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Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Clustered Parishes Are Our Future

Kristi Bivens

When I was just 16 years old my dad was ordained as a permanent deacon for the Diocese of Crookston. He was hired as a pastoral associate at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Crookston. It was around the same time that the Cathedral began sharing a pastor, an associate pastor, and a pastoral associate (my dad) with St. Francis Church in Fisher, Minnesota. St. Francis was referred to as a “mission parish” of the Cathedral. Shortly thereafter, St. Mary’s Church in Euclid was added to the mix. There really was no cooperation between the parishes; they simply shared clergy. Over the next 16 years it all changed, and it became an extremely confusing amalgamation of parish relationships. Soon St. Francis was being served by the pastor from East Grand Forks, and Crookston was serving Euclid and St. Peter’s in Gentilly. Today, because the Cathedral has only one full time priest and one part-time priest, they only serve St. Peter’s in Gentilly. Another pastor from another parish serves St. Mary’s in Euclid, along with my dad who still works at the Cathedral and with St. Peter’s in Gentilly. The only connections these parishes have are the clergy and the Triduum of Holy Week, as they celebrate it together at the Cathedral. However, the people of these communities are connected in other ways: schools, jobs, and some are even related to each other. It has always perplexed me that there was not a more formal connection between these parishes. They are not that far apart. It has also perplexed me that the arrangements keep changing.

Now 16 years later, I am an adult member of a parish of my own, which up until six months ago was a parish with its own pastor. The Catholic Churches in the metropolitan area of St. Cloud went through a process, which took 18 months, to determine which parishes would be “clustered.” The process was well thought out and involved ordained and lay people. It also prepared people well in advance of the changes that were to come. Now Christ Church Newman Center is sharing a pastor and associate pastor with two other churches and trying to figure out what it means to be the Cluster of St. Mary’s Cathedral, St. Augustine Church, and Christ Church Newman Center.

All of these experiences have led me to my In-

tegration Project. It seems to me if clustering is to become the future of the Catholic Church, and in some cases, it is the present, there needs to be a process for cluster life and cluster ministry; there needs to be a new understanding of parish.

Why Clustering?

“Who will make the day to day decisions?” “Will people start leaving the church?” “Why can’t we keep our Mass times?” “How will the pastor get to know us?” “Will our church eventually be closed?” “Will our parish staff change?” “How will we survive financially?” “Are we a parish or are we a cluster?” “What *is* a cluster?”

Parishioners are asking many questions of the Catholic Churches in the St. Cloud, Minnesota, area as they prepare to enter a new understanding of church, often referred to as clustering. “Clustered,” “combined,” “affiliated,” and “parish-mission” are just a few of the names used to describe parishes that are served together by the same pastor. Even though “clustering” has been used for many years, there is no canonical term or widely accepted process for what is commonly becoming known as clustered parishes.

There is not a specific definition offered by the Catholic Church regarding clustering. Canon Law makes one mention of a pastor serving more than one parish in Canon 526 §1: “A pastor is to have the parochial care of only one parish; nevertheless, because of a lack of priests or other circumstances, the care of several neighboring parishes can be entrusted to the same pastor.”¹ Canon 526 can be seen in the definitions to follow.

Several dioceses across the United States offer definitions of the term cluster. The Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa, defines a cluster as “the collaboration and sharing among several parishes of pastoral leadership, staff, resources and/or programs.”² FutureChurch, a national coalition of Catholics who

¹ John Beal, James Coriden, and Thomas Green, eds. *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000).

² Archdiocese of Dubuque, IA, Office of Pastoral Planning, “Guidelines for Clusters,” <http://www.arch.pvt.k12.ia.us/PastoralP/Cluster/clustguidlexpectplan.html> (accessed March 16, 2007).

seek the full participation of all baptized Catholics in the life of the church, offers a similar definition: “A grouping of two or three distinct parishes/missions that remain independent entities, who share a pastor and are ministered to by a pastoral administrator or a team of priests and ministry staff.”³ The Archdiocese of Detroit, whose definition is the only one of the three offered here to be based on Canon Law, claims that: “A Clustered Parish has a priest as its pastor, however the priest may live at another location and be pastor of more than one community. The communities each have a parish pastoral council, and may or may not have geographical boundaries.”⁴ The Diocese of Cleveland uses this definition: “A cluster is a group of parishes committed to a long term relationship of collaboration to plan and provide pastoral care for these communities. In forming this relationship, each parish has its own parish identity, canonical status and financial accountability.”⁵

Each of the four definitions highlights the fact that the clustered parishes share pastors, staffs, and resources, but the parishes remain separate entities. It is also important to note within the definition from the Diocese of Cleveland, it is mentioned that the relationship among the parishes is long-term. Relationships between parishes that are not long-term are headed for disaster. In order for parishes to begin working together, they cannot share resources with one parish for a year and then two different parishes for another year. The pastor and the staff will simply run themselves into the ground. There needs to be continuity between parishes in a cluster.

