

**Best Practices of Parish Leadership**  
**National Ministry Summit**

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The six national organizations that form the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project sponsored a series of eight regional symposia throughout the United States between November 2004 and November 2006. These invitational symposia engaged 529 pastoral leaders throughout the United States in a discussion of the emerging models of pastoral leadership they are currently experiencing and expect to foresee in the future. Of the 529 participants in these eight regional symposia, 82% also completed extensive questionnaires involving over 27 items describing their current experiences and future expectations of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership.

The intention of the symposia process was to identify typical pastoral leadership structures and experiences that might foreshadow the next wave of leadership in parishes throughout the United States. Participants in these symposia represented pastors, parish life coordinators, deacons, pastoral associates, parish pastoral council reps, and diocesan leaders in their various roles and responsibilities. The representation of men and women in these symposia was nearly equal. The age distribution of symposia participants reflected the current profiles of church leaders with 67% of participants being between the ages of 50 and 69. There was an under-representation of multicultural pastoral leaders, as well as young adults throughout all symposia.

Symposia participants also represented a balanced distribution of parish households they serve with approximately 46% of their parish households over 1,200 and an equal number under 1,200. Over 70% of symposia participants have achieved a Masters or Doctoral Degree during their careers. About half of symposia participants represented parishes with pastors responsible for one parish, while a large number of participants represented more diverse leadership models.

Throughout the symposia process, it became apparent that the expected results of the initiative would be substantially different than anticipated. While we had expected to identify a handful of emerging structural models and defined roles of parish leaders (i.e., mega churches, multiple parish pastors, etc.), the project found little consistency and uniformity among emerging models. We found models of parish leadership are largely driven by the economics, geography, and demographics of the local situation. A preferred ecclesiology or diocesan planning efforts did not appear as a significant factor in determining how parish structures are evolving among symposia cohorts.

These parish leaders also experienced a number of formidable challenges in building a sense of vibrancy in their faith communities. These challenges include:

- **Systemic and structure issues in Church leadership (i.e., shortage of priests, downsizing of parish and diocesan structures, clergy abuse issues, etc.)**
- **Issues of theological, cultural, and multi-cultural diversity**
- **The culture of self-centeredness and individualism prevalent in U.S. society**
- **Emerging personnel issues involving the need for extensive training, education, and formation of future pastoral leaders, particularly in rural areas or areas without a Catholic university presence**

Despite the complex challenges these pastoral leaders face, they demonstrated an enormous sense of optimism in the spiritual vitality of their parishes. This optimism is also conditioned by a grounded realism in the challenges they face in building intentional communities of faith for the future.

A total of seven structural models of parish leadership were identified throughout the symposia process, with seemingly infinite variations. Most importantly, however, across these parish structures pastoral leaders are giving birth to new models of leadership through:

- **Intentional planning and visioning processes in their parishes**
- **Innovative approaches to clustering parishes and inter-parish collaboration**
- **Intentional formation of lay leaders**
- **Concentration on smaller, more intentional faith communities within the parish, providing outreach to individuals and families**

While the emerging models or structures of parish leadership are exceedingly diverse, the patterns or behaviors of leadership demonstrate surprising commonalities. These common elements have caused the project to redefine emerging models as less of a “structural model” and more of “a practice or set of practices” which are giving birth to the parish of the future.

These best practices include some amazing convergence of common experiences despite the geographic, economic, cultural, and demographic diversity of local parish leaders and their parish experiences. These best practices or examples of emerging models include:

- **Emergence of a total ministering community with a growing recognition and appreciation of a common baptismal call to discipleship with different expressions among clergy, non-ordained professionals, and lay leaders working together in building the spiritual vitality of parish life**
- **High level engagement of parishioners in ministry formation at the diocesan and parish levels, which results in lay led ministries and the development of new ministries**
- **Redefinition of the role of pastor and parish life coordinator as dynamic facilitator and chief collaborator calling forth the gifts of others and serving as a change agent for new roles, structures, and programs**
- **Extending the role of parish staff include much of the day-to-day pastoral ministry and programming of the parish, as well as calling forth the gifts of parishioners.**
- **Collaborative pastoral teams which facilitated the formation of lay leadership rather than administering their own projects and priorities**

- **Deep-seated spiritual vitality linked to the centrality of the celebration of the Eucharist and sacramental life as the fundamental defining characteristic of Catholicity in parishes**
- **Intentional efforts to embrace multi-culturalism even before parishes themselves have become multi-cultural in their membership**
- **Intergenerational faith formation through various evangelization and catechetical programs based in the RCIA, biblical studies, sacramental preparation, and youth catechesis**
- **Proactive outreach to individuals and households within the parish despite the size and complexity of the parish structure, inviting each and every household and parishioner in the life of the parish and its future formation**
- **Proactive efforts to reach youth and young adults through cross-parochial ministries, digital ministries, integrating young adult leaders into the life of parishes, and catechetical programs age appropriate to young adults in their 20s and 30s.**
- **Intentional collaboration among churches to share resources whenever possible, transcending the boundaries of each parish as a stand-alone enclave**
- **Commitment to justice evident in practice and usually demonstrated at a high level in parish organizations with a specific council or commission devoted to justice ministries**
- **Greater accountability in parish life and transparency of personnel management, financial management, and ethical standards of conduct in dealing with employees and members**

In short, rather than finding “cookie cutter” models of emerging parish leadership structures for the future, the symposia identified a vibrant and creative undercurrent of parish revitalization and formation. These emerging communities are rooted in celebrating, vibrant, and welcoming communities with a comprehensive understanding of a total ministering community involving ordained, non-ordained, professional, and lay volunteers working together to achieve a comprehensive vision of the parish of the future. These communities are very often mission focused in serving the church and the world and more deeply intentional in the faith formation of individuals through small faith-based communities, deep-seated prayer and sacramental life, and a rock bed foundation in the Eucharist as the center of all parish life and ministry.

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