The Changing Face of Ministry
Pastoring Multiple Parishes

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One of the challenging consequences of changing parish structures is the increasing number of priests serving multiple parishes. Drawing upon several years of research and interviews, the author offers a rich description of the rewarding and difficult aspects and pastoral implications of this new pastoral situation.

Taking snapshots is a favorite hobby of people who like to make comparisons. What did we look like ten or twenty or even forty years ago? How have we changed and what are the implications of those changes? Besides photographs, “snapshots” can also be based on statistics. A few numbers can paint vivid pictures, as I hope to demonstrate in this article about multiple parish ministry. Since Vatican II, widespread changes in parishes have resulted in new forms of pastoring. From 1965 to the present, the decrease in the number of priests by more than eighteen thousand, accompanied by an increase of more than twenty million Catholics, has had dramatic effects. Pastors and parishioners in virtually every

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diocese in the United States are aware of these consequences. During this time period, the number of parishes has remained relatively stable at about nineteen thousand, but now more of them are huge mega-parishes and clustered parishes. Parish structures, sizes, and configurations, as well as the delivery of pastoral services, are noticeably different.

Many dioceses report a rapidly growing rate of priests becoming responsible for more than one parish. How many parishes are affected by these changes? What is the frequency of this phenomenon in various regions of the United States? Under these new circumstances, how is pastoral ministry being adapted by priests to meet the needs of parishioners? What is the role of lay ecclesial ministers in these changing circumstances? How do priests feel about extending their ministry across several parishes and many miles? What is rewarding and what is difficult about the ministry? What are the pastoral implications of the evolving structures?

Several years of research involving a thousand priests who responded to these and related questions, and also subsequent conferences around the country for priests, lay ecclesial ministers, and parishioners, have yielded some surprising and inspiring responses (Schuth). Nonetheless, the continuing expansion of this form of ministry leaves many church leaders and parishioners concerned about the consequences over time of priests being stretched beyond their limits. Largely from the viewpoint of pastors, this article considers the encouraging and the disheartening dynamics involved in this issue and the pastoral implications for U.S. Catholics and their leaders.

The Dimensions and Structures of Multiple Parish Ministry

For as long as some dioceses have existed, priests have served more than one parish. In rural areas of the Upper Midwest the practice has been prevalent since the dioceses were founded, and though less frequent in other places, it was not unknown. What is new, however, is the sudden upsurge in the numbers of priests with responsibility for pastoring several parishes. A 2005 analysis of every priest’s assignment, as listed in diocesan directories (Schuth, 3), showed that 44 percent—over 9,100 parishes and missions—were served by a pastor with more than one parish. Some 20 percent of parish priests, 4,409 of them, were thus involved. Significant reasons for this growing form of ministry are the declining number of priests and their uneven distribution. Though the upper and central Midwest and Northwest regions are most affected, all parts of the country have at least some dioceses with high numbers of multiple parish ministers. The 144 dioceses have a high percentage of priests serving more than one parish, with an average of 24.2 percent. In the 32 archdioceses the proportion is less than half that of dioceses, with only 11.8 percent. Some diocesan leaders believe that, because
until recently the most influential archdioceses have been relatively well supplied with priests, minimal attention has been given to this issue nationally.

The terms used to identify multiple parish arrangements vary considerably. They may be called clustered, coupled, affiliated or paired, combined, linked, or twinned parishes. The nature of the relationships among parishes also differs, depending on the ways the pastor, pastoral council, finance council, and staff members interact. Some of the arrangements are described in “Multi-Parish Cluster Models” (Mogilka). Among others he includes: separate parishes with one pastor by himself, a pastor with a centralized lay ministry team, a pastor with separate lay ministers for each parish, and merged parishes with separate worship sites. Occasionally, several priests live together and minister to five or more parishes, with one or more of them serving as pastor. Variations on these models are found time and again depending on local needs and availability of personnel and resources.

When parishes come together, it is sometimes the result of a diocesan edict, usually from the bishop; alternately, the arrangements happen as part of a planning process involving extensive consultation on the diocesan and local levels. At times pastors and parishioners within a neighboring area take the initiative in combining their parishes. They may be aware of the already small sizes of parishes and their continuing population decline and also the shortage of priests that will inevitably lead to clustering or closure of parishes. If they take the initiative, people often feel more satisfied with the ultimate decisions about the arrangements. The most successful and amiable relationships among newly combined parishes usually result from consultative planning and from local initiative. Strong resistance is often the outcome when decisions are made with minimal or no consultation with those who understand local dynamics and relationships.