As the process of clustering parishes becomes more common, parishioners are asking “why?” The most prevalent reason for clustering parishes is the decrease in the number of priests available to serve a growing number of parishes and parishioners. In 1965, there were 58,432 diocesan and religious priests in the United States to serve 17,637 parishes and 4,547 missions. In 2005, 43,422 diocesan and religious priests were available to serve 19,297 parishes and 2,901 missions.⁶ The number of priestly ordinations has decreased from 994 in 1965 to 467

in 2005; however, the number of Catholics is on the rise in the United States. In 1965 there were 45.6 million Catholics in the United States compared with 67.8 million Catholics in 2005. Even though there are fewer priests and the number of parishes has not increased significantly, the strain comes from the increase in the number of parishioners in each parish.⁷ In the past, more than one priest was available to minister to parishioners in one parish. The ratio of priests to parishioners was also smaller. Today, in most parishes, there is one priest to minister to the parishioners. People often expect as much from the one priest as they did from the two or three priests they had 30 years ago. That is simply not possible. Clustering exacerbates the problem. Because priests are expected to do their ministry for two or three churches at the same time, it becomes more and more difficult for the priests to attend to the needs of their parishioners. From my current experience, I can think of one example. I am member of a cluster of three parishes with two priests to serve them. A small faith sharing group to which I belong invited both priests to dinner with us one evening. Both priests were emailed and called and neither returned the messages. They simply do not have the time.

The retirement of priests is another area which is impacting the need for clustered parishes. In 2005, there were approximately 4,408 priests serving multiple parishes. By 2010, approximately 1,250 of those men will retire.⁸ In 2002, *The Los Angeles Times* conducted a survey of priests. They discovered that the average age of these men was 61.⁹ By 2012, just four short years away, many of these men will be retired. The retirement of these men will only increase the priest shortage given the fact that the number of ordinations is not equal to even the number serving multiple parishes who will retire.

Other solutions to the priest shortage have been attempted, such as Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest (SCAP). SCAP is a rite developed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to be used in parishes in order for people to gather for worship and receive word and Communion even when a priest cannot be present. The intent of SCAP is to continue Sunday worship in communities without priests where Eucharist cannot be celebrated weekly.

³ FutureChurch, Lakewood, OH; <http://www.futurechurch.org/sopc/finalcrisiskitwebsites-73106.pdf> (accessed 10-15-07).

⁴ Archdiocese of Detroit, MI; <http://www.aodonline.org/aodonline-sqlimages/ParishLife/LeadershipServices/Parish-Clustering/ClusterGuidelines.pdf>.

⁵ Response to survey conducted by the author.

⁶ While the number of parishes has increased since 1965, the number has decreased since 1995 by 426 parishes.

⁷ Katarina Schuth, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 32.

Since the inception of SCAP in 1988, several concerns have arisen. The major concern is that the faithful do not see a difference between SCAP and Sunday Mass, because eucharistic liturgy is not being celebrated on Sundays on a weekly basis. Eucharistic liturgy is the source and summit of Catholic faith. Since Vatican II, Eucharist has been spoken about as the “most perfect expression or manifestation of the Church. The Eucharist brings the Church into being. The Eucharist, in fact constitutes the Church.”¹⁰ In 1995, the bishops of Kansas issued a pastoral statement “reaffirming the importance of Sunday celebrations of Eucharist and presenting their position on distribution of communion outside Mass on Sundays.” They wanted to heighten the distinction between Sunday Mass and a “communion service.” Because of a blurring of the lines between the celebration of Eucharist and the reception of Communion, the bishops of Kansas restrict “communion services” to emergencies only.¹¹

