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The
**Listening
Parish**

**A GUIDEBOOK TO
SYNODALITY PRACTICES
IN A FAITH COMMUNITY**



The Pastoral Center

*Dedicated
to the theologians of the Roman Catholic Church
East and West:
in hope for the development
of a vibrant, penetrating, accessible theology of Trinity,
a theology of the Holy Spirit
fired with discernment and breathing of trust,
and a compelling theology of the Church as family ...
so we might ever more confidently travel together
— minds convinced, hearts free,
eyes delighted, and ears open —
in one vast, complex, listening, searching,
discerning, united and joyful communion
on the synodal way.*

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Contents

A. Introduction	5
1. Using This Guidebook.....	7
2. On Being Family.....	9
3. Assumptions Exposed	11
B. Considering Synodality	13
1. What is the Call About?.....	15
2. Reflection Questions	17
3. What is Synodality?.....	19
4. A Case Study.....	21
5. A Dynamic Model of Church	23
6. Co-Responsibility & Respect	25
7. Beliefs Grounding Synodality	27
8. What Synodality is Not.....	29
9. Thought-Provoking Images	31
C. The Synodal Path for the Parish	33
1. Probing Practices Questions.....	35
2. Parish Practices for the Journey.....	37
D. Church Structure	39
1. The Diocese	41
2. Parish Civil Law Status	43
3. Parish and Leadership Variation.....	45
E. The Pastor.....	47
1. The Parish and the Pastor.....	49
2. What Pastoring Requires	51
3. One Among Many	53
4. Reflections for a Pastor.....	55
F. Council Basics	57
1. Parish Councils in Law.....	59
2. The Councils' Mission	61
3. Planning and the Pastoral Council.....	63
4. Planning and the Finance Council.....	65
5. Council Election & Eligibility.....	67
G. Council Meetings.....	69
1. Effective Council Meetings	71
2. The Place of Confidentiality	73
3. Meeting Agendas	75
4. Meeting Mechanics	76
5. Meeting Facilitation	77
6. Who Chairs the Meeting?	79
H. Discernment Decision-Making	81
1. Discerning Together	83
2. A Sample Discernment Process.....	85
3. Further Reflections	87
I. The Ministry Staff	89
1. Staff Titles	91
2. Decision-Making	93
3. Communion in Co-Pastoring.....	95
4. Commissions & Decision-Making.....	97
5. Administrative Staff.....	99
J. Parishes with Schools	101
1. School As Parish Ministry.....	103
2. The School Principal.....	105
3. School Ministry Governance.....	107

K. Just Employment Practices	109
1. Synodality and Just Employment	111
2. Covenant Ministry	113
3. Ministry Planning & Review	115
4. Covenant Hiring	117
5. Just Compensation	119
6. Just Termination	121
L. Building a Parish Assembly.....	123
1. Engaging the Parish Assembly.....	125
2. Two Annual Reports	127
3. A Sample Data Gathering.....	129
M. Moving Toward the Peripheries	131
1. Opening to the Peripheries.....	133
2. Responding to the Peripheries.....	135
3. A Large Group Listening Process	137
N. A Sample Pastoral Planning Process....	139
1. Process Outline.....	141
2. Step 1: Parish Sense of Self	143
3. Sample Beliefs Statements.....	145
4. Step 2: Parish Image.....	147
5. Sample Organization Charts	149
6. Step 3: Parish Direction.....	151
7. Sample Goals & Objectives.....	153
8. Steps 4-8. Parish Accomplishment...	155
O. Parish Synodality in Practice.....	157
1. Living the Spirit of Synodality	159
2. Some Limits	161
3. Participating in God's Family Life ...	163

INTRODUCTION

Using This Guidebook

"A SYNODAL CHURCH IS A LISTENING CHURCH..." —POPE FRANCIS

This work is designed for practical use within a parish. While it can certainly be read through in sequence by an individual ministry leader, it is also a toolkit that can be used in a targeted manner with groups.

Each chapter is formatted as a two-page handout so that it can be reproduced on a single sheet of paper. The digital "eResource" edition is licensed for use within a parish or diocesan office, allowing you to easily share one or more of these handouts with your leadership teams by email and/or as physical copies.

You may choose to distribute one or more handouts in advance of a meeting, so your participants can read them beforehand and discuss when you gather. Use whatever chapters are most helpful for your team and its current situation in whatever order you wish.

May the Holy Spirit guide your way as you journey together as church!

On Being Family

The Aim

In the end, synodality is all about being family. Church as family. The Church united as family—one family, our family, in communion with the divine family that is the Trinity.

So What Is Family?

Catholics hold that the family is the first institution of, and foundation for, all human life. Created by God as God's masterpiece, a mirror of God's life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Catholics understand that the family serves as the seedbed for life itself. A privileged community comprised of members who are persons complementary yet equal in dignity, family also "consists in sharing relationships of faithful love, trust, cooperation, reciprocity" (Pope Francis) that bring about happiness for each member.

The family humanizes people through the relationship of "we" and at the same time promotes each person's legitimate differences.

Pope Francis, April 29, 2022

A community of faith, hope, and love, the family aims to nurture and protect life, offer support and security for healthy growth into full humanity, stimulate vibrant faith in God, and bathe its members all the while in unconditional love.