**Rewarding Aspects of Multiple Parish Ministry**

Priests assigned to pastor several parishes report both rewarding and difficult aspects of the ministry. Yet their overall satisfaction is high, with more than 90 percent feeling appreciated for their ministry, happy with their lives, and willing to choose priesthood again. When asked about the rewarding aspects of ministry, they name parishioners as most significant, with special mention of the support they receive personally from them, their example of faith, and their willingness to take responsibility for the good of the parish. The other major source of satisfaction proves to be the ministry itself. For some pastors the small number of people makes it possible to get to know the particular needs of families. Providing high-quality liturgical celebrations ranks high too, especially at significant moments in the lives of people they know so well. The setting, especially in rural areas, is for many priests a peaceful respite, though some find this environment a drawback.
Support of Parishioners

More often than any other factor, priests said the greatest reward for them was “the people, the people, the people.” Representing many expressions of encouragement were these words: “The social and human support and esteem shown to me by my parishioners is rewarding.” An older priest commented, “What means the most to me is the abundant love of Jesus showered on me in so many wonderful ways—the tremendous love, affirmation, generosity and support of the parishioners in all three parishes as I minister to their spiritual needs.” Other priests added: parishioners appreciated their services, recognized their sacrifices for the parish, and consistently expressed gratitude. Moreover, the faith of the people inspired many pastors. A young priest stated, “The parishioners have called out certain gifts from me that I didn’t realize God has blessed me with and they have been an example of faith to me that has challenged me to grow in holiness.” Another priest added, “Their love for the Church, their faith and for the most part their love for priests and laity who are involved in parish ministry are gratifying.”

Many pastors were impressed by the willingness of people to work for the good of the parish. A midwestern priest put it this way:

What is most rewarding is to see the commitment of the people to their parish communities. I work hard serving these communities, but that is my primary responsibility in life. The parishioners not only care for their parish, but they also spend time raising their families, working hard at their jobs, and volunteering in the community. I am inspired by their generosity.

A priest more than seventy years old, now unable to carry out as many functions as he did when he was younger, appreciated the understanding of parishioners, their cooperation and determination to keep their church open and active in spite of his limitations.

The assistance provided by volunteers and paid staff alike encouraged many pastors. One young priest commented, “Many of my parishioners are always volunteering when I need them. I love working with these people, especially on the missions where I am not always present to give them support.” An older priest pointed out that “parishioners and staff are generous and visionary. Often they have better ideas than I could ever come up with to make our parishes work together more effectively. Lay ministries and lay participation help me to plan for a positive future.” A priest with years of experience offered, “Their contributions add vitality to each of the three parishes involved in our cluster. Working with lay staff in mutual ways makes these relationships very valuable to the ministry.” Many expressed appreciation for the work of volunteers, especially those who provide services the priest cannot render: “They work with newly arrived Hispanics to help build community in a way I can’t because of my lack of fluency in
Many priests of all ages from across the country specified the centrality of the liturgy in their ministry. They expressed their satisfaction in these words: “Being able to help others by bringing the Eucharist and sacraments to the parishes”; and “celebrating liturgy and just being with parishioners in their times of need”; and “noticing connections being made as the Word of God is proclaimed and broken open.” A feeling of success is rewarding to many. “I would have to say the young people in the Confirmation class—when I see them in church participating, then I feel I am doing something right,” was the sentiment of a pastor of thirty years. But after only ten years serving three parishes, another priest who knows success in his ministry noted his exhaustion: “The difference I have been able to make in the parishes influences my attitude toward this ministry. Church attendance has tripled and there is a lot of harmony. But it has come at a great personal expense. I am tired most of the time and I don’t know how much longer I can continue.” Summing up the responses is this observation: “Being part of people’s lives and helping them grow in their love for God is most rewarding—in short, it’s being their pastor.”

Difficult Aspects of Multiple Parish Ministry

The strong expressions signifying the rewards of serving multiple parishes and the love and dedication pastors have in doing this ministry are inspiring,
but pastors who face this challenging work year after year are also aware of the difficulties and pitfalls. Some problems are intractable; for example, the distance and the time it takes to travel to several parishes and coping with the small size of parishes that lack personnel and financial resources. Managing the fears of parish closures is a somewhat intangible problem, but one with serious effects on morale. Other difficulties, such as handling complications with scheduling and fulfilling extensive responsibilities in different locations, usually diminish as priests grow more comfortable with their roles, but until then they create stress.

