

## The Multiple Parish Pastoring Project

Multiple Parish Pastoring (MPP) – the assignment of two or more parishes to a single pastor - is not a new experience. Historically, priests traveled the highways and byways establishing and maintaining multiple parishes and mission churches as they went along. Rural dioceses have always had some parishes sharing the services of a pastor. Despite its limited yet widespread prevalence, MPP has always been seen as an extraordinary and hopefully temporary pastoral practice, a practice contrary to the norms of canon law and the Church's vision for parish.

What is new, is the recent significant growth in the number of pastors and parish life coordinators doing MPP in dioceses throughout the US. This growth has been driven largely by declining numbers of priests available to serve parishes and some population shifts. Data from a 2005 study by Sr. Katarina Schuth reported that as many as 44% of all parishes and missions in the United States share a pastor. MPP is the most common response of bishops and diocesan planning efforts to deal with declining numbers of priests for service to parishes.

Complimenting the research of Sr. Katarina is the work of the Multiple Parish Pastoring Project of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Initiative which was led by the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development (CPPCD) and the National Federation of Priests Councils (NFPC). This initiative, organized in 2004 and concluded in 2007, included

- U.S. Diocesan Staff Study – to explore MPP training needs and practices
- Pastors of MPP Study - to gather best practices
- National Symposium on MPP – with MPP pastors and parish life coordinators, diocesan staff, researchers, representatives from national organizations and staff from diocesan pastoral planning offices
- MPP Training Program Pilots – two offered for pastors, staff and lay leaders with 400 participants
- Exploratory Study of Inter-Parochial Pastoral Councils, by Robert J. Miller
- Book to be Published – Authors – Mark Mogilka and Kate Wiskus

### Project Highlights

**Incidence** – As the numbers of priests continues to decline, the numbers of parishes that are linked or share a pastor or parish life coordinator will continue to grow. This number does not include parishes that have been canonically merged to form a new parish, but still maintain two or more worship sites. MPP is the number one response of dioceses to declining numbers of priests available for parish ministry. Given the growing multi-cultural nature of parishes, pastors often report that even though they only have one parish, given the unique spiritual and pastoral needs of various ethnic groups – sometimes they feel like they are pastoring more than one parish.

**Diocesan Awareness** – The MPP Project found that despite the growing incidence of MPP, there were few seminaries or dioceses across the country that provided any training, preparation or support for pastors or parish life coordinators with multiple parish responsibilities. There were few, if any guidelines, program resources, policies that address this growing phenomenon. Most diocesan policies, training and resource materials continue to assume one parish one pastor as the norm.

**Impact on Pastors** – Research by Schuth noted pastors in general were happy, well appreciated and satisfied with their ministry. They enjoyed smaller parishes, ministry in general and interaction with parishioners. However, they also struggled with “never enough time”, too much travel, increased levels of administration, duplication of effort, the inability of parishes to work better together, difficulty in finding replacements for vacations and days off, and limited resources (staff and finances). Almost half weren’t sure they could do MPP for more than 10 years. In general they are making the best of a less than ideal set of circumstances.

**Adaptability and Creativity** – Through phone interviews with pastoral leaders, presentations and discussions at the national symposium on MPP and stories shared at the pilot training sessions, those involved with the MPP Project were awed by the adaptability and creativity of pastoral leaders and parish communities. Often given the unique circumstances that they faced, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit they adapted and came up with countless new ways to make the best of a less than ideal situation. Their creative best practices are the back bone of the MPP Project.

**Transition Planning, Process, and Leadership** – The move from being a single pastor/parish to the sharing of a pastor or parish life coordinator is one that must be treated with the utmost pastoral care, compassion and sensitivity. The most successful processes are those that engage all members of the parish in a prayerful collaborative process. Failure to do so can result in a deeply divided, grieving and wounded community that has limited chances for growth. Pastoral leaders need training in the areas of basic change theory, community grieving, dealing with resistance and the use of ritual to lead these communities through change.

**Models** – While there is no one way to do MPP, there are a number of basic MPP models. The pastoral leader and parish community members should use a collaborative discernment process to determine which model will work best at this time given the history, culture(s), geography, gifts, within and among the respective parish communities. At one end of a continuum are models that maintain separate communities, programs, staff and identity. They only share the pastor or parish life coordinator. At the other end of the continuum are models that merge all programs, staffs, councils, share all in common and create a new parish identity. At the center of the continuum are MPP models that try to balance the sharing of some programs, staff and resources while still maintaining individual parish identities.

**Family Systems** – One of the best sources of information about how to lead or manage multiple parish situations comes from the field of family systems theory. To assist those in leadership, the experience and research on parenting, blended families, step parenting, dealing with sibling rivalry, the importance of dating (preparing for an eventual marriage/parish merger) are images and experiences that can help leaders and parishioners to understand the dynamics of MPP.

**Parish Staff** – Given what are often unrealistic community expectations, the complexity of MPP and decreased time available by pastors per parish, whether paid or volunteer, well trained and formed staff(s) are critical to the success of parishes in the MPP situation. Pastoral leaders need to know how to empower and delegate without abdicating responsibility for major areas of parish life. They need training in the recruitment, mentoring, supervision, affirmation and termination of staff when necessary.

**Impact on Parishioners** – Resistance to change is normal and should be expected. When the rationale for change is not clear or well understood, there is greater resistance. Parishioners may fear loss of parish identity and the experience of community they have known and loved. Adjustment to a part time pastor can be a challenge. Lay ecclesial ministers and deacons doing ministry previously done by a priest can pose a challenge for some. Reductions in mass times may be burdensome. Loss of a resident pastor can cause fear and anxiety over whether this is the first step to eventual closure of the parish. Some parishioners may experience feelings of jealousy or engage in a kind of sibling rivalry of the “other” parish. Despite these challenges, over time, improvements in ministry and services and cost savings, through the better sharing of resources and staff with other parish(es) is frequently a positive outcome.

**Pilot Training** –The MPP Project found that the best training engaged not just the pastor or parish life coordinator but training that also include members of the staff and parish lay leaders. Key components for training programs include collaborative leadership and administrative skills, organizational models of MPP, pastoral planning and priority setting, staff recruitment, empowerment and supervision, finances, managing change , dealing with conflict and resistance, self -care and time management, and working smarter through use of MPP best practices. The MPP Project pilot training workshops were well received and well attended where offered.

**Support** - At the diocesan level, bishops and offices continue to speak, develop policies and programs that assume one pastor or parish life coordinator and one parish. The need for more formal training for pastors, staff and parish leadership is indicated. Peer support networks for pastors, parish life coordinators, educators, pastoral ministers, business managers, and support staff have been well received and found to be very helpful where tried. Support and assistance from the diocese or outside facilitator during times of transition from single to multiple parish situations is especially important.

In conclusion, MPP is not the best way to shepherd or organize parishes. Yet, it still can be a positive and life giving experience that calls forth and utilizes all the gifts of pastoral leaders and parishioners in unique and still undiscovered ways that can boldly continue the mission of Jesus. We’ve seen it happen. Utilizing the wisdom, experiences and best practices gathered through the MPP Project, we look forward to working with pastoral leaders and communities to minimize the stumbling blocks along the way and increase the likelihood of parish community and pastoral leader success in the future.

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