Indeed, as the Catholic Church understands it, the family serves humans as the ground experience of justice. Family is the womb for the birth of reverent human freedom, abiding human security, and an expansive and tender fulfillment of human needs.

The relationships within the family bring an affinity of feelings, affections, and interests, arising above all from the members' respect for one another.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2206

Reality Straining Toward the Ideal

Growing up in an extended Catholic family, I was told that family was the secure place where my needs could be met, that family members were the people I could trust, and that family was the only sure, safe harbor for life.

My mother and father ended their marriage when I was 23, away in seminary. Their surprise divorce and subsequent remarriages within two years heaped a great trauma on me, which would scratch, scrape, and sear for the next 35 years.

When my family shattered, I sought substitutes in other families, friendships, "priestly fraternity," and faith community life. At the same time, I continued to pursue an authentic experience of family—as best I could—through relentless attempts for right relationship as I strove to honor my father and mother, their new partners, and their changed contexts and lives, as well as in my broader family life, all amidst the shards.

In the end, failing to find family's promise in my own family, I found it in two other places.

First, I found fulfillment through searching for and striving to surrender to life and love within and among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as Trinity—the divine family of the Three in One and One in Three.

You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Always a sinner and ever a clumsy partner within the divine dance, I found tender mercy and the restoration of the joy of my youth through ac-

cepting, surrendering to, and abiding within the unfathomable mystery of relating with God explicitly as Trinity.

My second experience of family fulfillment came in striving for the gift of consensus in ministry decision-making. I made plenty of missteps and mistakes. Nonetheless, working to enter fully into this process with college students or parishioners in leadership, with parish staffs in planning, or with fellow priests in council offered me the shared relationships of faithful love, trust, cooperation, and reciprocity that fleshed out what I lost and lacked in my family life.

Within these processes and relationships, gradually, over the years, I became a true believer in prayer and what Pope Francis calls “the practices of synodality.”

Becoming a disciple of Jesus means accepting the invitation to belong to God’s family, to live in conformity with [God’s] way of life: ‘for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.’

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2233

The Vision Synodality Offers: Church as Family

From the beginning, prostitutes and sinners, the poor, outcasts, and the alienated comprise the searchers who, filled with deep and sometimes unarticulated longing, seek the experience of family within the embrace of Christian faith community life. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul illustrate the struggles that ensue, as well as the values and dispositions required, as we journey together toward that fulfillment of the family of faith’s—the Church’s—promise.

This family theme has remained throughout our history. Over the centuries, the Western Church evolved the custom of placing a shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary on one side of the church assembly building and a shrine to St. Jo-

seph on the other, the Blessed Sacrament reposed in the middle. This devotional placement strongly suggested the church as Nazareth; the parish as a place of respite and rest, deepening relationship and security, comfort, growth, and joy; our community as family.

In 1995, Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* offered the image of the Church as the family of God. This model of Church, the Pope proposed, arising from within a critically important Church within our universal communion, serves as a particularly appropriate expression of the nature of the Church, underlining as it does the Church’s notes of community spirit, solidarity, solicitude, generosity, and hospitality.

The Promise of Being Family

The promise of Church as a pilgrim family on the way to God includes within it the roly-poly, pell-mell, tumble-bumble of all human family life. We saw that among the disciples and within the early communities. We see it vividly today in our parishes, dioceses, national churches, and the Synod on Synodality.

At the same time, the synodal practices offered in what follows—listening and sharing honestly of our experience and ideas; engaging in relationships of faithful love, trust, cooperation, and reciprocity; striving for consensus about what God wants of us in our community’s decision-making and decision taking—aim to extend a familial hope.

Implemented in the parish, these synodality practices invite us to reverence and mirror in our parish life the dance of the Trinity’s life and the dance of our own families within the life of the Church. These practices aim to embody for the parish Pope Francis’ call to enter into the promise and pilgrimage of becoming, as Church, the universal family of God. ■

Assumptions Exposed

The Aim

Pope Francis has invited the universal Church to walk the path toward synodality:

| Synodality is a style; it is a walk together, and it is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium.

Pope Francis, November 29, 2019

This work offers practical ideas, guidelines, and tools for implementing synodality practices in the parish. What follows rests on six assumptions.

Synodality is Ancient Yet Unfamiliar

The first assumption is that synodality is new to us.

The practice of holding Church synods is ancient. The so-called Council of Jerusalem in the year 50 (Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 15) is often cited as the first Church synod. It was not called that at the time, but during the third quarter of the second century, the Church began using the word synod for gatherings of multiple churches to discuss problems.

Over the centuries, the use of the term synod has varied, and synods have taken different forms—sometimes bishops, presbyters, and laity met; sometimes bishops and presbyters; sometimes bishops only. Many in the Church today, therefore, may be unacquainted with the term or feel fuzzy about its meaning.



A Parish Cannot Hold a Synod

Strictly speaking, a synod is an assembly of the pastoral leaders of churches gathered to discuss matters of concern, often matters of disagreement. Synods may be a universal gathering, a regional gathering, or a diocesan gathering of churches.

[The parish] is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.

Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 28

While the parish is a community of communities, it is but a single church. Consequently, a parish cannot be or hold a synod.

