



The Evolving Parish

10 Lessons Learned from Working
with Parish Reorganization Efforts
over the Past 20 Years

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The image of the Spirit hovering over the Church—to make something new—captures the experience of working in many archdioceses and dioceses in both urban and rural settings.

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In reflecting on these many experiences, ten critical learnings stand out from working with both large urban archdioceses and small more rural or small town dioceses on parish reorganization. In some ways how each diocese approached change and transition was very unique; in other ways they had many things in common.



In all cases the planning efforts upon which the learnings are formed were grounded in the following realities and processes:



1. Recognition and acknowledgement of the Spirit's calling parishes to something new, based on a deepening faith and the fact that the current configuration of parishes in a given diocese was not pastorally or financially sustainable;
2. Prayer grounded in the liturgical scriptures of the season, faith sharing and petitions for the world, larger Church, those in need and the success of the process;
3. Criteria for vibrant parishes generated and/or approved by the Ordinary and the Planning Commission made up of appointed clergy and laity;
4. Assessment of current ministries and a preferred future at both the parish and cluster (a grouping of parishes) levels based on hard data and parishioner input;
5. The emergence of a Cluster Suggestion for a new parish model(s), after weeks of reflection, prayer, study and evaluating the current reality;
6. The reply to the Cluster Suggestion in the form of a Preliminary Recommendation from the Planning Commission, followed by a Response from the cluster and ultimately a Final Recommendation to the Ordinary from the Planning Commission;
7. The Ordinary's prayer and consultation with his advisory bodies, his decisions and ultimate implementation of a new and sustainable presence of parishes—reflecting the abiding and guiding presence of the risen Spirit of Christ.

Learning 1:

The power of clergy and laity working together strengthens communities, especially during transitions

When lay people and clergy work together, a new appreciation grows of the gifts each brings to the process. In many instances, the experience of planning with the Pastor or Parish Life Director is the first time some lay people have experienced that their planning and organizational gifts are needed and appreciated.

In one smaller diocese, after the first training evening for pastors and their core teams, the Vicar General remarked the next day: “Do you realize we engaged more than 1000 parishioners in those regional meetings last night? That is the first time that has ever happened in this diocese.” As the process unfolded, both clergy and laity became more comfortable in sharing and more supportive of each other. A serious and reflective spirit, peppered with humor, described the tenor of many of the clergy and lay planning formation meetings.



The hard work was assisted by the pastoral leader feeling he or she was not alone and could count on the support of lay leaders as well as the laity knowing and experiencing that they with their many gifts were really needed in the planning process.

Learning 2:

Parish reorganizational planning is a call to deeper discipleship

A deeper understanding of what it means to be a parish surfaced in reorganizational planning.

For many, at the initial part of the planning process, regular Mass attendance was the sign of a “good Catholic.” Acknowledging the Eucharist as the “source and summit” of parish life, core teams and cluster teams began assessing their parish ministries and using the criteria as benchmarks. This led the teams to come to a deeper understanding of the parish as a sign of Christ’s presence in the community, reaching out to those in need, and advocating for justice and quality faith development.



Many gradually moved from Catholic as their identity to Catholic as a way of life. They started to see how cultivating and nurturing discipleship called for vibrant liturgies, life-long formation, social outreach to those hurting or in need, as well as good stewardship in administration. These pillars for vibrant communities were embraced by many as paramount to Gospel-centered and sustainable parishes.

Learning 3:

Transparency empowers people to act credibly toward creating a faith-filled future

Clergy and laity appreciated the transparency of the Ordinary in promoting the sharing of facts and figures which the diocese had, as well as data each parish had.

They also were grateful for the bishop's desire to have a consultative decision making process, though they often had to be convinced that the bishop did not have "a plan in his bottom drawer" and their involvement was mere "window-dressing."

By and large when people had five years' worth of data, (financial, sacramental, registered parishioners, Mass counts, demographics, number of priests projected for the future, etc.) they, themselves, could name the trends and begin to see the implications of the need for new models of parish.