**Travel Time and Distance**

The survey of priests with multiple parishes confirmed how much travel was required of them to reach their parishes. Since the majority of these churches are in rural areas, it is not surprising that a fourth of the priests travel at least one thousand miles per month for their ministry. Another fourth travel between five hundred and a thousand miles, and 35 percent travel between one hundred and five hundred miles. Most of the nearly 20 percent who travel fewer than one hundred miles are located in urban areas. Travel takes a considerable toll, especially as priests grow older or serve in northern dioceses where winter travel is at times exasperating and dangerous. Priests are concerned not only about “the distance between parishes and missions,” but also taking care of “the sacramental needs when people from several missions are in different hospitals. The drive time often takes longer than the actual ministry.” Especially in dioceses covering large areas, priests complained that “travel time for Sunday Mass is so great I don’t have time for visiting between Masses.” And “I have difficulty getting to know the parishioners, since I shuttle between parishes so often. Too much windshield time means I don’t give any of them all they need.”

**Coping with the Small Sizes of Parishes**

Another challenging problem is the size of many of these parishes. Nearly 70 percent of them serve fewer than two hundred fifty families and two-thirds of those have fewer than one hundred families. While small size can be an advantage in getting to know people individually and the workload can be somewhat lessened, the drawbacks are also noteworthy. An experienced priest put it this way:

> Our situation is our size. With the small number of families, we are unable to be ministerially complete—no staff members but myself and the bookkeeper. Though the people volunteer and do much of the work, not having trained professionals to work in the parish keeps much from happening that would benefit the whole. Some may opt to close the outlying parishes and try to offer the mega-church solution, but that has its own shortcomings.
Others spoke of stresses such as the lack of time to develop anything fully and barely having enough time or resources to keep the minimum level of activities going. Duplication of liturgies and meetings for small numbers was tiring, as well as managing the expectations of parishes wanting everything they had before with their own priest. Another concern looms large for parishioners, many of whom recognize the fragility of their situations. They fear the closure of their small parish communities. Priests struggle between giving an honest appraisal of tenuous circumstances and offering encouraging but overly optimistic words.

**Balancing the Needs of Several Diverse Parishes**

Scheduling all-embracing pastoral services for several diverse parishes is a complicated task for even the most experienced and proficient pastor; for those less capable or filling multiple parish assignments for the first time, the task is daunting. One priest put it this way: “I am stretched too thin; my last assignment was with four parishes—a true impossibility in every way. I have the gnawing feeling that I’m not doing justice to any of the parishes. I like to get things done and see them finished. Work in multiple parishes is never done.” A pastor for ten years noted the difficulty of staying in contact “especially in those places where I don’t live. It can be mentally draining to shift from community to community especially across cultures. It’s like adding a fourth parish to the three I already have. Thinking about completely separate worlds, each needing total commitment, takes more energy than I have some days.” Ultimately many priests face their limits by letting go of things and allowing others to do them.

A pervasive problem is scheduling services to please each parish. One pastor complained, “Too many people act as if I had only one parish; every group wants you for the full amount of time; they are uneducated as to the time available. They gripe a lot when they don’t get what they want when they want it.” After fifty years in the priesthood, a pastor acknowledged his “inability to arrange schedules of Masses that are pleasing to all three parishes as well as providing equal service in other spiritual matters.” Summing up the concerns, pastors said the issue was “time, time, time.” Balancing too many different demands and being pulled in many different directions is frustrating for them.

**Pastoral Implications for Dioceses, Pastors, Staff, and Parishioners**

Many pastoral implications of multiple parish ministry are suggested in the foregoing comments. Even in the face of demanding schedules these priests are highly satisfied with the support they receive from parishioners and lay ecclesial ministers. The ministry itself offers enormous satisfaction, especially in having close contact with small communities and helping people grow in their faith.
These two elements are the backbone of parish life and indeed have positive implications—pastors generally want to engage in this ministry and they enjoy it. Yet the reality of frequent travel is exhausting, and parishes cannot simply be closed when they are in distant places. The small size of many parishes leaves them without resources for full pastoral services, such as vibrant liturgies, competent religious education, and a variety of other faith-building opportunities.

Priests adjust their lives and ministry to satisfy the vast majority of parishioners, but sometimes at the price of omitting certain aspects of service, such as certain external activities. Rarely did pastors have time for civic involvement; they said they were not very effective in leading their parishes in addressing the social problems of the community, or being involved in the civic communities where their churches are located, or understanding the secular political forces that influence each of the parishes. Many pastors lamented this situation and pointed out that it constituted a real change in the theology of ministry. The lack of time for external activities meant the loss of opportunities for evangelization. This focus can narrow the vision of parishioners and diminish the role of the church in society.

