

Leadership in Multi-Site Parishes

by Dennis Mahaney

Parish leaders are most effective in multi-site and merged situations when they exhibit calm and compassionate leadership. These leaders focus on a unifying purpose, plan for a positive future, empower parish leaders and encourage the parish to become a community of learning.

What kind of leaders succeed in these situations?

1. Leaders Who Plan - Newly joined parishes need time to plan. Planning is best done in accessible ways. Effective parish leaders must exercise creativity in organizing parish clusters around a united sense of purpose in ways that go beyond the assumptions implied by a “one pastor per parish” approach. Planning together helps leaders to focus the congregation on its common identity and purpose. Cooperative planning gives leaders opportunities to challenge a merely consumerist approach to parish membership. From this starting point, parish organizations and ministries can be engaged in articulating their role in making the marriage of communities work. Key parish groups are also invaluable partners in keeping parishioners engaged in the process. These groups are places to discuss and pray over what is needed for a merger to succeed.

2. Leaders Who Empower – Through our common baptism, both clergy and laity are welcomed to cooperative stewardship in the church and world. While we are co-workers in the vineyard, the structures can sometimes isolate efforts or emphasize the work of some over the contributions of others. The task of sharing ownership in parishes is no longer an option if churches want to thrive, and not merely survive. How does working together with others, both inside and outside our parish, broaden our vision of church?

3. Leaders Who Unify - The mission of a parish is often taken for granted. Unity is not uniformity. Parishes that define themselves in opposition to other parishes suffer from parochialism. It is important to ponder the reasons for our unity and diversity. What is distinct about our parish? What does God ask of us, especially in this new circumstance? Can we make a concrete difference by working together? Who are the influencers who can be enlisted to support change early on (e.g. pastoral and finance council members, long-time parishioners, parishioners who hold positions of respect in the community)? How can pastoral staff bring the pastoral council, or other parish organizations and ministries together to accomplish more or better ministry through cooperation?

4. Leaders Who Learn - Emerging issues require new approaches to pastoral ministry. Effective pastors and parish leaders in clustered parishes will have to learn how to manage the time and resources of their communities as well as learn how to manage their own time and energies to stay healthy. Since few parish leaders can go back to school, this suggests a need for local learning communities and a commitment to continuing education for those already doing pastoral leadership. Multi-site and merged parishes can require additional expertise in: parish administration, pastoral planning, collaboration, time management, leading change, systems theory, negotiation skills, fiscal and personnel management and skills in volunteer management to respond effectively to the emerging demands of parish life.

For more assistance with leadership in multisite parishes or parish clusters contact the [Office of Parish Life](#) or call 716-847-8393.