Even in large suburban parishes, which often were financially stable and had many engaging ministries, parish leadership found wisdom in seeing how they might be better stewards of their human and financial resources by working collaboratively with other parishes to avoid unnecessary duplication of services or resources. They also often considered "adopting" a "sister parish" locally or internationally. In such cases, they were enriched by the multicultural nature of the "sister" relationships in their effort to share resources.



Learning 4:

An emerging culture of collaboration, led by the spirit, developed through the process

See I'm making all things new (Rev. 21:5)

One of the consequences of building parishes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a great pride in an immigrant church and a deep-seated parochialism.



Boundless sacrifices occurred in firmly rooting the Catholic Church in the United States. Buildings became symbols not only of one's heritage and the sacrifices and skills needed to actually build the church buildings, but of one's faith.

When Polish people spoke of the stories of how their fore-fathers had spent years “gold-leafing” the dome of their church after working long hours in the factories, or the Irish recalled the meatless weeks their ancestors embraced, many of whom worked in the coal mines, to save money for their neo-Romanesque church, we understood that we were not just talking bricks and mortar—but a Spirit filled faith firmly rooted in memories, imagination, sacrifices and stories.

The faith of the immigrants was closely identified with the church buildings, where worship nurtured families from baptisms to weddings and funerals, and through the depression and other calamities. In some ways, the very gifts of the past initially became obstacles to forming the parishes of the future.



Not without a lot of pain and sense of loss, gradually as people got to know one another, they began slowly to embrace change and make connections with the past—to honor it—and in so doing—to connect with the same spirit of sacrifice that was being called upon today.

A reframed narrative often focused on letting go of the past and responding to the Spirit's presence as one's ancestors had to deal with their current realities. Gradually parishioners began to see the wisdom in “better together” whether parishes merged, linked or connected as partners.

Learning 5:

More involvement of parishioners = greater wisdom and less resistance

The more the parishioners were involved in the process the more ownership there was for the change and the less resistance to the bishop's decision.



When town hall meetings, focus groups, surveys and a regular communication strategies are employed people feel like their voices count and they share their wisdom. Regular reports to the parishioners through parish bulletins and announcements as well as the inclusion of prayers for the embodiment of Gospel values in the planning efforts—all add to the sense that planning is a community effort.

Even if the bishop's decision may not mirror what the parish or cluster were proposing, the fact that the parishioners were involved, knew the facts and figures, felt heard through the dialogical process, and were given a credible rationale resulted in a greater acceptance of the bishop's judgment in light of the common good.

Learning 6:

Pastoral courage and leadership are essential to successful planning, especially in times of change and transition

The courage and leadership of the Pastor or Parish Life Director is critical in helping people accept change.

Pastoral leaders sometimes report that they feel torn. On the one hand they know the current situation is no longer sustainable, but on the other they discern that the parishioners expect them to “go to bat for the status quo.” Effective leaders walk with the people and empathize with their pain, fears and loss.

At the same time they can graciously offer assurances to the parishioners that they are not alone on the journey, that once they get out of the “wilderness” they will be a stronger community—one that more faithfully reflects living the Gospel values. Envisioning celebrating vibrant liturgies with full churches, being able to reach out to those in need and making a positive impact on the larger Church and the world can be very motivational as people face change and transition.



This is not an easy task and requires that pastoral leaders have opportunities to be trained in leading through change and transition—skills that were not attended to in seminary or initial training. We noted that people suffer much more when there is not effective pastoral leadership, than when there is. Appeals of the bishop’s decision to the Vatican are much more common when pastoral leaders lack the courage and the skills to lead through the “wilderness” zone. However, in a rare case or two it should be noted that even when there was good pastoral leadership, appeals to the Vatican proceeded, though in our experience none of the bishop’s decisions were overturned.



Learning 7:

Effective planning and implementation leads to stronger parishes

Research is emerging which demonstrates that planning for and implementing change in parish models can lead to stronger parishes.



Three common models for some of today's parishes and many of tomorrow's include **merging** parishes where two or more parishes come together to form a new parish community, **linking** two or more parishes which share a pastor, and **collaborating parishes**, which establish substantial partnerships in programs, trainings and staff deployment. In dioceses where we have worked, while the models may have different names, the planning process affects all parishes. There was no such thing as a "strong stand-alone" parish, which was not at least collaborating with one or two other parishes.