Another solution to the decreasing number of priests has been to bring in priests from other countries. While there are many positive aspects, the negative aspects can make things very difficult for parish life. Dean Hoge and Aniedi Okure have recently published a work on the challenges and opportunities of having international priests in the United States. The first challenge is language. It can be difficult for the priests to be understood, especially when saying Mass, which often becomes a very rhythmic process. Parishioners can find it very frustrating. In my experience, I have heard parishioners say they “may as well not go to Mass, because they can’t understand anything anyway.” Without experience and patience on the part of parishioners, the international priests will not improve their language skills. It cannot come at the cost of parishioners. There are also cultural misunderstandings and differing ecclesiologies. For example, it can be difficult for the priests to work with women as equals on staff. The understanding of men being superior to women in some cultures can present a problem in a church that has had women as ministers for many years. A sense of the pastor being superior to the other ministers in the parish can cause difficulties as well. Many priests work collaboratively with their staffs in parishes in the United

States and have done so for many years. To have a priest come to a parish and not work collaboratively with the staff can cause many difficulties for the staff as well as the parish.¹²

Finding the best solution for parishes to handle the declining number of priests is difficult. Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest and international priests are possible solutions. Clustering is a possible solution. I propose that clustering is the best solution, but it will be a major shift in how people understand and know parish. It is not the first time, however, that parishes have changed. The parish is an entity that has changed dramatically over the last 2,000 years. Through each change that has been made in parishes something has died, but through that death new fruit has been born.

Producing Much Fruit

Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. (John 12:24)

Parish life is deeply important to many Catholics. It is where people worship, grow in their faith, serve others, develop relationships, and share the most intimate parts of themselves. Parish life is often a constant in a person’s chaotic and changing life. When the constancy of parish life changes, it is a difficult adjustment for people. But, changes happen often in parishes: staff members leave and new staff members are hired, pastors change, familiar hymns are used less often, new methods of faith formation are introduced, among many others. The changes can cause the life of a parish to diminish or the parish can continue to grow. There is comfort to be found in the above passage from the Gospel of John. When parishes allow themselves to die to the familiar, they open their parish life to producing new fruit. For example, parishes that have implemented family-based faith formation have reported, anecdotally, increased participation by adults in faith formation opportunities. Families are growing together in faith; formation is no longer a program for children, but for everyone. Fruit is being borne through the death of an old understanding of faith formation.

Clustering parishes is not only a change in parts of parish life, but a change in the entire understand-

¹⁰ Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ, “Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest: Some Disquieting Reflections,” *New Theology Review* 8 (February 1995): 53.

¹¹ Bishops of Kansas, “Sunday Eucharist: Do This in Memory Me,” *Pastoral Music* 20 (February–March 1996): 40–41.

¹² Dean Hoge and Aniedi Okure, *International Priests in America: Challenges and Opportunities* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 51–60.

ing of parish. Again, comfort can be found in the passage from John. It is necessary to allow the understanding of parish that now we hold to fall to the ground and die. We must realize that clustering parishes will bear fruit for each parish and the church universal that we could never imagine.

Over time, the parish has become an entity which the early Christians, or even parishioners of 40 years ago, could not have imagined. With each change in the understanding and life of a parish that has occurred over the last 2,000 years, a grain of wheat has fallen to the ground and produced much fruit.

The Catholic Church has existed for approximately 2,000 years; however the church is not the same as it was at the beginning of the 2,000 years. The same can be said about Catholic parishes. The parishes we know today are not the same as they used to be. In the early Christian church, the communities tended to be in urban areas and were small groups who gathered in people's houses. There was no sense of belonging to the larger Body of Christ, but just to the smaller community.¹³

As Christianity grew over time and spread to other areas of the world, Christian communities did as well. The understanding of belonging to the larger Body of Christ began to develop. Parishes themselves began to develop in many ways. Churches in the countryside were ministered to by a circuit rider priest or deacon and governed by a bishop. Monasteries began to develop and the religious men in the monasteries ministered to the surrounding community. Churches were built as shrines at the burial places of saints. Owners of estates would build private churches to serve the people who worked and lived on their land.¹⁴ All of these developments would lead to the more formal understanding of parish developed by the Council of Trent.

The Council of Trent, 1545–63, gave the first solid teachings around the parish. Preaching and instruction were to be done every Sunday by the parish priests. Priests were to reside in the parishes in which they were the ministers. Much of the Council of Trent focused on the hierarchy of the church and left the lay people with a passive role in the life of the parish. The sacramental life of the parish was emphasized and practices of eucharistic piety developed, such as benediction and eucharistic processions. The practices of piety gave lay people a way to

be more active in their faith and in the parish.¹⁵

The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had an impact on the parishes of the Catholic Church. People were drawn to urban centers for employment in the factories. The parishes in large cities grew exponentially. For example, in Paris in 1900, an average parish contained 40,000 members. People in parishes like the ones in Paris were unable to get to know each other and therefore a sense of community was difficult to build.¹⁶