The Parish is Synodality's Seedbed

However, a third assumption is that a vibrant parish community expresses its life through attitudes and practices critical for the larger Church that would be considered synodal. That is, a vital parish nurtures practices of synodality in its style of being Church.

What might a synodal-minded parish look like?

- * Humbly inclusive pastoring
- * Consensus-building parish council processes

- * A collegial ministry staff
- * Regular and careful listening to the people
- * Wide invitations for parishioner participation in pastoral leadership and ministry
- * Discernment decision-making as commonplace
- * Accountability
- * Transparency
- * Just organizational practices
- * Relationship and ministry movement toward the poor and those on the peripheries of the parish and life

All these parish practices are synodality notes in themselves and serve synodality in the larger Church. When a parish embraces a synodal style and implements synodal procedures, it inspires and serves as a training ground for the larger Church to be authentically itself and synodal in the Gospel mission.

The Larger Church is the Synodal Focus Now

The great work of journeying together on the synodal path currently preoccupies the Church's universal, continental, and national levels. Participation in nurturing synodal practice on these levels is a critical focus in our time. That is as it should be.

However elemental to the Church's life, the parish as an engine of synodality currently sits on the back burner as the larger Church does its building work.

Still, the Parish is Crucial to Becoming a Synodal Church

A fifth assumption is that we know enough about the call to synodality to explore what its notes need to look like on a parish level.

Let's Explore How to Nurture Synodal Practice in the Parish

What follows, therefore, is a work of coaching. It seeks to offer ideas, guidelines, and tools for parishes that desire to better express synodality practices. This work seeks:

- * to point out what is necessary for a parish to embrace a synodal style
- * to assist a parish in blessing what synodal notes already exist in its life, and
- * to offer suggestions and pointers to help a parish refine and further develop synodality practices.

The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with him.

Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 27

We Are On a Journey

The final assumption is that we, as Church, are on a path of great experiment.

This work of coaching, therefore, remains humble. It aims simply to underscore the importance of certain sound practices, offer some food for thought, and encourage pastoral leaders to creative responses in their own parish to the call of the deepening our pastoral impulse to effective Gospel mission. ■

What is the Call About?

The Church: Always Reforming

Like creation, the universal Church groans in one great act of giving birth to new life in Christ Jesus for all peoples (Romans 8:22).

Christianity is eternal. Its forms, however, are linked to history and conditioned by given stages of development. Faithfulness to our mission as Church requires adaptation in every age.

Spreading the message of Jesus Christ and the pattern of life he has shown us demands that in every age, the Church rethink its ways of being and operating, which includes the Church's

- * functions
- * governance
- * modes of participation
- * and structures of accountability.

As Pope St. Paul VI stated when he opened the second session of Vatican II in 1963, this reforming task presupposes "the desire, the need, and the duty of the Church finally to provide a more complete definition of itself."

The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as an openness to constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ... Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way...to that continual reformation of which she always had need.

Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel* 26

Faithfulness to the Gospel calls us all as Church to a constant process of growth and renewal, to permanent conversion and purification, if we are to remain faithful.

The First Aim of the Call

Pope Francis calls us to synodality to help make our mission as Church in our time more dynamic and effective.

All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.

Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel* 27

The first aim of the call to synodality is to invite the whole Church to channel our customs, ways of doing things, times, schedules, language, and structures for "evangelization of today's world rather than for (the Church's) institutional preservation" (*Joy of the Gospel* 27). This invitation calls us to a new mindset as Church, sending us to the peripheries to listen to real human needs, then returning to the center to discern how we as Church reestablish communion with all people at all levels so we might all become one people of God.



To accomplish this end, synodality as a style and mindset seeks to build forms of listening, discernment, dialogue, and decision-making that strengthen the bonds of unity among the successor of Peter, the bishops, the ordained, and all the faithful in Christ, all of whom share co-responsibility for the Church's mission.

Other Aims of the Call

Today, we stand as a clerical, authoritarian Church unsettled by conflict. Our sociological structures have served us well in ages past; they grew out of historical necessity. But clericalism today—"the complex of being chosen," as Pope Francis calls it—has become a systemic weakness because clerical culture has become monarchical in practice and socially stratified.

The clerical sex abuse scandal and scandal of the widespread lack of financial accountability are the shocking tip of the iceberg for the Church.

Clericalism thrives when service is confused with power. This creates in the Church an authoritarian style, a hierarchical worldview, and the tendency to identify holiness and grace with the clerical state. These social dynamics distort the cleric's power over persons and the hierarchy's power over the people of God. They lead to what Pope Francis listed in his December 22, 2014, Christmas address to the Curia as "unhealthy elements that need reform":

- * neglect of controls
- * excessive planning and functionalism
- * loss of communion among the Church's members
- * extravagant garments and honors
- * careerism and opportunism
- * membership in closed circles.

These unhealthy elements exclude and divide in the Church, separating us rather than uniting us for mission.

What the Church Needs Today

To counteract these unhealthy movements and their hobbling us in mission, we need a change of mindset.

In this third millennium, we as Church can now create structures of participation which situate the primacy of the successor of Peter within the college of bishops and the collegial decision-making of the bishops and clergy within the whole people of God.

