

PASTORAL PLANS ARE EASING PASTOR TRANSITIONS

In the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend

Case Study



Catholic Leadership
INSTITUTE

THE OPPORTUNITY

Today, Catholic dioceses nationwide are grappling with unprecedented challenges in serving the People of God. Multiple factors affect their parishes, including financial pressures, declining engagement in parish life, demographic changes, fewer men answering the call to the priesthood, pastors assigned to shepherding multiple parishes and worship sites, leading to further diocesan reorganizations and parish consolidations.

These challenges are made more acute as they require today's priests to become pastors earlier in their priestly ministry than most of their predecessors. In the past, priests would have multiple assignments and experiences as associate pastors, usually lasting several years, before being asked to step into the role of pastor.

Along with an accelerated call for priests to become pastors, the regular movement and reassignment of priests is challenging to any diocese and faith community. Beyond the loss of a trusted shepherd and spiritual father, a change in pastoral leadership can stall parish progress and adversely affect initiatives set in motion by the previous pastor.

EFFECTIVE PASTORING

A thriving parish needs a good shepherd. That's the conclusion reached in 2022 when Catholic Leadership Institute conducted a virtual symposium on Effective Pastoring in the 21st Century. The symposium included 36 leaders from 15 arch/dioceses and various apostolates and religious communities across the United States and Canada. This group proposed a purpose statement, values, and key responsibility areas for the role of an effective pastor.



According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the average number of diocesan priests per parish has decreased 50 percent since 1965. As a result, priests typically experience one brief assignment in advance of assuming the responsibilities of managing and shepherding a parish. This new landscape requires new thinking and planning to ensure that parish life continues to flourish.



In follow-up to this conversation, a white paper summary was prepared. The following excerpt about the expected role of a pastor reflects the responsibilities our priests are facing sooner than ever:

Leadership matters. Leaders matter. Despite the quest by some to find or develop “the pastor-proof” parish, it doesn’t exist. A Catholic community of faith can persevere through bad leaders. It can hold on with no leader. But it can’t thrive without a leader. The flock needs a shepherd. A good leader does not necessarily always make a good shepherd, but a good shepherd definitely needs to be a good leader, especially in today’s return to an apostolic age.

At this time in Church history, the imperative for thriving parishes is critical. But how do we best support our pastors in their own leadership formation and pastoral planning efforts to ensure they are as effective as possible, let alone prepare them for ongoing transition? In many dioceses, Catholic Leadership Institute has the opportunity to help parishes by facilitating better discovery and dialogue to orient a pastor and his parish toward mission.

With clarity about the mission and a clear path forward, these pastors can lead better and adapt more seamlessly when their assignments eventually turn over. This was witnessed first-hand in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend in Indiana as it applied its efforts to define priorities around its pastoral and spiritual mission.

KEY LEARNINGS

In 2019, Most Rev. Kevin Rhoades, Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, engaged Catholic Leadership Institute to guide several parishes through CLI’s *Next Generation Parish* experience.

In the early phases of *Next Generation Parish*, an “Envisioning Team” of parish leaders comes together and dedicates prayerful time, skill, and discernment in mapping out a pastoral plan. Over the course of several months, the team creates a plan that articulates the parish purpose, values, priorities, and goals. This plan becomes the framework for a two-year period of implementation and unites the community under one set of shared beliefs and goals.



PROPOSED PURPOSE STATEMENT OF A PASTOR

A pastor leads his flock into a life of deep prayer and sacrifice, rooted in the Sacraments, that enables the community to discern a vision and fulfill a plan to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

PROPOSED VALUES FOR THE ROLE OF A PASTOR

- Vision
- Co-responsibility
- Apostolic
- Joy
- Innovation

PROPOSED KEY RESPONSIBILITY AREAS OF A PASTOR

TEACH: Proclaim, instruct, and accompany the Christian faithful in the Truths of the faith so that they can grow in personal holiness and missionary discipleship.

SANCTIFY: Plan, promote, and celebrate the Sacraments devoutly and frequently facilitate God’s grace imparted upon the Christian faithful.

GOVERN: Seek and steward the God-given temporal and human gifts present in the community in order to facilitate opportunities for the Christian faithful to experience encounter with Christ.*

*The first unique responsibility of the pastor for this area of responsibility is to ensure a vision and pastoral plan for the parish.



