

Article 4 of 6:
Meeting the Pastoral Needs of Parishioners within the Context of a Vibrant Parish
(Part 2)

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In the last article, we discussed the urgency and need to consider change. Let's now begin to look at issues that can have a direct impact on developing effective and vibrant parishes.

1. **Leadership**

There is no single leadership style identified in parishes that have been judged to be vibrant. The leadership style within a parish grouping depends on the style and preference of the pastor. What is important is that everyone recognize the style and then function accordingly. All styles can be effective. Let's briefly look at some of the leadership styles included by William E. Simon, Jr. in his book, *Great Catholic Parishes*. "We identified three different styles of leadership sharing: the collaborators, the delegators, and the consultants." (Simon, p. 20)

"Collaborators" involve a process by which the pastor and his staff work together as a well-integrated team. All issues are discussed as a team and decisions made by consensus. "Delegators" by contrast involve a process by which the pastor empowers others to be responsible for a specific area, program, or issue. The pastor hires lay leaders he feels are competent and empowers them to formulate a plan and make decisions. Finally,

"consulters" involve a process whereby the pastor seeks input from a broad cross-section of the lay leaders and parishioners in the parish grouping and then makes a decision based on the input received.

The key to all of the above leadership styles is the communication that occurs among the pastor, lay leaders, and parishioners and how lay leaders are empowered to accomplish an assigned task. "The shift to shared leadership represents a marked change from the traditional lone-ranger model of pastoring." (Simon, p. 20) "To discover new meaning, a leader must be open to many voices and willing to collaborate. Effectively leading a parish today requires communication, cooperation, consensus building, and teamwork. (Simon, pp. 20-21)

2. **Communication**

Communication can be the root of so many problems. It is critical that, as we contemplate change, we make certain to discuss potential changes, along with the rationale, with parishioners well before the change occurs. Involve everyone in the discussions on the need and rationale for change to help everyone understand why the particular change is needed. "Communicating the need for specific changes before they occur helps reduce tensions. Comments about changes where parishioners had no buy-in can ring through the minds of pastors long afterward..." (Simon, p. 130)

3. **Lay Leadership**

It should be made clear at the beginning that lay leadership has been found to be an essential component within a vibrant parish. It is no coincidence that one of the goals specified in the mission statement for the Living Stones Planning Committee is to "activate

greater participation among the laity in leadership roles." Pastors cannot do it alone. They need a team of committed and talented lay leaders to begin the development of vibrant parishes that better meet the pastoral needs of all parishioners. "Although, canonically, pastors are held responsible for all decisions made in a parish, these pastors were quick to admit that they do not lead their vibrant parishes on their own." (Simon, p. 19)

There is an elephant in the room that needs to be recognized and confronted. Our parishes do hire lay leaders. However, we cannot expect additional lay leaders to become involved in significant and strategic ways as unpaid volunteers. This will not work. Yes, we need volunteers involved in all parishes, but we also need to increase the number of paid lay leaders, if we are ever going to develop the kind of effective parish team that is necessary for building vibrant parishes. "The goal is to find the right people and pay them well..." (Simon p. 42)

It needs to be recognized that hiring lay leaders does pose problems for the pastor. Unfortunately, hiring the wrong lay leader or a weak lay leader can create major problems for the pastor and can also be counter-productive in trying to build vibrant parishes. This needs to be acknowledged, but should not dissuade us from moving in the direction of increasing the number of lay leaders who are involved actively in our parishes. It is essential. However, we need to be up front and realize that "Despite the rosy picture painted in the last chapter of well-coordinated parish staffs, even the successful pastors we surveyed spoke of problems with personnel. In fact, nearly half (45.2%) spoke of challenges they face related to working with some of their staff members." (Simon, p. 33) This is a sobering fact, but must not dissuade us from getting more lay leaders involved in all of our parish groupings.

We must also encourage talented people to actively discern what they have to offer the church community and to be willing to make a commitment. Again, we are talking about a combination of both volunteers and paid lay leaders. "Our parishes need to become places where it is normal for adult Catholics to ask, "What is God calling me to?" Over the years we have discovered that a powerful way to foster a parish culture of discernment is by beginning with the discernment of personal charisms. Charisms are some of the many graces that we receive in baptism and confirmation. A charism is "a favor" or (in St. Thomas Aquinas's terminology) a "gratuitous grace" given to a member of the body of Christ to empower him or her to build up the Church and to witness Christ to the world." (Weddell, p. 92) Parishioners must actively discern what gifts or strengths they can offer within their parish community. This needs to be a coordinated team effort, if we are going to be serious about building vibrant parishes that meet the pastoral needs of all parishioners. It is by attracting, encouraging, and selecting talented "living stones" that will enable us to revitalize our parishes.

Next week we shall discuss evangelization, involvement of children and youth in our services, and music. We hope you will contemplate the ideas presented in these articles and continue to discuss them with your pastor and fellow parishioners.

References Cited:

Simon, William E. (2016). Great Catholic Parishes. Indiana: Ave Maria Press.

Wendell, Sherry A. (2012). Forming Intentional Disciples. Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division.