We as a Church could today become a community of free and open persons who cooperate responsibly, united in solidarity, participating together responsibly and with accountability in the Church's mission.

We could create a mindset and structures of participation that express the universal baptismal commission to mission.

In our time, for the sake of the mission's effectiveness, we could embrace being Church as a genuine "we":

- * all the baptized equal before God
- * all in communion together as the faithful in Christ
- * all sharing the same responsibility, in accord with our stations and gifts, for our identity, vocation, and mission as Church.

Achieving this change of mindset and style as a universal Church is no small task. We have many obstacles to overcome.

And our becoming a genuine, universal "we" as Church begins in the parish. ■

Reflection Questions

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF SCANDAL?

- * How has your experience of Church or feelings about the Church been touched or changed by the clerical sex abuse crisis?
- * What positive changes have you witnessed in the parish because of pastoral leadership or community sensitivities that grew out of the experience of the scandal?
- * How would you rate your parish's accountability regarding its finances (1 being completely opaque and 10 being completely transparent)?
- * What mechanisms of financial accountability seem to work best for the parish?

PARISH COUNCIL LEADERSHIP

- * Does your parish have a pastoral council?
- * How engaged is your parish's pastoral council in shaping the parish's life, especially its ministry planning and implementation (1 being completely disengaged and 10 being completely engaged)?
- * Does your parish have a finance council?
- * How engaged is your parish finance council in preparing and monitoring the budget and managing the parish's property assets (1 being completely disengaged and 10 being completely engaged)?
- * How are the parish pastoral and finance council members selected?
- * What within your parish's experience of councils seems to work most smoothly and well?

GENERAL LEADERSHIP MATTERS

- * To what extent is the whole parish community solicited and engaged in dialogue about pastoral leadership (1 being not at all solicited and engaged and 10 being consistently solicited and engaged)?
- * What mechanisms and processes are used in the parish to solicit opinions and engage everyone to discern leadership concerns?
- * What mechanisms and processes seem to work best?
- * What forums and ways of proceeding exist in the parish so community members may freely offer advice, process their concerns, discuss larger Church issues, or resolve community conflicts?
- * What forums or ways of proceeding have proven most productive?
- * Who or what groups hold effective power—the capacity to achieve a common purpose—in the parish?
- * Who or what groups hold power in a particularly notable segment or area of parish life?
- * Who or what persons or groups are excluded from power in the parish?
- * Who or what groups in the parish are ignored or overlooked by parish leadership?
- * Is pastoral leadership accountable to the parish community?
- * How is pastoral leadership held accountable?
- * Are some in pastoral leadership more accountable than others and how is that expressed? ■

What is Synodality?

The Meaning of the Word

Synod comes from the Greek *syn*, together, and *hodos*, way: walking together. Used in the Church since the third century, *synod* refers to regional assemblies of bishops and diocesan assemblies of clergy who gather to discuss matters of doctrine and practice. Vatican II was a form of synod.

Regarding bishops' meetings, the words *synod* and *council* have tended to be used interchangeably. Larger assemblies of bishops have favored the word *council*.

Pope Francis calls us to understand *synodality* far beyond the convening of events. He invites us to synodality as a mindset and style that governs all we are and do as Church. He calls us to be Church in a way that sets in motion constant transformation: all the baptized striving together, sharing co-responsibility for bringing the Gospel to the world, joining together in a permanent state of Gospel mission.

The path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord asks of us is already contained, in a sense, in the word "synod," which means "walking together"—laity, pastors, Bishop of Rome.

Pope Francis,
October 17, 2015

A synodal Church goes out to the peripheries to listen to people's real needs, brings the results of listening back to the community, and then structures processes for the

whole community to discern the meaning of what was heard and how the Church might respond. Pastors and people together, in this framework, fashion and implement a response that proclaims the Gospel, expands communion in the Church, and accompanies people in helping meet their real needs.

Listening and Discerning Together

A synodal Church is a Church that listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the bishop of Rome all listening to each other, all listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth.

Pope Francis, October 17, 2015

Pope Francis proposes that listening, dialoguing, and discerning together characterize the dynamic process of interaction and communion that is being Church.

Listening opens us to being changed in our identity and relationships, our ears tuned to one another in a horizontal dynamic, all listening together, people and pastors, so we can know what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Revelation 2:7).

The act of listening leads us into becoming a culture of en-

counter and accompaniment in a permanent state of mission.

Listening to the signs of the times draws us into updating and renewing the foundational event of Christianity. Through reciprocal listening relationships, we allow ourselves to be impacted not simply by doctrine and customs but also by the on-the-ground culture of our time, the context in which Gospel mission takes place today.

Co-Responsibility in Mission

A fuller implementation of synodality summons us to rethink the Church's mission so we might better shape how we fulfill it in our time. Two keys, especially, must be kept in mind for following the synodal way.

First, proceeding together in mission requires that the whole community gather so that it might pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, and offer advice for the sake of pastoral

- * planning
- * decision-making
- * decision-taking
- * and implementation.

Proceeding together rests on the principled conviction that what affects everyone in the Church community must be discussed and approved by everyone.

