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Leadership in Complex Pastoring Situations

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Parishes are changing dramatically. The one-pastor, one-parish model with a homogenous community of parishioners is becoming the exception. According to research published in 2011, 7 percent of all parishes in the United States are the product of a recent merger of two or more parishes, 27 percent share a pastor with at least one other parish, and 38 percent are considered multicultural.¹ Since this research was first published, these numbers have increased.

Clearly, these emerging parish models call for new forms of pastoral leadership. What I refer to as “complex parish pastoring”—spreading your time and talents among multiple parishes and multiple cultural communities—is more and more the rule rather than the exception. And your ability to learn new pastoral skills and adapt to these new parish realities will in large part determine your success as a pastor and a leader.

Adding to the complexity of changing parish models is the fact that the Catholic population will continue to grow, especially through the influx of Hispanics, while the number of priests will continue to decline. In recent years there have been questions raised by the Vatican over diocesan initiatives to close parishes. As a result, I believe that pastors will increasingly be asked to serve in even larger parishes, multiple parishes, and parishes that are more culturally diverse and, hence, more complex.

My hometown Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin, provides a good illustration of the rapidly changing landscape of the Catholic Church in America. In 1988, we had 219 parishes; today, we have 157. We’ve been through many parish reorganizations and changes. Fully 65 percent

of our parishes now share a pastor with at least one other parish. In one case, we had a single pastor with responsibility for six parishes. In recent years we have also taken steps to meet the growing needs of the Hispanic community in the city of Green Bay. This community has doubled over the past decade to embrace at least 14 percent of all households in the city. Within our diocese, eight parishes are now engaged in special ministries with the Hispanic community. In addition, we have another seventeen parishes that, while single canonical parishes, have two or more churches that celebrate Mass each weekend.

To be effective pastors and leaders in complex pastoring situations, we need to begin by asking the basic question, How do we define, or what do we mean by, effective leadership? There are two parts. First is the ability to articulate a *vision*, to make God's dream a reality within the church. And second, leadership is the ability to *engage people* to make that vision a reality. We need to instill in parish leaders and parishioners a sense of ownership and a willingness to help bring God's vision to life. Both parts are essential. I know leaders who are great visionaries but don't know how to engage and motivate people to make those visions come true. Likewise, there are parishes that have engaged many people and are quite busy with activities but have no vision and aren't going anywhere. These shortcomings are magnified in complex pastoring situations.

Basic Vision

So, the first question on the road to being an effective leader of a complex parish setting is, *What's your vision of what a parish should be today?* In workshops that I've done with priests and with lay leaders around the country, I rarely get a common answer. It's obvious that we don't have a unified understanding of the modern-day basic vision for even a traditional parish, much less a complex parish. This raises an even more important question: How effective can we be as a church if pastors, lay leaders, and parishioners don't have a common understanding of why the parish exists?

There is an official answer to that question. It comes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2179, which cites four parish building blocks. First, the parish is a community entrusted to a pastor as its shepherd. It is a web of relationships comprised of loving, caring

people who support one another. Second, it's a place where the faithful gather for Eucharist, the sacraments, and worship. Third, it's a place where religious doctrine is taught and people are formed throughout their lives. Finally, the parish is a place where charity and good works are practiced.² Pope Francis has added a fifth building block: evangelization.³

So, when we talk about a vision for the modern-day parish, we should keep in mind these basic building blocks that should be reflected in any written parish mission statement. *How many of us have a parish mission statement?* Each parish should have a unique mission statement that reflects its basic vision. Unfortunately, most are long, rambling documents. My challenge to you is, consider boiling down your statement to fifteen to twenty words that can be easily remembered. At the very least, it should acknowledge that you are a community that celebrates the Eucharist, teaches Catholic doctrine, and practices charity, good works, and evangelization. To my mind, these elements should be at the core of any good parish mission statement.

Portrait of Today's Pastor

So if the vision is clear, what is the reality of how pastors spend their time? Research offers some insight, showing how the ever-growing complexity and diversification of parishes has reconfigured the role of pastor. Instead of being able to spend adequate time on your pastoral ministry—the reason most of you responded to God's call to serve—you're now required to spend more and more time on church administration. A study done in 2006 across various church denominations showed that priests, on average, work fifty-six hours per week. This was the most hours per week on average of any denomination in the country. Just as revealing, the study found that, on average, 31 percent of Catholic pastors' time is devoted to administering and attending meetings. On the other hand, Protestant pastors spend, on average, 14 percent of their time on administration.⁴

Clearly, there's something wrong with this picture. I'd like to suggest there are much better uses for your time than committing nearly a third of it to administration. It's helpful to look to the wisdom of Pope Benedict XVI on this matter. When asked at a meeting with Italian priests in July 2007 how they should handle their growing responsibilities, including ministering to multiple parishes, the Holy Father replied that

their bishops “must see clearly how to ensure that the priest continues to be a pastor and does not become a holy bureaucrat.” The Holy Father went on to state, “I think it very important to find the right ways to delegate . . . [and the priest] should be the one who holds the essential reins himself, but can rely on collaborators.”⁵

Engaging People to Carry Out the Vision: Art of Delegating

Remember, good leaders articulate a vision but, just as important, they engage people to make the vision a reality. One of the most important tools for engaging people is through “delegating,” as noted by Pope Benedict. It’s one of the essential skill-sets that pastors—especially those in complex environments—need to actively cultivate. Unfortunately, there are a number of myths and misconceptions regarding delegating responsibilities. I’d like to address some of them.