**Recommendations for Bishops**

In light of these basic facts, the pastors who were surveyed offered proposals to bishops whose policies have great influence on their lives. Several practices can be initiated or improved by bishops/religious superiors. First, leaders need to offer encouragement, show appreciation, and get to know the dynamics of multiple parish ministry. Basic to this request are performing simple gestures—offering prayers, making visits and calls, and showing other manifestations of concern for the well-being of pastors. Yet bishops are so often overburdened by other aspects of their work that they do not take time to visit parishes. Second, encouragement can also come in the form of access to certain spiritual and educational opportunities related to ministering in several parishes. Since 90 percent of the pastors had no formal training before beginning this form of ministry, a variety of formats appeal to them such as monthly spiritual evenings of reflection, workshops, classes, and educational resources online, all geared specifically to multiple parish ministry. Those who staff bilingual parishes need help with language and culture, especially opportunities for Spanish-language studies.

From another point of view, these pastors need others to assist them with their ministry. First, diocesan offices could organize priests to substitute for those serving several parishes. Rural areas have little access to substitutes for weekend services since retired priests find it difficult to drive to distant locations, especially in winter. Having someone organize transportation for them or having retirement centers in several parts of the diocese are possible remedies. Second, the pastors would like bishops to make greater efforts to recruit priests by being more proactive about vocations and by exploring other sources of priests who would be suitable for the environment of a given diocese. A third way of alleviating some of the work
overload would be to recruit and educate more lay ministers. Once hired, lay ministers need to be assured of decent salaries and favorable working conditions.

Perhaps most necessary, given the changing dynamics of church membership and ministry, is for bishops to take leadership in planning for the future configurations of parishes. It is an opportunity to strengthen a process that will allow reasonable transition to this form of ministry. Many pastors noted the absence of planning and wished it were more evident, especially in determining the ways parishes are closed, combined, or merged for administrative purposes and pastoral care. Consultation with priests and parishioners needs to be a significant part of the process. Present arrangements do not always reflect awareness of local situations, and so inadequately informed and inappropriate decisions add to the difficulty of pastoring several parishes.

**Recommendations for Pastors**

The participants in this study suggest useful actions for priests who in the future will share the joys and burdens of serving as pastors of more than one parish. Given the variety and quantity of responsibilities, they recommend focusing time and attention on priestly ministry. For many, this would mean doing less administration and paperwork, attending fewer meetings, and spending less time on the road. They prefer liturgical, sacramental, and educational duties instead of maintenance, bookkeeping, and secretarial jobs. If at all possible, they recommend hiring at least one full-time person to manage administrative tasks, even if it requires diocesan financial assistance. Without some form of help, the length of their service is likely to be shortened, indeed a very negative pastoral implication.

With or without appropriate assistance, pastors advocate regulating the expectations of parishioners. Though this suggestion can seem selfish, it is important to establish boundaries if priests are to provide long-term service without suffering exhaustion. As parishioners get used to sharing a priest, they gradually realize the pastor’s limitations. Repeatedly priests say they would like to reduce duplication, primarily in two ways: by attending fewer meetings and presiding at fewer weekend Masses. In some cases an inter-parish council or joint meetings can reduce this commitment of time. In general, pastors need to discuss the state of affairs with parishioners, including the constraints brought about by the responsibilities for more than one parish. Members of all parishes need to be involved, preferably in common gatherings.

Besides providing excellent ministry, another goal of managing time well is to focus inner resources by taking time for prayer, exercise, and relaxation. Though this advice is universally acclaimed, it is not well followed. Given their busy lives, priests know they should put more emphasis on their spiritual life, health issues, and rest and relaxation. For some, getting a good night’s sleep at least once a week would be a starting point. Taking a day off each week without fail is even better, and having a vacation of more than five days would be ideal. Regrettably, about
a quarter of the priests in this study believe they are not very effective or not at all effective at organizing their time and balancing what they do.

**Challenge for the Future**

In the course of the research on multiple parish ministry, what is truly amazing is the positive way most parishioners, priests, and parish staffs have adapted to personnel changes, parish configurations, and other alterations. They have opened their hearts and their doors to members from diverse cultural backgrounds and religious tendencies and to people in all age groups with varied educational preparation. Parishioners who share a priest with other parishes are awakening to ways they can contribute to easing the burdens and appreciating the gifts their pastor brings instead of expecting only to receive from him. The real challenge for the future is maintaining a vital Catholic presence and a positive environment where grace and peace are the outcomes of truly collaborative ministry.

**References**


**Other Resources**