Second, accepting co-responsibility means that we strive for the effective participation of all according to each one's calling because all are qualified to reflect on the mission, and all are called to serve. Effectiveness for mission demands that we achieve unity in plurality and come to the whole through and with all the parts.

Becoming a Dynamic Church

The call to synodality invites us to encounter and accompany one another, especially in conflict.

The synodal way invites us to engage different viewpoints face-to-face in an environment and with a method of discernment. It calls us to ex-

press and listen with openness to learning new ways of seeing and valuing, which might lead us to find links to new and more effective structures and channels for being Church that are more closely aligned with the Gospel.

Walking the synodal path means that the totality of the faithful—pastors and people together in horizontal relationship—make the decisions that shape Gospel mission in our time. This process demands that we find methods and ways to help the faith community achieve consensus about our mission. And since building consensus requires that we discern together not simply ours but the Holy Spirit's truth about our missionary path, consensus decisions must be binding for all—pastors and people together.

Consequently, becoming a synodal Church requires that we find effective ways for listening, discerning, dialoguing, and co-sharing—the capacity to achieve purpose for the common good of all. This necessity invites us to create relational dynamics, a human environment, and accountability practices for effective consensus building:

- * reciprocal listening
- * exchanging and communicating
- * sharing and growing in solidarity
- * the desire to reach consensus
- * and coming to a common conviction.

A synodal spirit demands a new kind of collaboration, cooperation, acceptance, welcome, giving, and receiving—pastors and people accompanying one another—within our life together as Church.

Building the dynamics of synodality as a way of being Church will take creativity and wisdom. Growing in the mindset and style of synodality demands experimenting. Our intent on the journey is simply to better be Church in our time: abiding in mission relationships steeped in respect and charity, humility, and justice, open to ongoing conversion of heart, and reaching for constant purification by the Holy Spirit whom we encounter in our listening and discernment. ■

A Case Study

The Facts on the Ground

The Diocese of Rustburg established Light of Christ parish in 1960 on Rustburg's expanding north side. A middle-class, blue-collar, and economically stagnant town today, Rustburg grew out of the 19th-century engines of coal mining, steel mills, and railroad freight transportation. The decline of these industries in the last quarter of the 20th century left Rustburg's economy floundering.

When the state legalized marijuana, economically depressed people from surrounding states flocked to Rustburg to take advantage of its mild climate, cheap living, easy drug access, and lax police enforcement. Over time, this influx led to a housing shortage in Rustburg and a growing population of homeless people. This city of 112,000 estimates that over 300 people live on its streets today.

Though Light of Christ parish includes tony neighborhoods of university professors and administrators, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, a wide creek runs north to south through the west side of the parish's territory, and intersects downtown. The length of the creek bed accommodates a hidden city where an estimated 200 tents shelter homeless men, women, and families, many of whom likely have mental illness, addiction, and poverty. The creek bed, hidden by homes and trees, sits five blocks from the Light of Christ parish complex.

Some Reflection Questions

- * Does the Light of Christ community have any obligation to encounter, strive to accompany, and help meet the needs of the hundreds of homeless people who live within its boundaries?
- * If Light of Christ community members were to go out to the peripheries, to the people living in this creek bed within its territory, what would they do there?
- * What assemblies and processes need to be established so pastoral leaders and parishioners together might fashion and implement an accompanying response to the homeless among them that proclaims the Gospel, expands encounter and communion in the Church, and accompanies people to meet their real needs?
- * How might the experience of the outreach be brought back to the parish?
- * How might that be processed in the community?
- * What might accountability to the parish and the homeless look like?
- * What methods might be set up for ongoing encounter, dialogue, and accompaniment among the homeless and parish members? ■



Beliefs Grounding Synodality

The Necessary Foundation

Synodality is a mindset, a fundamentally spiritual attitude about our life together as Church that rests on convictions about God's will, what the Church is, the sacraments, and the Christifideles. If we embrace synodality practices, certain beliefs must ground what we do and how we do it as Church. Without them, our embrace of synodality will be weak or partial, or it will fail.

- * **Renewal:** The *Lumen Gentium* model of the Church as the people of God on a **pilgrimage** toward the Father sets a model and vision of Church for our time.
- * Baptism empowers the people of God as the organically **united Christifideles** in the midst of the world.
- * Baptism also empowers the universal Christifideles to be **missionary disciples** of Christ.
- * The **mission** of the people of God is to bring the Gospel to the whole world, excluding no one.
- * **Solidarity:** All the Christifideles are responsible for nurturing the communion that is Church and fulfilling the Church's mission.
- * **Option for the poor:** The Christifideles includes the poor as privileged subjects among us. The poor are not simply the economically deprived but include all those on the peripheries of society and the margins of the Church who live without full acceptance.
- * The **ordained** serve the whole Christifideles as one among the people of God.
- * **Women and men religious** serve the whole Christifideles through the exercise of their charism.
- * The **laity** serve the Christifideles through their personal gifts, expertise, life experience, and the hard-won insight they gain through their lives of faith.
- * **Participation:** By definition, the Church is a dynamic relational reality: a people building communion together as they proclaim the Word, share their gifts, and advance together on a pilgrimage toward God.
- * **Discernment** builds the Church as all the baptized, with their vocations, charisms, ministries, and services, hear the Word, examine the signs of the times, and participate together in concrete space and time under the action of the Holy Spirit.
- * **Dignity of the human person:** All of the Christifideles can know and express truths about the content of our faith.
- * All the Christifideles are a necessary part of the whole, including a wonderful **diversity** of charisms, gifts, services, and ministries, completing the whole.
- * **Communion:** To listen to God, we must listen to the whole Christifideles so that we might, together, through actions, words, and gestures, hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age.
- * Synodality is a **communal** form of living and interacting in a culture of encounter and sharing. Church is not an individual experience; we are Church only if we are interrelated.
- * What affects all should be discussed and approved by all.
- * The aim of our listening, discussing, discern-

ing, deciding, and implementing decisions together is to achieve **consensus** about how we as the people of God fulfill our baptismal communion and mission.