At the same time in the United States, people were emigrating from Europe and forming parishes. The new parishes were often called “national churches.” Ethnic groups were the basis for the parishes, not geographical areas. Most towns across the United States had more than one Catholic parish, based on specific ethnic traditions. The Polish immigrants would attend a Polish parish and the German immigrants would attend the German parish.¹⁷

The history of the development of the Catholic parish shows that what we know as parish today has not always been. Parishes have adapted to the many challenges from ecclesial structures and social and cultural influences. The parishes following the Council of Trent were a response to the Protestant Reformation. The parishes of the United States are no longer national churches because the immigrants assimilated into the culture of the United States. The parishes of today are a response to the church being a part of the modern world instead of hiding from it. Clustering parishes is also a response to the changed faces of the church and the world. It may feel as though everything familiar is gone, but the people of God who belong to these parishes will survive. Parishes have needed to adapt and change with the world around them and will continue to as the world develops.

What is a parish?

In more recent years, as an understanding of parish has developed, so has the theology surrounding the parish. The Second Vatican Council, the 1983 Code of Canon Law, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have all developed writings about parish that can also be applied to the life of clustered parishes.

In the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People issued by the Second Vatican Council, the follow-

¹³ James A. Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 18–21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22–24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

ing characteristics of a parish are offered: A parish gathers all types of human diversity and inserts them into the universality of the church. Within a parish, lay and ordained members are to develop habits of working cooperatively and make contributions to diocesan undertakings. A parish should attract people to the church through its apostolic works.¹⁸

The 1983 Code of Canon Law offers much information about a parish, but its definition can be found in Canon 515, §1: A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a priest as its proper pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop.¹⁹

The parish is for most Catholics the single most important part of the church. This is where for them the mission of Christ continues. This is where they publicly express their faith, joining with others to give proof of their communion with one another.²⁰

The United States Catholic Bishops Committee on the Parish issued a statement in 1981 entitled, *The Parish: A People, a Structure, a Mission*. In the statement, the committee outlines its vision of a parish: “Whatever the form, a parish seeks to become ever more fully a people of God, sharing the mission of Christ and developing the structure necessary for supporting its community life and carrying out its mission.”²¹ Three areas need to be considered when looking at the parish: the people, the mission, and the structure.

According to the statement on the parish, the committee states that the parish is first a people. They are a people called together by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to “make increasingly true and obvious their response to God through Christ.” The people are “challenged to continue Christ’s work of transforming the world into a more graced fellowship.” Personal relationships are fostered among the members of a parish in order for them to become brothers and sisters in the Lord. Through the action of building relationship should grow a desire to care for those in the parish as well as in the world.²²

¹⁸ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People), §10.

¹⁹ Beal, Coriden, and Green, eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*.

²⁰ USCCB Committee on the Parish, *The Parish: A People, A Structure, A Mission*, *Origins* 10 (March 1981): 641.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 643.

²² *Ibid.*

All people of a parish have a role in the life of the parish. All the members of the parish have been baptized into the Body of Christ and have been called to further the mission of the church, to participate in the life of the parish. Some of the roles have been clearly defined and are held by priests, deacons, laity, or religious. The role of the priest is to help parishioners “deepen their union with Christ through the word and Eucharist and to become one with the full family of the Church through the bishop.” Many other roles are assigned to the liturgist, the faith formation director, the social concerns director, the eucharistic minister, the permanent deacon, the liturgical decorator, the music leader, and others. In order for the parish to mature fully, lay ministry must be developed with the laity in roles of leadership. It is also the role of the parish to promote vocations to all the forms of ministry in the church. Without the promotion of vocations, the church and consequently the parish will be left without needed leadership.²³

The parish is not an entity in itself. As stated above, one role of the priest is to help parishioners become one with the full church. A parish is part of a local church under a specific bishop, also known as a diocese. The parish must share in the mission of the local church. The parish is also a part of the worldwide universal church, under the pope. The tradition and teaching of the universal church guides the local church. The parish is also a member of the wider local, national, and international communities. It is not shut off from the secular world within which it exists.²⁴

The most important part of a parish community is its sacramental life. Through the sacramental life God acts and the people respond. The eucharistic liturgy is where the parish has its greatest expression of communion. It is in the liturgy where all the efforts of the parish are united with the priesthood of Jesus. In the sacrament of reconciliation, the healing forgiveness of the Lord is proclaimed to those who strive to live in Christ. “In all its celebrations of the sacraments the parish makes every effort to attend to the mystery of God’s action, to open itself to the power of the sacramental symbols and to show care for the people engaging in these rites.”²⁵