The quality of the planning and implementation processes influence the amount of time and the features of the “new normal.” With excellent leadership and gracious, faith-filled and generous parishioners, a “new normal” in merging parishes can happen between 12 and 18 months. Both pastors and parishioners often report how beneficial and encouraging it is to have full churches, resounding music and upbeat congregations, all characteristics of the “new normal” in merging parishes.

The successful “linkage” transition in sharing a pastor is often between 9 and 12 months, if “where the Pastor or Parish Life Coordinator lives” does not become a stumbling block. Sometimes the parish where the pastoral leader lives is seen by some parishioners as the “lead” parish and the other parish sometimes feels like the “step child.” Mentoring for pastors of newly linked parishes for the first year by those who have done it for a while often is beneficial and helps the new pastors avoid some of the common pit falls and also lessens their stress levels.

Vibrant “collaborative” parishes often start with one or two projects within six months and grow toward many shared efforts between 18 and 24 months. Staff development and team building influence the effectiveness of this model.

Learning 8:

Dealing with grief in merging parishes greatly influences the initial quality of parish life in the new parish community

The more people love their parishes which are merging and the longer they have been members, the greater the grief.

Sometimes there are tinges of guilt in the sorrow. “If only I had done more; if only we had gotten more vocations; the “if onlys” add to the grief. Another contributor to merger grief is the thought that fewer and fewer people might be sharing our faith. As people looked at the world and see all the struggles they saw, they became very aware that more faith was needed, more nurturing through the Eucharist, more prayer, and that added to the sorrow that their parish was merging and there would be one less parish to serve others in a hurting world. There also was fear of not belonging and of emptiness as well as the sense that they have disappointed their ancestors who made so many sacrifices to build the church.



Two aspects related to this learning should be noted. The first is recognizing that merging parishes does not necessarily mean not using all church buildings for worship. Often, at least initially, all churches may be used for worship, either for special occasions (weddings and funerals, feast days) or regularly for one weekend Mass. This approach, where possible, is pastorally sensitive and helps lessen the grief while giving the new community a chance to form and people a chance to get to know one another before they are worshipping together in one place.

The second aspect is to help all the communities that are merging understand that each one will be impacted—even the one designated as the new parish site. It is important to diminish the “winners and losers” syndrome as much as possible and emphasize the forming of a new parish community. All parishes need to have a final liturgy, as they will no longer be the same parish community, even if their church building is used as the parish worship site.



One former parish council member from the new site shared recently, “I did not think my family would be affected by the merger as our parish was the chosen site, but when we went to Mass the first week of the new parish, people we never saw before were sitting in ‘our’ seats!”

Grieving rituals—grounded in the Paschal Mystery—can take many forms. Having dinners around storytelling evenings, preparing and sharing updated pictorial histories, holding reunions, taping stories from the “elders” are but a few ways to keep the story of the wonderful gifts alive.

Moving artifacts from one church to the newly designated parish church is powerful. In one diocese, processional banners with the name and dates of each parish were used especially for the opening Mass of the newly formed parish. At its final liturgy, one parish had two of the prominent statues taken down and carried out by “pallbearers” in the final procession. Tears were shed in abundance. The next week the same pallbearers brought statues from one of the other parishes into the new parish worship site and, thanks to great preparation by gifted maintenance staff, the statues were mounted in the new worship space as part of the entrance rite. Creative renditions using back-lit stained glass windows from one church in the entry way of the new worship site helped the community on a visceral level to recognize that part of their sacred worship site was now part of the new sacred place.

This learning reinforces the fact that as a people of story, symbol and ritual we have abundant traditions to draw upon deepening our own experience of the Paschal Mystery—from death new life emerges given the Spirit of the Risen Christ in our midst. If grieving rituals are passed over, great opportunities for deeper understandings and appreciation of faith and community are missed. Meaningful ritual not only brings closure to what has been, but also brings energy for what will be.

Learning 9:

Doors were opened to multicultural practices and relationships

While there were some obstacles, prejudices, resistance, subtle and not-so-subtle racism and classism faced in working with various groups, these were offset by examples of real openness to learn from other communities and to be united.