- * *Sensus fidelium*: Consensus is neither a mere organizational matter nor a simple redistribution of position and power. The achieving of consensus brings the Church to new birth.
- * The first and last question of our listening and discerning processes, indeed all our complex interactions, is always: **what does God wants of us?**
- * Listening requires the personal **involvement of the ordained** as one of the Christifideles: learning from other participants, engaging in dialogue, respecting different points of view,

risking change, and, in the process, becoming an integral part of the consensus achieved.

- * **When points of view oppose one another**, the ordained need to listen even more closely because the responsibility to listen and express oneself flows from the gifts the Holy Spirit pours forth on all the baptized.
- * **Subsidiarity**: Only if all the Christifideles engage in expressing themselves, listen to one another, discern together, consult relevant persons, and decide together can the making and implementing of decisions have full and final authority.
- * The Church is credible only if it is itself evangelized by **constant renewal and conversion**. ■

What Pastoring Requires

Skillful in Groups

In all parish settings, a pastor's ministry focuses on the whole parish assembly and the groups with it.

The synodal way demands that a pastor have significant relational and communication skills. The pastor needs to have these and, where the pastor's skills are weak, to have the wisdom and skill to authorize and encourage colleagues and parishioners who have such skills to use them on the parish's behalf. The skilled pastor participates fully in the reciprocal listening and dialogue within and among parish groups and remains firmly committed to the group processes.

A parish implementing synodal practices is best served by a pastor maestro, not a lone ranger.

The Pastor as Maestro

A maestro reveres the orchestra and strives to bring about harmonious sound from the whole of it. A maestro understands the aptitudes, strengths, and weaknesses of each of the instruments, their players, and each of the orchestra's sections.

The capable maestro has a subtle understanding of the music, too: the composer's intent, the movements within the music, and its performance history.

A maestro also knows what he or she aims to achieve with the conducting, mindful that the fullness of grace comes about only in the quality and coherence of the conductor's and orchestra's joint, capable musical execution.

For a highly skilled maestro, the orchestra's harmonious sound is more than simply the sum of its instrumental parts. Great orchestral performance is transcendent, glorious, and something new.

If a pastor has a maestro's mindset, the whole parish community always stands as the pastor's focus.



A maestro pastor learns the parish's census, geography, history, and social context. The pastor learns the community's aptitudes, strengths, weaknesses, and possibilities.

Reciprocal listening and dialogue dominate the maestro pastor's time and engagement.

The evolving of the whole together and the movements within the parish's constituent groups remain the pastor's ever-juggling focus.

If the pastoring ministry remains intentionally structured to be exercised within and among the parish's groups, then parish staff and groups feel affirmed, respected, and supported; volunteers feel blessed and encouraged; consensus builds around a shared vision; and pastoral leaders and parishioners across the community, in often surprising ways, offer amazing time and creative energy in service of the parish community and the mission.

It terrifies me to think that I could take more pleasure in the honor attached to my office, which is where its danger lies, than in your salvation, which ought to be its fruit. This is why being set above you fills me with alarm, whereas being with you gives me comfort. Danger lies in the first; salvation in the second.

St. Augustine, Sermon 340

The Lone Ranger Pastor

Fr. Archie is retiring from 13 years of pastoring St. Paul's, a large urban parish. A pious and kindly people person with a servant's heart and a good preacher, the parishioners remained taken by Fr. Archie's apparent holiness and charm. They liked him.

When asked, Fr. Archie's vision for the St. Paul's was "that the name of Jesus be known and loved." Unsure about how to translate that vision into practical terms, however, Fr. Archie consistently became defensive when pressed for details. Consequently, Fr. Archie held his cards close to his chest.

When inevitable bumps in the road showed themselves, staff and parishioners were treated to Fr. Archie's repeated refrain, "Remember, I am the pastor!" Feeling put off as a result, staff tended to jockey for favor by bending to what they guessed to be Fr. Archie's wishes. He allowed few initiatives over the years and never supervised or followed through. Power vacuums became filled by favorites whom Fr. Archie trusted; he held others in suspicion. And even though Fr. Archie was fiscally undisciplined, no one faced him with financial facts or their implications. That would have led only to an argument and the refrain.

In Fr. Archie's last year, the parish budget had to be cut by one-third. Full-time staff were offered a severance package because paying them was unsustainable. Staff members left exhausted, grieving, and resentful. They had enjoyed Fr. Archie's Friday homemade chili lunches and his inquiries about the health of their mothers, but they walked out the door uncertain about the genuineness of his care for them.