Through the many ways written about above, the parish is constantly trying to become a commu-

²³ *Ibid.*, 643–44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 644.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

nity of faith. The achievement of the parish becoming a community of faith can be measured by “the specific ways people acknowledge the identity they have in common and demonstrate the responsibility they have for one another.” The proof of community is a reflection of “the even deeper communion with God that is theirs because of Christ’s gift of the one Spirit.”²⁶

While the parish has been described thus far as the people and their relationship, the parish does not exist for itself. It exists to further the mission of Christ. The people of the parish are called to minister to each other and those in the world around them; they are called to evangelize. Evangelization calls believers to deepen their faith while bringing the Gospel message to those who do not know it or have been away from the church for an extended period of time. The best way for parishes to further the mission of Christ is to be a credible witness of faithfulness to Christ.²⁷

It is also an essential part of the mission for each parish to provide formation for its members, to work for justice, and to participate in ecumenism. Formation should be an ongoing, lifelong process which supports and shapes a Christian life. Through formation, the people of the parish are made more deeply the people of God. To work for justice means the parish is to work to establish a more just society. They can work for justice by identifying critical issues in the world, convening people, and sponsoring and supporting efforts to build a society where there is justice, peace, and freedom for all.²⁸ The parish must also be committed to the unity of all of God’s people. Through ecumenism, parishes can express their common faith in Christ with other Christian churches. They can also work for justice with other churches as well.

In order for a parish community to grow and its mission be maintained, there must be structures in place. There is a need for clear pastoral leadership. “Parish leadership challenges everyone to recognize and accept responsibility to both the Gospel and the church, which is tradition.”²⁹ Leadership encourages collaboration between clergy, religious, and laity. To encourage collaboration, the leadership will need to develop structures which allow for participation in decision-making and ministries of the parish. One

of the best structures to encourage participation is the parish council. The function of the parish council is to ensure the mission of the parish is being carried out and to formulate policies which encourage the mission and ministry of the parish.

“The parish is basic to the life of the church. It is in the parish that the most intimate concerns of individuals and the broadest reaches of the church’s mission come together.”³⁰ What the Second Vatican Council, the Code of Canon Law, and the U.S. Bishops have said about parish until now do not describe clustered parishes. But in a sense they do. There are some aspects of parish that do not change when clustering occurs. Clusters have people gathered in community and the mission is already lived out in the individual parishes. What does not transfer from the documents is structure. The basic tenets the USCCB offers are necessary for the structure of a cluster, but they need to be enhanced.

Before I can begin to address what the structure of a cluster should be, it is helpful to look to those who have been working with clustering. Men and women who work in diocesan planning offices across the United States are an excellent resource. Through an email questionnaire, I asked several Directors of Pastoral Planning their thoughts about clustering. I was especially interested in what makes clustering a successful experience for parishes in their dioceses. The answers they provided inspired hope in me that clustering can be a positive experience, even though for some it is the end of parish life as they know it.

Successful Clustering

When I asked the diocesan Directors of Pastoral Planning what are the elements that are needed for a successful cluster, they offered statements such as the ones below:

- A common commitment to word, sacrament, service, and stewardship.
- A clear understanding of and commitment to cooperation.
- Having leadership that respects the dignity of all with the ability to develop consensus for action.
- The development of a collaborative mentality.
- The development of a larger vision of the church and its mission.
- Clear communication.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 645.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 646.

Many of the responses were the same. There was a strong emphasis on good leadership, communication, and collaboration between the parishes in a cluster. Good leadership and communication are necessary in a parish that stands on its own, but collaboration is essential for clustered parishes.

I also asked the directors what could hinder a successful clustering experience and below are some of the answers they offered:

- Individualism and parochialism valued more than common good.
- Fear of rejection and criticism by other parishes.
- A society that keeps everyone very busy and fosters observation over participation.
- Unsupportive pastors and pastoral staffs.
- Struggle for parish survival takes precedence over mission.
- Poor communication.
- Perceiving that the need to change is imposed from outside the parish community.
- Weak pastoral leadership.
- Parishioners giving priority to what has been and reluctance to move out of their comfort zones.

I find it interesting that many of their answers are the exact opposite of what was offered as successful elements necessary for clustering, such as weak leadership and poor communication. There also seems to be some fear for parishioners of moving into a new experience of parish. The fear is normal. Many people fear change.

