

# Quintessentials

Top 5 insights for ministry from our team in the field



Catholic Leadership  
INSTITUTE

## 5 Steps to Set Up Multi-Parish Pastoring for Success

As the landscape of the Church in the United States continues to shift dramatically over the next decade, the long-projected retirement cliff for priests, lay ecclesial ministers, and professional staff is already underway. The prospect of multi-parish pastoring is a reality in many — if not most — dioceses.

While far from ideal, multi-parish pastoring has existed for decades in many parts of the world and in some dioceses across the United States. Catholic Leadership Institute has accompanied numerous dioceses and parishes as they discern a move toward a multi-parish pastoring model and as they support its early implementation.

Drawing on this collective experience and learning, we have compiled a practical resource designed to support and sustain communities adapting to multi-parish pastoring—whether as a permanent or transitional leadership structure. This resource outlines five steps that a pastor and his team can leverage to help lighten the increased workload and establish a ministry that is more sustainable for both leaders and the community over the long term.



These steps apply to various forms of what some define as “multi-parish pastoring” settings, including [one pastor leading more than one canonically distinct parish community](#), as well as [one pastor leading one canonical parish with several worship sites](#).

### 1. Don't try to maintain the “status quo”

Statistics show that priests and parish staff are some of the most relational, caring, service-minded people. That makes sense, given their response to Christ's call. At the same time, we also know priests and parish staff often struggle with change, conflict, and taking risks. While the desire to try to shield people in the parishes affected by this new reality from any change or disruption to their daily/weekly rhythm of faith practice comes from a very good place, it can also yield very bad effects for the clergy and laity in leadership.



It is not feasible to take what is done for one community and try to replicate it in two, three, or even four other communities. Catholic Leadership Institute has sadly seen that when pastors try to keep the “status quo” afloat, the effects can be extremely detrimental not only on the health and well-being of the pastor and staff, but on the vitality of the parishioners. Things must change. The question is how to go about initiating that change? In times of change and transition, it is important to remember William Bridge’s “Two C’s” and “Four P’s”:[1]

## The Two C’s and Four P’s



### Care

Lead with empathy toward staff and parishioners. Acknowledge what they may feel they are losing and reassure them of your ongoing commitment to them and their parish.

### Concern

Take parishioners’ concerns seriously and resist the temptation to dismiss them. Even if you do not share the same concerns, people need space to fully process the transition from one reality to another.



### Purpose

Repeatedly and clearly explain why a change is being considered or implemented. Communication should begin well before the change takes place. As a general guideline, allow at least one month for relatively minor changes, and four to six months for more significant shifts, such as adjustments to Mass schedules.

### Plan

For major changes—such as combining staff or altering schedules—clearly outline the steps involved. What will happen first, second, and third? When will decisions be made? The more transparency offered about both the plan and the process, the better.

### Picture

Share a clear vision of what the change will look like once it is implemented. For example, in one multi-parish pastoring situation, a pastor explained that a revised Mass schedule would allow him to be more present to parishioners before and after Mass, rather than rushing to the next location. Help people see not only what is changing, but why it matters and what it could make possible.

### Part to Play

Invite people to participate in the change process. Can parishioners offer input on Mass times through a survey? Could they help shape a new shared website? When people have a meaningful role to play, they are more likely to feel ownership and invest in the success of the change.

[1] William Bridges' Transition Model, "Two C's" and "Four P's"

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## 2. Forming one staff

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This is likely the most challenging step — and also the most critical. The pastor needs to both support and be supported by a united staff with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, minimized duplication of effort, and a shared approach to daily ministry. Even when parishes are not canonically merged, fostering a culture of shared responsibility and strong working relationships among parish staff is essential. The following steps can help begin that process:

- **Engage a facilitator** to guide challenging conversations. This allows everyone to fully participate without the added pressure of planning or running the meetings.
- **Invite the current staff** of all parishes to reflect together on what is working well and where they feel most stretched or challenged.
- **Discern future staffing needs** with councils and staff by identifying roles that may need to be added or expanded. For example, while a half-time maintenance position may be adequate for a single parish, serving three parishes may call for a full-time facilities director to coordinate maintenance resources across locations. Similar considerations may apply to areas such as religious education or communications.