Fr. Archie had inherited a parish with a solid financial foundation and ministry structure. He left behind for his successor disconnected pieces and wide squabbling.

Why Lone Rangerism Fails

The lone ranger pastor may have limited skills, be a strong introvert, have rigid ideological commitments and authoritarian leanings, feel insecure and defensive, or be a combination of the above. All these dispositions inhibit synodality process-

es. While such a pastor may be holy, kind, charming, a good preacher, and even organized, the lone ranger mindset blocks the full implementation and effectiveness of synodality practices in the parish.

Why? Lone ranger pastoral leadership stimulates a stunting dynamic in a parish. Staff members and parishioners—whether for power or security—tend to reach toward what they perceive to be the pastor's preferences. Dialogue with the pastor on a personal or group level becomes impeded, nurturing competitive rivalry and manipulation in some while dispiriting and distancing others. Consequently, fog arises in decision-making and implementation. Conflict surfaces, thwarting the mission. Grief, apathy, and anger well up in the parish community.

Historical Notes

Acts of the Apostles 15:1-19, tells about the church's decision to shift its ministry in relationship with the gentiles. The presbyters and elders of Jerusalem gather. They listen and dialogue. Paul, James, and Peter—maestros each in their own ways—shape the decision-making. The whole group reaches agreement.

The letter from the Jerusalem church announcing the decisions to the gentile community at Antioch begins: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us..." That wording is stunning.

From Acts forward, the Church understands that group-based pastoral leadership works. Bishops form a college that gives unity and continuity to church teaching, including the Bishop of Rome within and above the college of bishops. Authoritative and consultative bodies across the church—ecumenical councils and bishops synods, diocesan presbyteral and deacons' councils, diocesan synods, parish councils, finance councils, and parish assemblies—mirror this same sensibility. Pastoral leadership centers itself in groups.

In the listening and discerning group, the Holy Spirit inspires, animates, directs, and leads the church with presence and power, and often with wind and fire.

A pastor on the synodal way leads by listening and dialoguing and must necessarily be skillful in groups. ■

Planning and the Pastoral Council

Pastoral Ministry Planning

“Where there is no vision, the people perish,” says one translation of Proverbs 29:18. A compelling vision wakes people up, rouses their enthusiasm, and focuses their energy toward forward movement. The first task of the pastor and councils together is to offer the parish vision.

Vision requires planning.

Planning is the backbone of council ministry. Planning gives contour and thrust to the parish’s forward movement as it strives to reach consensus about its identity, image, characteristics, and direction. Pastoral planning managed by the councils and coordinated across all parish leadership groups is vital to the ongoing life of a parish community.

The Pastoral Council and Planning

The pastoral council serves as the parish’s essential planning group. Because its charge is ministry vision, the pastoral council’s planning mandate is the steel spine that holds its process together. Thus, planning is the top priority for the pastoral council and the engine for its meetings.

If other matters intervene—they always do—the planning process pauses to accommodate them. Approving the yearly budget, discussing the rising crisis, debriefing the bishop’s pastoral visit, and sorting through the pastor’s latest personnel quandary continually interrupt the planning flow. That reality must be an accepted part of the pastoral council’s process.

Nonetheless, pastoral ministry planning is the task that holds everything together for the pastoral council.

It is the function of the pastoral council to investigate everything pertaining to pastoral activities, to weigh them carefully, and to set forth practical conclusions concerning them so as to promote conformity of the life and actions of the People of God with the Gospel.

Pope St. Paul VI, August 6, 1966

The Planning Process

An effective pastoral council follows a good planning process. Whatever process might be selected, it needs to be clear, complete, carefully articulated, easy to follow, and promising for the results the council seeks.

A poor planning process leaves in its wake a rather chunky stew, both in people’s minds and on paper, and neither staff nor parishioners will be able to grab hold of it or use it.

The process that works will be the process that outlines explicit goals and specific tasks for particular persons and groups accomplish at precise time intervals with accountable results. Nothing less is worth the council’s time and effort.

Writing a good five-year plan will take the pastoral council, in collaboration with the finance council, parish commissions and committees, and the parish assembly, 18 months or more. This time frame is ordinary. A highly participative process, including the gathering of accurate data, focus group discussions, and ministry commission and parish assembly input, requires generous time if it is to be a consensus-building process for pastoral leadership and the whole parish.

The critical insight that the implementing of synodality practices invites us to ponder is this: the process of planning—its focus, breadth, listening, discernment process, level of whole parish participation, outreach to the peripheries, and continuing refreshment based on the concrete realities of parish life—is far more important than a document when it comes to planning.

After a pastoral plan is published, a monitoring and evaluation process will demand continuing and extensive pastoral council involvement with parish staff, ministry commissions and committees, the parish assembly, and those on the margins of parish life. As major parish projects outside the plan arise, the pastoral plan requires revision.

The Parapet Surprise

Fr. Richard began his pastorate focused on planning, and he invited the pastoral council into an extended planning process. Because the council members were inexperienced and their time was kept carefully limited, planning began as a trudge. Nonetheless, beliefs, a mission statement, and functions emerged from the process over several months and were shared with the finance council, staff, and parish. The process grew in momentum and parish support.