I also find it interesting that one person identified, “A society that fosters observation over participation due to multiple commitments,” as hindering a successful cluster. I think the respondent was trying to find a nice way to describe the “busyness” of people’s lives. In order for a cluster to be successful, the members of the parishes must be committed to it. Given the multiple commitments of people in today’s society, it will be very difficult to get them involved in the life of the parish.

Clustering can seem like a daunting experience. Many parishioners and ministers to whom I have talked or listened do not like it and do not see it as a positive step for the church. “All we need to do is ordain women and married men and that will solve the problem. Then we don’t need to share a priest,” is a comment I have heard often. Whether I agree or disagree with them does not matter. The church is not in that place now and we have a problem which we need to solve.

Where Two or Three are Gathered

Through my work, however, I no longer see clustering as such a daunting experience. I see it as an opportunity to create a new understanding of church. By bringing parishes together, our experience of God can only be enhanced. The words of the Gospel of Matthew come to mind for me: “Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt 18:19-20). With words such as these from Jesus, how can the possibilities of clustering two or three or four or five parishes be anything but hopeful? Wouldn’t it seem that the more people who are gathered together in God’s name would only enhance relationships with God and each other? I think that there is nothing but a deeper understanding of the Body of Christ to be found. All the members of the Body of Christ need to be involved in the life of a cluster: the lay and the ordained, including the bishop. The laity can take ownership of their parish in a way they have not done previously. The ordained can work collaboratively with the lay members to further the mission of the diocese and the Roman Catholic Church. A new understanding of parish is an excellent way for all members, lay and ordained, to work as the Body of Christ.

We Are Clustered . . . Now What?

Often clustering can become what it was in my childhood, simply the clergy serving multiple parishes and passing around the smaller parishes from larger parish to larger parish. That cannot be what clustered parishes look like. Pastoral staffs cannot handle an increased workload that serving two, three, four, or even five parishes will bring. I think the words of Vic Klimoski, in the preface of Katarina Schuth’s book, say it best:

It is not just bishops and their staffs who have to figure out what to do each year as priests retire or die, thus decreasing the number of those available for assignment. It is not the priest’s duty to run himself ragged just so St. Ann’s Parish doesn’t have to give up its 9:00 a.m. Sunday Mass. *The cluster model belongs to the church, and we together have a responsibility to pray steadfastly for guidance, to assist each other through the grief and anger that might arise, and to be courageous in developing or adapting structures that bring sanity*

*and efficiency into the cluster's life. This is a sacrificial call to lay people, but a call that resonates with the theology of baptism and the eloquent vision of the church as the Body of Christ.*³¹

The words above inspired me to accept the responsibility of the cluster model belonging to me. I will lay out in the rest of the paper a process that will call forth the gifts of the people of the parish. What I propose will not be easy, nor will it be accomplished overnight, but it needs to be done. I propose a movement from cooperation between the parishes in a cluster to a formal collaborative ministry. It will lead the cluster to what Philip Murnion terms a covenant communion.³²

So, why begin with cooperation? Why not just jump right in and build a collaborative ministry in the cluster? We all know change is not something that comes easy for people. For the last 40 years, parish life has been a certain way. When you change the way a person gathers for worship or experiences church, you are changing something very personal to him or her. In the bishops' document on the parish to which I referred earlier, it is stated "The parish is for most Catholics the single most important part of the church. This is where for them the mission of Christ continues. This is where they publicly express their faith, joining with others to give proof of their communion with one another."³³

Parish Cooperation

In the book, *Sharing More Than a Pastor*, which is a study of clustering in the Diocese of Superior, Wisconsin, Joan McKeown describes a process to build cooperation between the parishes in a cluster.³³

McKeown first recommends inviting all the parishes to one parish's social event. Perhaps one parish holds an annual fall festival. The members of the other parishes in the cluster should be invited, but the invitation needs to be more than a bulletin notice. Representatives from the parish should extend personal invitations to the other parishes at their Masses. Staff members and parishioners could encourage individuals they encounter to attend the activity. It would be an opportunity for people from

the individual parishes to begin to get to know each other.³⁴

The next suggestion McKeown makes is to hold a non-threatening cluster-wide social event. The event should be non-competitive. A softball game pitting parishes against one another would not build community, nor help the people to get to know each other. One event could be a hymn sing with a social afterwards. In order to avoid conflicts over who will host it, choose the largest parish for this first gathering in the hopes that many people will attend. The responsibilities for the hymn sing and the social should be divided between the parishes, making sure people from each parish are working together on planning the event. It is also a good idea to have those hosting the social be from each parish. Get the parishioners working together in the kitchen, which can be a very social place.³⁵