First myth: *You can’t trust employees and volunteers to be responsible.* Keep in mind that part of your job as a leader is to mentor and guide people to *be* responsible and call them to account. Here, your formation, background, training, and experience will serve you well.

Second myth: *When you delegate you lose control.* You need to learn how to delegate but not abdicate your responsibility. It is absolutely essential that you call on the people of God to use their gifts and talents in service to the community and delegate as much of the responsibility as is feasible. Otherwise, you fall into the common trap of “I’m the only one who can do it correctly.” And that, I can assure you, is a one-way ticket to burnout. There is only so much you can accomplish by yourself. But with the assistance of others, incredible things are possible.

Third myth: *You can’t fire a volunteer.* You certainly can and in some situations should. However, it should be done sensitively and discreetly, perhaps even couched in an invitation for them to use their gifts in a different aspect of ministry within the church.

Fourth myth: *If you delegate, volunteers will get the recognition you deserve for a job well done.* Remember, the most effective leaders are those who work in the background and celebrate the successes of those who are on their staff. Delegation actually increases your flexibility because it gives you more time to focus on your primary tasks of pastoring.

Fifth myth: *Your staff and volunteers are too busy to take on any more responsibilities.* Drawing on my own experience, I have a staff of seven and periodically fall into the trap of “Oh, they’re working so hard I can’t ask them to do one more thing.” Sure you can. Usually, that means sitting down with them to figure out what work or project they can put aside to make room for the more urgent task you need them to do. After all, you’re the one in charge.

Final myth: *Volunteers don't see the big picture.* Sometimes they don't, but isn't that your job?

What are the steps, then, to being a better delegator of responsibilities? Most important, you need to effectively communicate the task. Oftentimes, those lines break down, or they never existed, and that's when problems typically develop. You should be spending at least thirty to forty-five scheduled minutes a month, one-on-one with every member of your parish staff. Ask them, “What happened over the last month?” and “What’s coming up in the month ahead?” It’s also an opportunity to discuss with them any concerns you may have about their performance. These meetings also provide a means for you to be able to affirm and mentor them, and thereby help them in their ministry to the community or communities you serve.

Another critical step in assigning responsibilities is to delegate not just the task but the authority that staff members need to get the job done. Set the standards up front as well as your expectations of what should be done. Also, be sure to give them the background information they need and offer your full support and commitment.

Sometimes we delegate a task and come back six months later to find out the staff member or volunteer hasn't even begun the project because of other priorities. That's a sign that you haven't been a very good delegator. You should have established up front the time frame for completing the task, and then followed up at least once a month to determine what progress has been made toward that goal.

Last but not least, provide affirmation for a project well done. And when a project isn't well done, ask the question, “What did you learn?”

Engaging Laypeople

In complex pastoring situations, being a successful pastoral leader and good delegator also means you've come to accept the importance of

the laity in fulfilling your role as pastor. According to the Code of Canon Law, the pastor as shepherd “carries out the functions of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, also with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and with the *assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful*” (c. 519, emphasis added).

Part of the framework of being a great pastor today, especially in complex pastoring situations, is engaging laypeople. In the document *Ecclesia in America* (1999), Pope St. John Paul II was even more explicit: “A renewed parish needs the collaboration of laypeople and therefore a director of pastoral activity and a pastor who is able to work with others” (41). I’m always amazed that we haven’t more fully mined this pearl of wisdom from St. John Paul. In today’s environment, effective leadership means finding people who can complement your gifts as pastor.

Building Bridges among Parish Communities

Given the complex pastoring situations you find yourself in, articulating a vision for multiple communities or cultures has never been more challenging. Here again, John Paul II had some helpful advice. “One way of renewing parishes,” he suggested, “might be to consider the parish as a community of communities and movements” (*Ecclesia in America* 41). This vision has more recently been articulated by the USCCB Committee on Cultural Diversity in the 2013 publication *Best Practices for Shared Parishes: So That They May All Be One*.

What do we mean by “community of communities”? Implicit in this phrase is the ability to recognize and affirm the unique characteristics of each community within each parish, and the unique communities within each single parish, especially in multicultural situations. This requires you to directly address two questions. First, what are my vision, hopes, and dreams for my parish or parishes as a whole? And second, what are my vision, hopes, and dreams for each individual parish or community within a single parish?

In your articulation of the vision for each individual community and the broader community, it is critical to engage key leaders from each separate community. As part of that process, it’s important to find out who are the key drivers and thought leaders within these communities, and how do I build relationships with them? Remember that each

community, each ethnic group, has a unique leadership style, a unique way of coming to the table, and a unique way of getting things done.

