't you immediately switch your business to a mini mill model? No, you would not. According to Christensen, not a single integrated steel company, anywhere in the world, has built a mini mill. "Today, all but one of the integrated mills have gone bankrupt," said Christensen.

On first hearing this story, you might think the managers are stupid. Or overly cautious. Or just resistant to change. But think about that for a minute. These are the leaders of what had been some of the most powerful, most profitable companies in the history of the world. You don't get to a level like that by accident.

Christensen's analysis of the situation is that the leaders of the big steel companies did exactly the right thing—according to their worldview. The problem is they had a faulty worldview. Actually, it was more than a worldview. Christensen called it a “near-religion,” the “Church of New Finance.”

What Does the Steel Industry Have to Do with Faith Formation?

About now, you may be wondering what this has to do with RCIA ministry. Or maybe you've guessed already. Many of us have a worldview—even a “near-religion”—about how RCIA is supposed to work. And, like the big integrated steel mills, many of our RCIA processes are in trouble. So stick with me a minute as we look more closely at what happened to big steel and the lesson we can learn for our formation processes.

Christensen discovered that every business sector has a “near-religion” worldview that blinds it to new ways of doing things. Everywhere we turn, new technologies arise that disrupt big, established companies. And here's the weird part. These new technologies are often discovered or developed by the big companies themselves. But they are deemed too inferior in quality or profit potential to be worth the time to invest in. So a smaller upstart company takes over the “low” end of the market, eventually growing big enough to disrupt its larger competitors. Here's how it worked in the steel industry.

The first builders of mini mills would make steel by melting down scrap metal. The only thing their product was good for was making the steel rods that reinforced concrete: rebar. Rebar is the lowest tier of the steel market, and the profit margin is very low. The big steel companies were happy to have someone else make rebar. They could then drop their lowest tier offering and focus

on higher quality, higher profit-making products, like the sheet metal used in car manufacturing.

However, as the mini mills got better at what they did, they set their sights on the next lowest level of big steel's market and started producing that at rates the big companies couldn't match. And the trend continued, bit by bit, with the mini mills climbing up from the bottom and the big companies moving higher and higher upmarket. The trend continued until the mini mills had almost the total market and most of the bigger companies declared bankruptcy.

The "Nones" Are Disrupting Christianity

As church leaders, we can learn a lesson from the story of the steel mills. Our sector—Christianity—is being disrupted. The number of people in the United States who claim to be religiously unaffiliated—the "nones"—is larger than either the number of Catholics or the number of mainline Protestants. And yet, the nones report having a deep feeling of "spirituality." Someone is making spiritual rebar and offering more attractive options than our big, integrated religious institutions can.

The bishops of the Catholic Church are not oblivious to this trend. Like the CEOs of big steel, you don't get to be a bishop by being out of touch. In 2012, the bishops of the world met as a synod to advise Pope Benedict XVI about the needs of the church. Pope Benedict stepped down before the propositions of the synod could be acted upon, and it was left to Pope Francis to carry them out.

Proposition 7 proposed that "the Church proclaim the permanent world-wide missionary dimension of her mission in order to encourage all the particular Churches to evangelize." This is akin to the leaders of big steel saying we have to make more steel. Proposition 8 recognized the influence of secular culture. The bishops said, "As Christians we cannot remain indifferent to the process of secularization. We are in fact in a situation similar to that of the first Christians and as such we should see this both as a challenge and a possibility." This is similar to the steel CEOs recognizing the threat of the mini mills and resolving to address it.

Proposition 9 says, “The ‘first proclamation’ is where the kerygma, the message of salvation of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, is proclaimed with great spiritual power.” And closely linked is Proposition 10, which says, “It is an inalienable right for each person, whatever one’s religion or lack of religion, to be able to know Jesus Christ and the Gospel. This proclamation, given with integrity, must be offered with a total respect for each person, without any form of proselytizing.”

How to Not Get Disrupted

To me, these last two propositions are the key to solving our disruption problem. If we can recognize the challenge and possibility of increased secularization (proposition 8) and become truly missionary (proposition 7), we will become a dynamic church instead of a disrupted church. We have to proclaim the spiritually powerful message that Jesus offers salvation to everyone, and we have to do it with total respect for each person, without proselytizing.

But there is a big hurdle, much like the hurdle faced by the big, integrated steel companies. While the big companies were capable of turning out rebar, their focus and passion was upmarket—producing high-quality sheet metal. In a similar way, our big, integrated church is capable of announcing the simple “first proclamation” that Jesus offers salvation to all. And yet, much of our institutional effort is still focused “upmarket,” offering sophisticated theological teachings and religious practices designed to meet the needs of the most active members of our parishes.

Just as the big steel CEOs had a worldview, a “near-religion,” that kept them focused on the high-profit products, most parish leaders today have an actual religion that is focused on the already-religious. It is almost impossible to imagine disrupting the current situation to build “mini mills” in the middle of our parishes.

And yet, almost as soon as he was elected and every day since, that is exactly what Pope Francis has been exhorting us to do.