

Process for Inter-parish Cooperation

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Inter-parish cooperation is a process more than a product. Because it already happens in so many ways, inter-parish cooperation is a perennial topic for investigation and joint planning. But that does not mean that inter-parish collaboration is easy. Cooperative efforts between parishes should be pursued with the understanding that closer collaboration always includes change. No organization or community responds positively to change without preparation and effective leadership. As a result, the ownership of parish leaders is essential to successful collaboration at all levels.

What does cooperative planning look like?

Step 1: Participating parishes start by forming a joint leadership team that is constituted evenly of strategic thinkers from both parishes. It is best to include people who are committed to parish success and who are also open to the possibility of change in how parishes do things.

Step 2: The pastors notify each respective congregation from the pulpit about the formation of the team, its mission, time-table and how to be in contact with the leadership team.

Step 3: The joint leadership team invests time at the outset in team building, prayer and developing a clear statement of purpose and rationale for considering cooperative efforts.

Step 4: The joint leadership team identifies and notifies parish organizations of both parishes of their mandate as well as the incentives and limiting factors seen for inter-parish cooperation as they see it.

Step 5: If the group sees more to be gained than lost the decision is made to proceed.

Step 6: The team creates and distributes a survey to identify what organizations exist in each parish as well as the purpose, resources, aspirations and concerns of each. This survey is accompanied by a written explanation for the team (purpose, procedure, agenda and timetable).

Step 7: The team collects the survey results for organizations and reports the survey results to the organizations of participating parishes.

Step 8: The team proposes consideration of greater cooperation between organizations of the parishes (there are intentionally no recommendations as to what those steps would be).

Step 9: A second survey gets distributed to parish organizations to gauge their level of interest in further cooperation as well as to identify the concerns held by parish leaders and organizations about what this would mean for them. (Ideally this survey is conducted in person.) The questions can include: How can this organization benefit from cooperative efforts with another parish? What are the potential challenges each parish or parish organization might face? If your group believes that they would be unable to cooperate with a similar group at another parish, what viable alternatives exist for addressing the organization's needs? What change is your organization open to? What changes are off limits at this time? What questions do you have for the joint leadership team?

Step 10: The results of the second survey are collected and reported back to the organizations in both parishes along with an invitation to any one interested to attend a joint listening session to explore the possibilities further.

Step 11: At the joint listening session, the team and pastors welcome everyone, review the agenda and lead everyone in prayer. A facilitator invites participants to gather in small kindred groupings to explore the possibilities using a facilitated discussion or planning tool (e.g. S.O.A.R. matrix – Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results). The kindred groups are asked to answer the following questions: What resources do we have? What can we build upon? What has changed? What partnerships are possible? What new possibilities are there? What do we care about deeply as a community? What will motivate us? How will we know we have succeeded? What will it look like? Another way to conduct this listening session is to use a modification of the [Parish Cafe](#) approach.

Step 12: The meeting recommendations get reported back to the participating organizations, parish pastoral councils and a summary is provided to the parish congregations. Final implementation is left to the participating organizations.

At each juncture in the process, the joint leadership team consults with the relevant parish personnel and parish pastoral councils. As plans get implemented the joint leadership team is responsible for monitoring implementation, reporting progress to the congregations, soliciting feedback from effected organizations and evaluating outcomes. At St. Barnabas and Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, the various parish groups met together to discuss their common intentions, their strengths, their needs and their hopes for the future. In small kindred groups, people in the same or similar ministries discussed the benefits and challenges of cooperative planning. There was significant common understanding and courageous sharing about the likely obstacles and fears that would have to be addressed to work together. At the same time there were many good reasons to proceed and several recommendations of best ways to proceed. Some of these observations included:

- introduce new plans from the pulpit to reassure fearful parishioners
- conduct get-acquainted activities for parish leaders of similar or kindred groups so that people can get to know one another on a first name basis
- consider a pulpit exchange (weekend priest-swap) as a way for parishioners to meet the pastor next door and get better-acquainted
- invite the leaders of an organization from one parish to attend the upcoming meeting of their partner group in the other parish to get acquainted and discuss common interests
- initiate a small-scale cooperative pilot which would serve both as a successful launch and learning lab for collaborative planning. Lessons from this experience could be shared and publicized before attempting large-scale cooperative efforts invite parish pastoral councils to regularly and prayerfully consider the benefits and challenges of working together in various areas of parish life
- insure that all meetings where any changes are considered are transparent and inclusive to avoid any perception of favoritism. Whenever difficulties arise they should be addressed immediately. Wherever possible parishes should invite healing through the power of Catholic ritual.

Parish vitality does not just happen. It is enhanced by intentional collaboration between parishes. If this is your goal, contact the Office for Evangelization and Parish Life or call 716-847-8393.