

Best Practices in Parish Cooperation

What is it? How does a parish start? Is anyone doing it nearby? It may be easier than one imagines. But first let's start with a little imagination. Consider this question: Which is *your* parish more like – a stone cathedral or a towering sequoia?



Before you answer, recall that even the greatest of the cathedrals, neither stood as tall, nor lasted as long as the redwood giants. Some sequoias, still standing today, pre-date Christ. Perhaps these mighty trees are a living parable about the importance of cooperation. Sequoias are even more incredible when one considers their height and the forces of nature that these trees have withstood century after century. While most trees have a tap root that anchors it deep in the earth to resist the buffets of wind and weather, the sequoia does not. And yet it is the sequoia that has proven the most successful, standing taller and living longer than any other tree. The reason is that the root system of the sequoia is intertwined.

Think about it. The decisive adaptation that sequoias made was in developing an interconnected root system. That is the secret of their towering height and incredible longevity. These ancient cypress families are unique in that they literally hold each other up. The sequoia lives as a cooperative community. This is a vital lesson for vibrant Catholic parish life. This has been the strength of the Catholic Church throughout the centuries. We are a communion of communities, who share a united identity and claim a cooperative destiny.

The days of parochialism are over. There are many ways that parishes can benefit from cooperative effort. Examples of ways that parishes have already benefited through mutual cooperation include:

- saving on expenses (e.g. program supplies, subscriptions and quantity purchases)
- sharing part-time staffing
- scheduling Mass and holy day events
- large scale faith formation events
- jointly sponsored RCIA
- sponsoring joint reconciliation and devotions
- shared hospital chaplaincy coverage
- enrichment for liturgy or faith formation leaders
- outreach/evangelization efforts
- care for the poor (building projects, community dining room, pantry or clothes closets)
- occasional pulpit exchanges
- idea sharing between liturgy committees
- marriage preparation programs
- large or extensive programs that lend themselves to pooling resources (e.g. Lenten speaker series, JustFAITH, Come and See, or a youth rally)



Consider practical suggestions for greater cooperation today...

Tips to Get Started

Cooperation among parishes is not a new idea in fact it is at the heart of being Catholic. Many parishes have done it for years. So why not collaborate? Parishes collaborate whenever they want more... or want to save more.... Cooperation can start that easily. Parishes can start with...

... **co-sponsor an enrichment event for volunteer ministry leaders.** This can be an evening of reflection or a practical training event.

... **share resources.** This is a no-brainer for some parishes who share the cost of expensive gear (trailers, tents, concession stands) that are only used occasionally (e.g. picnics, vacation bible school or the lawn fete). Make sure to decide in advance about how storage, scheduling, maintenance, repair and replacement costs will be handled if something happens to what is commonly owned. St. Barnabas and Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament in Depew have been doing this for years.

... **make “inter-parish cooperation” a regular item on the vicariate and parish pastoral council agendas.** One parish cluster went so far as to insert this question after each topic on its agenda – Why don’t we do this together? It sounds simplistic but this one question made a world of difference to the parishes in that cluster.

... **co-sponsor an enrichment event or form a book club.** And start with the parish leaders. Invite the pastoral teams and key parish leaders to choose a book. You can discuss the latest sensational title or consider something ground-breaking (e.g. *The Mission Driven Parish* by Pat Brennan; *Growing an Engaged Church* by Albert Winsemen; *Keeping the Covenant: Taking the Parish to the Next Level* by Thomas Sweetser, SJ; or *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* by Israel Galindo. Each month the discussion can be hosted at a participating parish location. This is an enjoyable occasion to get acquainted, share on what it means to be church, grow in spirit, while simultaneously fostering a sense of unity and Catholic identity starting with the leaders.

... **increase communication between corresponding groups and personnel in neighboring parishes.** I wish I had a dime for every time that someone from one parish complained about their neighboring parish for not promoting our event or grousing because the other parish sponsored a competing activity on our night. The greatest tragedy of this situation is that the issue of contention is almost never explored with the alleged offending parish. What if it is the culture of silence that is the cause of such problems? Anyone who is married knows that it is silence that does the most damage. Start communicating regularly.

Learning from Local Successes

1. North Erie Vicariate - These vicariate meetings are lively and they address serious issues. And this vicariate cooperatively sponsors several educational activities each year. More than just a meeting place of ideas, this group has the reputation for being a watering hole that sustains committed lay leaders from many parishes.

It all started when the vicar gave lay leaders responsibility for determining the scope of the lay vicariate group. The first gatherings were focused on getting acquainted. After that the group spent a few meetings to brainstorm ideas, identify needs, and develop a statement of mission. Eventually the group saw adult education and support for the priests as the primary focus. There were additional efforts to host enrichment programs.

Through the vicariate, several parishes have cooperated to sponsor talks on what it means to be Catholic, and learn about other religions. The vicariate regularly co-sponsors a Lenten lecture series, and various parishes have cooperated to host a "Come Home" and "Come and See" programs for outreach to non-Catholics and fallen away Catholics. Whenever the vicariate offers a program, they move it around and work hard to encourage the hosting parish to relax and allow other parishes to help with greeting, hospitality and other tasks. This approach keeps everyone working as a team.