Catholic Leadership Institute's *Next Generation Parish* is a four-year experience that transforms the future of the Church through innovative, dynamic accompaniment. It is designed to help dioceses and parishes meet the challenges of our time through visionary models that:

- (1) foster spiritual maturity
- (2) share leadership
- (3) offer a vibrant Sunday experience
- (4) embrace a missionary impulse.



“It is difficult to create a long-term planning process. It’s hard to create a vision and core values. It’s difficult work and takes a lot of focus. *Next Generation Parish* helped us get this done and created a springboard.”

– Lenny Strzelecki

30-year parishioner at St. Thérèse Little Flower Catholic Church in South Bend, Indiana, and co-chair of the parish's *Next Generation Parish* Implementation Team

Thanks to the process's collaborative nature, a pastoral plan developed through *Next Generation Parish* serves as a guidepost with input from all key stakeholders. After a four-year journey of preparing, envisioning, planning, implementing, and assessing, the process can serve as a valuable asset, contributing to and sustaining parish growth and vitality. It engages clergy and laity together, allowing the laity to fulfill their responsibility to respond to their baptismal call to “make disciples of all nations” (MT 28:19) in new and creative ways because they understand how to achieve the parish mission together.

When a parish faces a change in leadership, Catholic Leadership Institute has identified that a pastoral plan provides clarity and vision to ensure consistency. It fosters connection and collaboration between the outgoing and incoming priests as well. A former pastor can articulate a clear vision for the parish, and his successor can come to better understand the parish's identity and priorities before beginning his efforts to make the parish his own. This “passing of the baton” helps a parish continue to move forward through the transition.

The challenges that accompany pastor transitions can be daunting to any parish family. When changes occur, recalling a learned process to engage and equip the clergy, staff, and other laity in one unified vision and dialogue proves to be an invaluable aid in fostering collaboration, preparing future leaders, and encouraging co-responsibility, so that parishes not only endure, but become vibrant faith communities for generations.

THE RESULTS

Following are a few examples that demonstrate how pastors in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend were better prepared to serve their parish communities during leadership transitions.

At St. Thérèse Little Flower in South Bend, Fr. Julius Okojie succeeded Fr. Terry Conan as pastor. Although Fr. Conan was saddened to leave his parish, because of *Next Generation Parish*, he was confident of a smooth transition. “Our strategic plan builds on our vision. It gives us goals,” he said. “Having a plan provides peace of mind during this transition. I know the work I started won’t fall apart when I leave ... when the new pastor arrives, he will already have clarity, direction, vision, and goals to work for.”

This proved true for Fr. Okojie, who stated: “The pastoral plan provided a roadmap for me as I assumed responsibility as pastor. It was helpful to know what preceded me and in what direction the parish was already heading, per my predecessor’s vision. It was also helpful not to have to create one from scratch but to build upon what was already in place. ... It still is our parish plan, although continually reviewed per our last Disciple Maker Index survey and ongoing discernment to address present and future needs.”

At St. John the Evangelist parish in Goshen, Indiana, pastor Fr. Royce Gregerson engaged and shepherded his associate Fr. Logan Parrish in Catholic Leadership Institute’s *Next Generation Parish* process. Fr. Gregerson said that beyond the financial and sacramental nuts and bolts of preparing to transfer leadership to a new pastor, the comprehensive planning process helps document a sense of the history of the parish, its priorities, its strengths and opportunities. It also can help the new pastor quickly identify key parishioners and staff who he can count on. “It’s so helpful to know the people who have been involved, who are good at different things – like a talent scouting report,” he said.

Through the creation of a detailed and effective pastoral plan, St. John the Evangelist demonstrated the importance of planning for Fr. Parrish, who is now pastor at St. Thomas the Apostle in Elkhart, Indiana, and is working with Catholic Leadership Institute on a pastoral plan for his new parish – which has helped guide his orientation to the new assignment. “A key to our plan is to help me ensure that our parish and our community enjoy a healthy sacramental life,” Fr. Parrish said.

Fr. Glenn Kehrman initiated Catholic Leadership Institute’s *Next Generation Parish* at St. John the Baptist in Fort Wayne and Holy Family in South Bend. When Fr. Kehrman was reassigned, he was able to orient the next pastor at Holy Family, Fr. Luke Okoye, within two hours by sharing the parish’s well-designed pastoral plan. The plan provided Fr. Okoye with a holistic understanding of his new parish community and supported a more seamless and efficient transition.

