

## Case Study: Fr. Dan

Fr. Dan is 67 years old and the pastor of a small parish in a large city where planning for reconfiguration, downsizing and merging of parishes has been underway for the past 6 months. His diocese engaged in this planning process to address the shortage of priests as well as the changing demographics, especially in the city parishes. Fr. Dan has been in the parish for six years and is comfortable with both its size, his living and work space and with the parishioners. His parishioners expressed some concern about the size of the parish which has grown smaller in the past two years due to recent highway construction nearby, but Fr. Dan told them emphatically “our parish will survive this process.”

Fr. Dan had shown only a modest interest in the planning process until recently when he learned that in the preliminary report, his parish is on the list to close. Initially, after hearing the report, Fr. Dan ignored the information and withdrew from any interaction with the diocese, his fellow priests and even the parishioners. When he stopped taking calls from the diocese, the Vicar asked to see him. Fr. Dan arrived at the meeting and immediately began to challenge the decision to close his parish. He questioned the process and erupted in a fit of anger, yelling about the insensitivity of the Bishop and of the entire planning group. When the Vicar raised the question of dealing with loss and encouraged Fr. Dan to talk about loss with a counselor or trusted friend, he replied angrily, “I don’t have the problem, you do.”

### Loss and The Grief Cycle

After several sleepless nights and a few angry outbursts in the parish, Fr. Dan decided to talk to a counselor about how to understand what was happening to him. The counselor first helped Fr. Dan to name honestly the changes that he would experience with the closing of his parish: changes in relationships, losing his “home” and his role as pastor. As they discussed these changes, Fr. Dan realized that they involve many losses:

- **Loss of attachments:** to places—his home and church; roles—being the pastor; relationships—with his staff and parishioners and things
- **Loss of turf**—deciding how things are done; regular responsibilities,

and sense of home

- **Loss of structure**—daily routine and what is familiar
- **Loss of a future**—not knowing what is to come
- **Loss of meaning**—asking “why me?” at this time of my life
- **Loss of control**—not having the final say

As Fr. Dan talked about these losses, he realized that change becomes more stressful when it impacts so many facets of life. He cried as he spoke about loss of a future, recognizing that he was thinking not only about an immediate future, but also imagining that his next assignment might be his last. The word “future” took on a whole new meaning.

Fr. Dan found it particularly helpful when the counselor explained that when change is perceived as negative, a person may experience alternating periods of activity and passivity as a way of coping with change. He now understands that withdrawing and isolating behaviors and angry outbursts were his ways of coping with the inevitable losses associated with the closing of his parish. He could easily identify with the emotions and sensations that accompany the loss of someone or something dear: shock, denial, and anger. When he questioned the intensity of his feelings of sadness and loss, he realized that he was touching back into some previous losses that he had not addressed. He was mourning for past losses as well as for the losses to come. Also, Fr. Dan identified feeling guilty, wondering if he had done enough to keep parishioners from leaving the parish.

After several weeks in counseling, Fr. Dan came to realize that he was midway through the grief cycle. Having experienced shock, denial, anger and even some depression, he was now at the point of being more realistic and accepting of his situation. He needed to make sense of what was happening and to move forward. At the urging of his counselor, Fr. Dan connected with other priests also impacted by the changes. By sharing with them and experiencing their support, he felt less alone and more able to move forward in the healing process. Talking with other priests also helped him to connect with Karl Rahner’s thinking that death and resurrection happen many times in a

person’s life. He also took the advice of a trusted older priest who recommended that he bring his suffering to prayer and that he lament with God. Using the psalms as a model, he shared with God his struggles and asked God to be with him and his parishioners.

During prayer, Fr. Dan realized that the closing of the parish was not only affecting him, but his parishioners as well. This insight, coupled with having done his own grief work, helped him to begin to reconnect with his parishioners and to help them with their grieving process. He felt he now had the strength to be with the members of his parish and mourn with them, i.e., to pass through grief, acknowledge and accept the losses, say farewell, and to create some ways to honor their past so that they can all move on and to form new attachments and create new communities of faith.

Fr. Dan now realizes that this entire change process has gifted him with new insights and skills. He understands the importance of personal support and connection with others in coping with change and grieving. He is learning to be present to his feelings, to hear their message, and to express them in healthy ways. He understands that overreactions to current changes and losses may come from past experiences where losses were ignored or passed over. He is more patient with members of his parish as they cope with the closing of the parish because he knows that the timetable for grieving differs for each person and there is not a “typical” response to loss.

Finally, Fr. Dan is valuing being human and spiritual as he approaches life’s challenges by doing his part and relying on God to do the rest. Jeremiah 29:11 now has new meaning for him - “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper, plans to give you hope and a future.”

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