The vicariate now also maintains parish clusters where the support and idea sharing continues. Parish leaders support one another and think creatively together about ways to respond to evangelization and transitions. Anyone is welcome to sit-in on one of their meetings and share in their refreshments.

2. Lessons from Lockport - The combined parishes of Lockport jointly sponsor city-wide faith formation in a variety of formats. The Catholic churches in Lockport were historically established along ethnic lines which are no longer relevant to the families and young adults who live there now. Lockport parishes decided to work together to offer three faith formation options for Catholics of that city - a traditional class, a blended intergenerational program and summer courses. In this new cooperative approach, any Catholic from any parish can attend any program on any campus. The Director of Faith Formation, offered multiple options in various locations to address the main objection to participation. Now the parents are empowered to decide on how to best foster faith in their family. In 2009 the combined program served over 600 families and the parishes expect even more in 2010. There were some challenges and many unexpected benefits.

The two major CHALLENGES were: 1. some adults felt less familiar with the faces and names of other families who participated in the program; 2. many commented of being fatigued by the changes as they had not fully emerged from the reconfiguration process. By the same token, this cooperative venture presented the opportunity to make needed improvements that might otherwise have met with knee-jerk resistance. One such change was the move to a parent-child centered retreat for families involved in sacramental preparation. This innovation alone led to both a greatly improved retreat experience and increase in participation. In just the first year there was an amazing response: 76 students out of a possible 83 students participated along with at least one parent.

The major BENEFITS of cooperative effort included:

- A shift in mindset of Lockport Catholics from parochialism to Catholicism. They see themselves as Catholics first and members of a particular worship site second. There is a sense of a larger and a more unified church across the city of Lockport.
- The children and youth enjoy the opportunity to be together with those that they see in school each day. This positive result was due to the efforts of school teachers, many of whom are parishioners and catechists, who helped to maintain continuity for the students and parents.
- Improved communication with families for all the parishes involved. This is due to the consistency of one method and channel that comes with a unified faith formation program.
- Creative use of space in the various parish buildings in town. For example, in Lockport, one building is particularly suited for use as a city-wide retreat center.

These innovations worked well due to the proximity of the participating churches. This is one example of how inter-parish cooperation helped Catholics make the shift from parochialism to Catholicism.

Necessary Attitudes for Successful Cooperation

It all starts with attitude. No matter how clever the idea, it is unlikely that there will be a benefit unless participants can operate out of a cooperative mindset. Success in cooperative efforts requires looking beyond oneself. It means looking beyond the church as a parish. And it means facing one's fears.

Consider yourself: What if someone suggests a multiple parish outreach effort to you. What is your first reaction? Some become overcome by fears (e.g. worrying that those who come forward will find the other parish(es) more attractive). What is the worst that can happen? People do choose that other parish. (Which they probably would have anyway, if left to shop on their own). But, if a cooperative outreach is designed well, we have the chance to find out why people prefer one parish or another.

Of course, it is more likely that 'different strokes will benefit different folks' and all parishes will benefit from any new interest in a more balanced way. No matter what the outcome, cooperative efforts call us to be a more self aware, encourage us to be more welcoming, and invite us to face the real issues that affect why people make important choices about church participation. Insight benefits those who care about the vitality of their church community. And it gives us a chance to learn from our mistakes.

Are there alternatives? Yes. Do not reach out and people will go somewhere else (maybe not even a Catholic church), without the learning about how to be a more attractive church. Cooperative efforts serve as a mirror into our own community – its beauty and blemishes.

Some parishes worry about over-stimulating a need that cannot be satisfied with limited parish resources. Some fear more chaos after a time of instability, others fear lose of identity much as the early Church did when Paul was drawing thousands of Gentiles into a small community of Jewish Christians but in the end parish vitality is about serving the People of God and that will necessitate transformation. And it is true that success comes less from doing things right and more from doing the right things. Change should not be feared. Change should be made intentionally, after careful investigation and prayerful consideration.

Leaders need a compelling reason to cooperate. Leaders have to face the bedeviling questions: What are we afraid of? What is to be gained? What is the risk? The challenge is to get beyond parochialism. Parochialism is the greatest weapon of those who are successfully proselytizing alienated Catholics. It all comes down to people.

Why cooperate? Because we are now in a new, global, religious marketplace. As Catholics we insist that one of our greatest strengths is that we are a world-wide Faith. Our unity and universality are our strong suit. This distinguishes Catholicism from many other churches. We are united in faith, not divided by it. This coupled with our diversity makes us stronger than the competition and stronger than any single church.

In the broadest sense one of our reasons for cooperation is the hope that it will transform us. It should change the way we do business. Change is our meeting place with the Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation and who united the many peoples at Pentecost. Birthing a church or growing one is messy but Acts is filled with assurances that growth is good (2:46-47).

What should we collaborate about? Why not choose any project, strategy or program that is too big to take on alone? Why not cooperate on scheduling and publishing events to save money on publicity costs? Why not plan for the future together to address common opportunities and threats? No matter how successful the first joint effort turns out, there is always much to learn with cooperative work.

Parish vitality does not just happen. It is enhanced by intentional collaboration between parishes. If this is your goal, contact the Office of Parish Life or call 716-847-5531 for help.

By Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life