After holding the social event, hold a one time adult or youth formation event. Perhaps the event can be a catechist in-service for all the parishes or a day of reflection surrounding a season or feast of the liturgical year. Again it is important to make sure that staff members or parishioners from each parish are involved in the planning. Moving from a social event to a faith formation event can begin to move people together around issues of faith.³⁶

The fourth step McKeown offers is to initiate a short term activity. Bible studies or faith sharing groups with members from each parish that last only a few weeks would work well. Promote them as a cluster-wide event. Many dioceses have begun using a program called *Why Catholic?* A program like *Why Catholic?* offers people the opportunity to build small faith-sharing communities. By bringing people from the various parishes together, they will begin to know each other on more than a social level.³⁷

Finally, begin to establish cooperation in current programs. McKeown suggests focusing on the areas and programs of the parish with the most open-minded people who have the least sense of parochialism. It will be difficult for people to give up ownership of a program with which they have worked for a long time. Another option would be to choose a program where the need for the cluster is the greatest. Perhaps it is a program which is not working well

³¹ Victor Klimoski, preface to *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes*, by Katarina Schuth (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), xiv–xv; emphasis added.

³² Philip Murnion, "Parish: Covenant Community," *Church* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 5–10.

³³ Joan McKeown, *Sharing More Than a Pastor* (Grantsburg, WI: ARC Research Company, 1993).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69–70.

in any of the parishes.³⁸

McKeown proposes that the more the parishioners work jointly, the less they will sit and wait for “Father” to make all the decisions.³⁹ They will begin to explore new possibilities for the cluster on their own. This, in my mind, is the beginning of formal collaborative ministry. Cooperation among the parishes in the cluster is about the parishioners getting to know one another. It is an antidote to parochialism. Without it, the cluster cannot move to collaborative ministry.

Collaborative Ministry

Collaboration in ministry is a response to the call received in baptism to recognize the charisms of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano take the definition even further; collaboration is the “identification, release, and union of all the gifts in ministry for the sake of mission.” They highlight three key elements of collaboration: “the essence of collaborative ministry is gift, collaborative ministry is a vehicle for ministry and the goal is always the mission of Jesus Christ.”⁴¹ Sofield and Juliano base some of their work on the work of Bishop Howard Hubbard from the Diocese of Albany, New York. Bishop Hubbard’s words sum up collaborative ministry well: It is based on one’s baptismal call, every member of the church has received this call, and the call is given to “advance the mission and ministry of Jesus in our world.”⁴²

The implementation of collaborative ministry will not be easy. It will require a commitment on the part of staff and parishioners. It will require people to give up ownership of programs of which they have been a part for many years. It will require patience, because collaborative ministry cannot be implemented overnight.

In their book, *Collaboration: Uniting Our Gifts in Ministry*, Sofield and Juliano offer a process to help parishes implement collaborative ministry. Below I will outline and explain their process. It is important to note that I believe collaborative ministry should first be implemented with the staff members from each parish. After that has occurred, then it can be

implemented with parishioners.

The first step is to examine one’s beliefs and behaviors about collaboration and to confront those that hinder one’s ability to collaborate. In order for collaboration to be successfully implemented, all of people’s biases, concerns, and hopes for collaboration should be brought out into the open. It is necessary to confront the concerns and biases people may have or they will continue to cause problems in the life of the cluster.⁴³

The next step is to develop a clear vision of ministry which guides the actions of and decisions made by the cluster. Developing a vision at times can be a meaningless process; it can produce a statement that has no real meaning. Sofield and Juliano offer criteria for developing a vision to help the implementation process become more than that. The vision must:

- Give a general direction for ministry;
- Be accompanied by specific goals;
- Be expansive rather than restrictive;
- Be owned by those affected by it; the vision cannot be developed without the people who are affected by it;
- Move to action as a result of concrete implementation steps.⁴⁴

The third step is to develop a method to discern the gifts of the community. However one develops this method, Sofield and Juliano give certain conditions that will help create a climate in which people will feel free to discern their gifts. I would recommend developing a staff day of reflection.

- Offer adequate time for private, prayerful reflection.
- Physical surroundings should be conducive to dialogue, allowing participants to share the gifts they have identified.
- Participants should know each other well (which is developed during the cooperation between the parishes).
- Examine ways in which their gifts can be used in ministry.
- An objective presentation can set the tone and direction for gift discernment.⁴⁵

The fourth step is to clarify the roles of the members. The most effective ministry occurs when the role one takes on in the cluster is compatible with his or her gifts. Clarifying one’s role also includes the need to evaluate to what extent the ministry is be-

³⁸ Ibid., 70–71.