It is examples such as a long established African American community merging with a Latino community that need to be held up. This merger demonstrated that doors of good will truly can be opened and celebrated. The African American community's church could no longer be used for structural reasons and the lack of the millions of dollars it would cost to repair the damage. The Latino community desired to form a new community with them.



To initiate the first Mass in the new community the African American community had a procession/parade with marching bands down a major street between the parishes. They wore buttons announcing the pride the African American community had in being welcomed by the Latino community and invited to form a new community building on the richness of the two former communities.

In the evaluation of the merger a year later, the biggest disappointment expressed by both groups was the language barrier. The desire for deeper unity was abundantly clear; the lack of ability to easily communicate hampered but did not negate the desire to form the new community. Despite the language barrier, progress in forming one community had begun and would continue. Again, it was pastoral, bi-lingual leadership that led to this amazing creation of a new parish.

The learning described above is encouraging and there are many other examples that with the right leadership, good processes and an openness of the people to learn, new relationships and new cultural experiences can be enriching and grace-filled.

It is also clear that much more work needs to be done in this area. The lack of cultural competence in society is also reflected in the Church, though perhaps in some cases to a lesser degree. There is some research that “minority” Catholic communities are more welcoming to other cultures than the dominant Anglo community is. Building upon the learnings from successful multicultural parish merger paradigms could influence cultural competence both in the Church and in the world.

Learning 10:

The experience of effective parish reorganizational planning does lead to a renewal of parish life

Having criteria or benchmarks for vibrant parish life has turned out to be a gift in itself. It has allowed parishioners and parish leaders to come to a deeper understanding of what the parish is and who the Church is called to be.



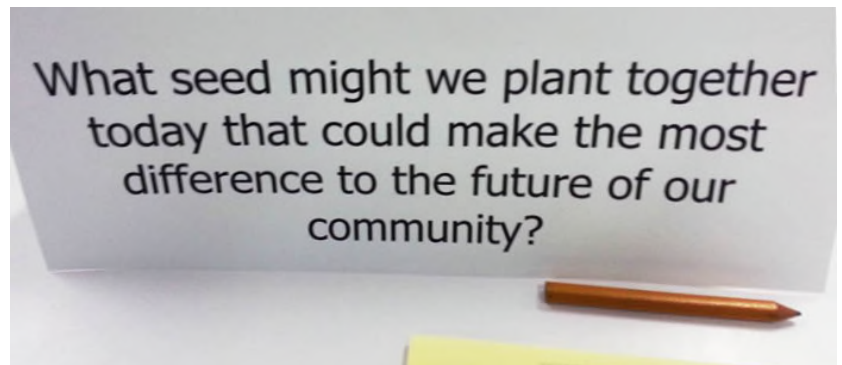
It has empowered Parish Councils to examine their planning roles and to inject a missionary impulse into their work and that of the parish. It has called parishes to deeper understandings of Pope Francis' vision that "God always wants to build bridges; it is we who build walls! And walls fall, always!" It is bridges within our parish ministries, between parishes and with other faith communities that the Pope is challenging us to build.

Conclusion

The Tip of the Iceberg

These 10 learnings are but the “tip of the iceberg” in terms of all the rich insights we have received through our last 20+ years working with archdioceses and dioceses.

Above all, we have learned that what may look like diminishment is truly an invitation to participate with the Spirit in helping to create a new Church of missionary disciples requiring, in the words of Pope Francis:



. . . creativity in adapting to changed situations, carrying forward the legacy of the past not primarily by maintaining our structures and institutions, which have served us well, but above all by being open to the possibilities which the Spirit opens up to us and communicating the joy of the Gospel, daily and in every season of our life. Our challenge today is to build on those solid foundations and to foster a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility in planning for the future of our parishes and institutions... it means discerning and employing wisely the manifold gifts which the Spirit pours out upon the Church. (Pope Francis, Homily at the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul, Philadelphia Saturday, Sept 26, 2015)

Maureen Gallagher, John Reid and Tom Reid are Senior Partners with The Reid Group, a national consulting firm helping leaders and organizations transform challenges into opportunities in the areas of Strategic Planning, Leadership Formation, Leadership Search, Fund Development, Conflict Resolution and Meeting Design and Facilitation.

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