At St. John the Baptist, the associate, Fr. Sunday Akuh, was named pastor. Since he had already been part of the parish planning process, Fr. Akuh was able to step into the leadership role with ease and continue to guide the parish through its implementation of the plan.

Any parish can equip its rising shepherds with adequate skills and acumen to better serve their congregations. Allowing younger pastors to thrive is a key imperative to keeping the faith vibrant and alive today and for generations to come.

“Walking with CLI is crucial for us at this time given the young age of many pastors in our diocese,” said the Most Rev. Kevin Rhoades, Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend. “Thanks to CLI, these priests are courageous, constantly learning how to lead their flock, and at peace with their calling and God’s hope for their life. ... Our priests need guidance to learn to lead like our Lord. Our parishes deserve it. Our pews will fill when they live it. Our future will be forged when they master it.”

THE INVITATION

The process of enhancing pastor transitions is best when rooted in prayer, discernment, and reflection, such as what occurs during the *Next Generation Parish* initiative. By taking intentional time to envision and plan the parish purpose, vision, values, and top priorities in a team dynamic, the more we can experience shared leadership and accountability for the future. As a result, a parish community can experience consistency and stability upon the inevitable shifts in pastoral leadership.

Below are a series of reflection questions to consider how each of us can better prepare for pastor transitions, and thus continue to assist our parishes to serve Christ and our communities:



FOR CLERGY

- How can you expedite the learning curve attached to a new assignment and enable a smooth transition for yourself and your brother priests?
- In what ways can you better mentor, instruct, and/or assist young priests and new pastors with managing the administrative and operational side of parish leadership?
- How can you engage parishioners to develop their God-given gifts to help your parish?
- What do you need to successfully implement a dynamic pastoral plan that could transform the future of your parish?

QUINTESENTIALS

Scan the QR code to download a copy of Catholic Leadership Institute's resource: *Quintessentials: 5 Principles for Streamlining Pastor Transitions*.



Here are some ideas based on CLI's experience in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend and elsewhere:

- Engage your own associate(s) in the details of running a parish, the parish planning process, and leading staff and volunteers on key initiatives.
- Give your associate(s) appropriate responsibilities and coach and mentor him to expand his skills away from the pulpit, including how to lead meetings and overcome any inherent introversion.
- Support the emotional health of your associate(s), and yourself, as together you plan for this major life change.
- Reach out personally to high-profile parishioners to ask them to engage with specific projects or teams for specific time periods, and to "talk up" the new pastor before he arrives. Build lay teams to support parish operational elements that continue from one pastor to another.
- Bridge the transition to a new pastor by, when possible, including him in key meetings and events leading up to the change.

- Make time to meet with the new pastor to give him the “lay of the land,” and support him meeting early with parish leadership and staff to get their perspectives.
- Engage with your peers or diocesan leadership to find helpful resources. Bring in outside help, such as CLI, to help guide the process.



FOR LAY LEADERS

- In what ways can you support, guide, and pray for current seminarians, transitional deacons, and associate pastors who will be our future parish leaders?
- In what ways can we step up to enhance the mission of our parish? How can we become more involved to support our priests and our parish as a whole?
- What role could you play to help your pastor prioritize parish planning to constantly enhance your parish’s vision and mission? In what ways could your parish empower an active team/committee that works to welcome and transition a new pastor?

Here are some ideas from the experience of Fort Wayne-South Bend and other dioceses:

- Think about how you can bring your business or personal experience to bear in helping support parish activities and priorities.
- Consider what ministry leadership roles you can take on, even on a temporary basis, and what ministries are lacking that you could help create. Meet with your pastor and parish leadership team to talk about how you can best serve.
- Determine what skills you can help your pastor, associates and deacons develop – including running a meeting, managing staff, organizational approaches, growing emotional intelligence, dealing with conflict, and more.
- Make a commitment to share your support for the new pastor within your parish groups and communities.

Developing a pastoral plan through Catholic Leadership Institute’s *Next Generation Parish* is one way to allow everyone in a parish to feel empowered and equipped to lead. Even with unavoidable pastoral transitions and changes, a clear plan rooted in mission can help keep any pastor-elect and his parish community focused and, God-willing, thriving.

To learn more about the *Next Generation Parish* process, visit: www.catholicleaders.org/next-generation-parish.