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰ Norman Cooper, *Collaborative Ministry: Communion, Contention, Commitment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 6.

⁴¹ Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano, *Collaboration: Uniting our Gifts in Ministry* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2000), 17.

⁴² Ibid., 148.

⁴³ Ibid., 148–49.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 153–56.

ing performed collaboratively as well as whether the ministry could continue without the specific minister in the role.⁴⁶

The final step is to empower a group to implement collaboration following the use of collaborative ministry among staff members. The above steps should be repeated with parishioners in some manner, especially the step of gift discernment. Implementation is not necessarily the sole responsibility of the staff. One example Sofield and Juliano offer is the parish pastoral council. Regardless of who implements collaboration, Sofield and Juliano offer three tasks to help accomplish the implementation:

- Identify the needs of the community (I change that to cluster).
- Discern the gifts and resources available.
- Establish the structures to bring about a marriage between the needs and the gifts and resources.⁴⁷

As I said before, collaborative ministry will not happen overnight nor will it happen without hard work. But when collaborative ministry is in place, the people of the cluster will become more fully the Body of Christ. They will become what Philip Murnion calls a covenant communion.

Covenant Communion

The parish, according to Murnion, needs to move beyond community into a covenant communion. I believe that a cluster needs to do the same. There needs to be a deeper relationship among the people in a parish or a cluster. Community can be a very broad, generic term that applies to many groups of people. In order to understand the term covenant communion, I will highlight what Murnion characterizes as a covenant communion.

First, Murnion points out that the communion and the covenant are formed by God: it is God, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, who calls and empowers people into communion. “It is within the parish that we express that the communion of the church is neither our choice nor an answer to *our* needs. It is our response to God’s love for us, which is present in the action of the Eucharist and the life of the Church.”⁴⁸

Second, the covenant communion must be as inclusive as possible, which begins with baptism. We do not need to earn our inclusion or meet certain

requirements to be a member of a parish or a cluster. The parish needs to keep calling people into more deeply committed relationships with God and one another, regardless of financial status, race, or sinfulness.⁴⁹

Third, the covenant communion entails a call to stewardship. Many people assume that the term stewardship means a financial contribution. But Murnion uses it to designate more than monetary gifts. Stewardship is the commitment of one’s gifts to the mission of the church and for the good of the community.⁵⁰ Through collaborative ministry, the members of the cluster have committed their gifts for the mission of the church and for the good of the community.

Finally, the parish as covenant communion encourages people to live out the communion with all of God’s family. It extends beyond the church building and the Catholic community.⁵¹ Parishioners cannot be focused solely on the life within the walls of the parish or boundaries of the cluster. All God’s people should be treated as such. Through the celebration of Eucharist and common ministry, the people of the cluster should be prepared to serve God’s world.

Murnion describes the role of covenant communions as:

supporting and demanding, encouraging free expression without sacrificing expertise or standards of authenticity, acknowledging each person’s responsibility for conscience and life as well as the community’s obligation to reveal the personal and public demands of discipleship. They are expressions of the mystery of God’s action, the moral demands of God’s family, and the requirements of mutual responsibility.⁵²

Clustered communities can become a covenant communion. They can live out what Murnion describes and through their lives, can bring people into deeper relationship with God and each other.

Moving Forward in Hope

Cooperation to collaboration to covenant communion is a model for a new understanding of parish as a member of a cluster. It is a structure that can be implemented to help bring hope and life to a par-

⁴⁶ Ibid., 156–60.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 160–61.

⁴⁸ Murnion, “Parish: Covenant Community,” 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7–8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

ish. As I have said before, clustering can seem daunting and so can the movement from cooperation to collaboration to covenant communion. But, I would like to return to the scripture quote from Matthew: “Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (18:19-20). Learning to work and worship together is a challenge for any individual parish. It will become an even bigger challenge as more and more parishes are clustered. But if we only recall the words from the Gospel of Matthew, we can be reminded that this new experience of being church can bring us into deeper relationship with God and with each other. Wherever we are gathered, God is present.

Clustered parishes are becoming more and more common. I have spent half of my life in clustered parishes. It is not a new phenomenon for me. But it is in many parishes today, especially in urban areas. Clustering has been the past for some, the present for many, and most likely will be the future for all of us. ✝

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