There are three basic models to keep in mind when building bridges among diverse parish communities: coexistence, collaboration, and consolidation. Each has its unique challenges and opportunities. In the case of coexistence, separate communities are members of the same church and may share the same worship space, but that's usually where the commonality ends. There is little interaction between them; they're virtual silos. The second model is collaboration. Here, communities maintain their basic identities but also have areas of overlap that you can build on. For example, there may be several annual events—like the parish festival or Christmas program—that bring all parishioners together and can serve as a springboard for partnerships in other areas, like fund-raising and outreach. The third model is consolidation, or merger, where communities come together as a seamless whole. It's a nice ideal, but since the roots of one's primary community tend to be especially deep, a true merger of diverse communities rarely happens.

Regardless of the model that defines your parish, you should be aware of the ways in which communities can cooperate. There will always be some parish cultures and ethnic cultures that can be quite compatible and blend together nicely. Others, however, maintain strong boundaries and are resistant to consolidation. It's important for you as pastor to realistically assess what the prospects for cooperation and collaboration are. As noted by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, when dealing with diverse communities the goal is not assimilation, but *inclusion*.⁶ Don't frustrate yourself by setting up unrealistic expectations to create "unity" in the face of deeply committed and tightly bound communities that simply are not able to come together.

What are some of the variables that determine how compatible parish communities and multicultural communities within a diverse parish can be? They include ethnic identity, ecclesial identity and practices, relative size, economic health, geography, decision-making processes, parish program priorities, staff, parishioner involvement, tolerance for change, and parish viability.

Your overarching goal when managing a complex parish environment should be to create a wonderful community of communities—a beautiful new mosaic—and not necessarily a melting pot. To accomplish this, you need to come to grips with three fundamental questions:

- What do these communities share in common that you can build on?
- What's unique and special in each community that must be acknowledged, honored, and respected?
- What's the best way to provide pastoral leadership to each community within this mosaic?

In responding to these questions, never lose sight of the fact that change—external change that you can see and touch—is easy; but transition—changing people's hearts, attitudes, beliefs, and values—takes a lot more time and patience. Many would suggest this kind of change, or coming together, literally takes generations.

A recent look at the field of social psychology has provided some new insights on how to foster unity between and among diverse groups. The first insight is to not declare it as your goal, because that just triggers resistance and the “circling of the wagons” to fend off any change or loss of identity. Instead, pastoral leaders should affirm diverse groups and help them to learn how to work together on important projects. As they work together, they build relationships. The relationships break down barriers between them. Their joint accomplishments provide them with a shared sense of pride and a new identity, and over time help to foster unity.

Multi-Parish Pastoring

It is important to note that when comparing traditional parishes to multi-parish ministries, research shows there is little or no difference when it comes to parishioner and leader evaluations of overall satisfaction and their evaluation of the quality of ministries and services provided by the parishes.⁷

Multi-parish pastoring does have its own set of distinct challenges. The biggest of these, according to research, is lack of time. More specifically, how do you manage your private time, scheduling complexities, and drive time between parishes? Just as significantly, how do you use the limited time you *do* have to best advantage, knowing you can't possibly be in as many places as you want, or need, to be.

The second greatest challenge, research shows, is attempting to manage multiple parishes where there is little discernible cooperation or collaboration among its diverse communities, or where parishioners feel you favor the other parish and don't spend enough time with them. These may seem like petty matters, but to parishioners they're very real.

Third on the list of challenges for multi-parish pastors is finding replacement help for days off, vacations, retreats, and service days outside the parish. This challenge can easily throw you into the guilt trap of not taking days off.

Finally—and not unrelated—is the challenge of serving small parishes with their limited staffing and resources.⁸

While the challenges of multiple-parish pastoring are very real, there is a growing body of research, best practices, and organizational models that can be a great help to pastors and parish leaders who serve in multiple-parish ministry situations.⁹ Multi-parish ministry should not be seen as a problem to be solved or avoided, but a model with unique opportunities for the sharing of gifts and talents among communities that need to be further developed.¹⁰

In the Diocese of Green Bay, we've seen firsthand how complex the parish—and the ministry of pastoring—have become. Beware of self-fulfilling prophecies. If you believe that navigating your way through diverse cultures and multiple parishes, while managing your time effectively, has made your job more difficult, if not burdensome, then it probably will be just that. On the other hand, if you view complex pastoring as an opportunity to be stretched—to orchestrate diverse unique gifts and talents into the creation of a beautiful mosaic—then you will find your ministry more stimulating and rewarding. God be with you and bless you in your efforts.

Endnotes

1. Mark Gray, Mary Gautier, and Melissa Cidade, *The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes*, Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership CARA report (Washington, DC: NALM, 2011).

2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (United States Catholic Conference—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).

3. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), 2013.
4. Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).
5. "Meeting with Italian Priests," *Origins* 37, no. 12 (August 30, 2007).
6. Committee on Cultural Diversity, *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers* (USCCB, 2012).
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