With these new roles defined, current staff can more easily discern whether they wish to step into a new position, adjust or narrow their responsibilities, or consider stepping away in light of the changing demands. While this discernment can be challenging for some people, greater clarity about future leadership often helps individuals arrive at an honest and personal decision about whether—and how—they wish to be part of this new chapter.



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## 3. Model and message unity and presence, over efficiency

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Pope Francis once said that shepherds should “smell like the sheep.” At Catholic Leadership Institute, we often add that, “sheep tend to sound like their shepherd.” Our research shows that the average parishioner is 11x more likely to recommend the parish if they recommend the pastor. This dynamic is especially influential during times of change, shaping both tone and culture. When pastors and staff do not model unity and collaboration, it becomes exceedingly difficult to invite parishioners to do so. Consider the following practices:

- **Integrate themes of change, unity, and welcome** into daily and Sunday preaching when appropriate.
- **Rotate parish staff** to facilitate relationship-building if multiple work sites are being maintained.
- **Rotate feast day celebrations, regular meetings, and parish events** across different parish locations.
- **Avoid framing changes primarily around the burden placed on pastors or staff.** While that might be true, focus on being present and the desire to sustain a good momentum for everyone.

## 4. Identify local volunteers at each site and form them together in a shared vision and culture

Catholic Leadership Institute has seen multi-parish pastoring thrive when communities are sustained by a core group of committed local volunteers who offer steady, faithful service in both small and significant ways — particularly in rural settings. These volunteer leaders not only take on responsibilities that would otherwise fall to the pastor or staff, but they also help keep ministry grounded in the lived reality of the community. They know who is ill, who is struggling, and who has recently experienced loss. As trusted influencers and natural communicators, they play a vital role in parish life. Such generosity should never be taken for granted or left unsupported. Bringing these leaders together to pray, receive formation, share updates, and — most importantly — to be thanked and affirmed is essential to sustaining both them and the wider parish community.

Have you enjoyed this Quintessential and want more?  
Check out [Pastoral Plans are Easing Pastor Transitions, Case Study](#)  
by Catholic Leadership Institute.



“This I ask you: be shepherds, with the ‘odour of the sheep,’ make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fishers of men. True enough, the so-called crisis of priestly identity threatens us all and adds to the broader cultural crisis; but if we can resist its onslaught, we will be able to put out in the name of the Lord and cast our nets.”

*Pope Francis, Chrism Mass - 2013*



**Read the case study!**

Scan the QR code with your phone.



## 5. Ask for help and resources (but be specific!)

During times of change, stress, and heavy workload, it's natural to put our heads down and simply try to push through. Without intentional support, however, pastors and staff in multi-parish settings can quickly experience burnout, resentment, and isolation. Feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, they may raise concerns with diocesan leadership, only to feel unheard when their needs are not clearly understood or addressed. The following approaches can help open pathways to meaningful support:

- **Engage a coach or facilitator** to help surface staff pain points, explore possible solutions (even those that initially feel unrealistic), and prioritize changes that would make the greatest impact. While not every need can be met, having a clear and shared “wish list” creates focus and direction.
- **Invite diocesan representatives** to visit and review these priorities together. In larger dioceses, this may involve the parish services office; in smaller dioceses, a meeting with the Vicar General may be most appropriate.
- **Explore shared service options** that can reduce administrative and logistical strain. Outsourced services such as bookkeeping, IT, or communications are often available to support smaller or clustered parishes and can significantly increase capacity.
- **Identify potential philanthropic partners**, including local community foundations or Catholic foundations. In mission dioceses, organizations such as the Catholic Extension Society or Catholic Rural Life may offer additional support.



### 1:1 LEADERSHIP COACHING

Need a coach to walk you through the transition process? Catholic Leadership Institute offers One-on-One Leadership Coaching to priests navigating change, managing conflict, preparing for new roles, and engaging in a series of other circumstances that call for accompaniment.



There is no question that the demands of multi-parish pastoring are significant. Establishing unified practices, schedules, staffing models, and expectations that assume a marathon — not a sprint — is essential for sustaining both parish leadership and parish life over the long term.