Just when the planning process began assessing parish resources, the maintenance coordinator found a brick on the ground in front of the school entry. When he looked up and saw it had fallen from high on the front façade, he immediately contacted Earl, the chair of the maintenance committee. A construction engineer, Earl, toured the school roof. After consulting with Fr. Richard, who had to look up the word parapet, Earl arranged for a team of engineers to assess the whole brick and cement parapet. Their conclusion: the entire parapet—three feet tall around the whole school building—was bowing out and falling. It needed to be replaced immediately. The cost? \$350,000.

The front entry to the school was cordoned off. Fr. Richard and Earl met with the councils.

The pastoral council set aside long-range planning to arrange a capital campaign for paying off the debt and the new construction. The project included both councils' consensus to hire a part-time development director to shape

a multi-layered publicity campaign for the parish and public-at-large, to frame up fundraising, and to follow through on the gift-giving process, from interviewing through meetings to mailings through thank yous. All this activity took months to plan and execute.

Meanwhile, the old parapet was gently taken down and a simpler replacement was installed.

The pastoral council had to set aside the planning process for several months. When the council took it up again, however, the parapet surprise had affirmed the beliefs, mission, and functions statement already done even as the whole process had reshaped the council members' and Fr. Richard's understanding of the parish's true resources.

The Planning Process Structures an Unending Orientation

A parish's pastoral plan document frames a community's orientation. The document is not law. The planning process constitutes the experience of Church, not the document.

In an ever-changing world, continual listening to the parish community's real pastoral need, attending to the gifts and demands of the Gospel call to mercy that manifest themselves with time, discerning an effective response to that need, then implementing and evaluating. This is the ministry work that infuses the structured process of planning with meaning. The process is the point.

Consequently, the usual five-year planning cycle, including the ever-messy interventions of reality that intrude, never ends, and it shouldn't.

Pastoral planning is the backbone of the pastoral council process. Planning is the pastoral council's first responsibility as a wise vision keeper for the parish and its ongoing task as the consensus-building engine for a parish community's Gospel ministry. ■

Council Election & Eligibility

What is "Election"?

The ecclesial concept of election to leadership differs from the common assumptions of a democracy: running for office, secret ballot, and majority rule. The ecclesial notion of election modifies those assumptions markedly.

Democracy-Style Elections Are Not the Synodal Way

For setting accurate expectations in a pastoral leadership group, a democratic style of council election is least suitable. Even the word *election* means something different in the democratic context, where the word refers largely to a “running for office” process and specifically to the results of the casting of ballots.

Democratic-style election in a parish runs the risk of bringing people into leadership who are focused on representation rather than communion, checks and balances rather than participation, and legislation rather than discernment. These suppositions can create a drag on a parish leadership group’s process and even open conflict.

Ancient Church "Election" Traditions

Whether the position be pope, patriarch, or abbot, *election* in Church traditions is, first, the results of the process of discerning the eligibility of a person for an office—more like nomination in the American sense.

Second, except in rare cases, the selection of an office holder requires more than majority rule. The aim of election in a church setting is consensus. Consequently, except for extenuating circumstances, a two-thirds majority is most often required for selection for ecclesial office.

In the Church, people never run for office. In-

stead, they are, in some form, nominated. Their qualifications are discussed by the group, either as a whole gathered (abbot) or on the side (pope), in a prayerful discernment process. A person’s interest in holding the office is typically assessed within the discernment of eligibility process.

The balloting process, typically repeated, is a structured and prayerful part of the discernment process that leads to selection.

Council Leadership Eligibility

Consequently, consideration of an election process in a parish begins with eligibility requirements. That is, clear expectations make good council members. Clarity demands that eligibility requirements for council membership be made widely known in the parish.

The box below articulates requirements for council leadership consistent with synodal practices and the models explored above and below.

- * Registered parishioner.
- * Participation in Sunday Eucharist.
- * Understanding that the council belongs to the pastor.
- * Support of the current council processes.
- * A three-year commitment.
- * Faithful attendance at a maximum of two 1½ hour meetings per month for 10 months.
- * Commitment to careful listening.
- * Participation in discussion.
- * Commitment to prayerful discernment about the parish’s ministry and its future.
- * The ability to keep confidences.

A Discernment Election Process

In a parish setting, especially one following synodal practices, discernment-oriented election to a council position is consistent with the parish's values and practice.

The process begins with publishing the eligibility requirements. It then proceeds with mustering candidates for election.

Some parishes enter a process of community-wide prayer and reflection in which some people are recommended, and others are personally moved to come forward. Other parishes begin the process with a council discussion, then call for volunteers in the bulletin, tap people on the shoulder, or ask people whose name surfaces if they are interested in serving.

Methods vary. Critically, the method chosen aims to match the eligibility qualifications with potential, capable candidates. This process is a form of "election."

Next, the "elect" are interviewed to discern their interest and suitability. The interview also aims to clarify mutual expectations, which is key to the process. Thus, the eligibility requirements

are thoroughly discussed in the interviews.

The interviewers might be the pastor, or include the pastor, or pastoral or finance council members.

Often the interviews result in just enough candidates to fill open slots. With that, the process of selection is complete.

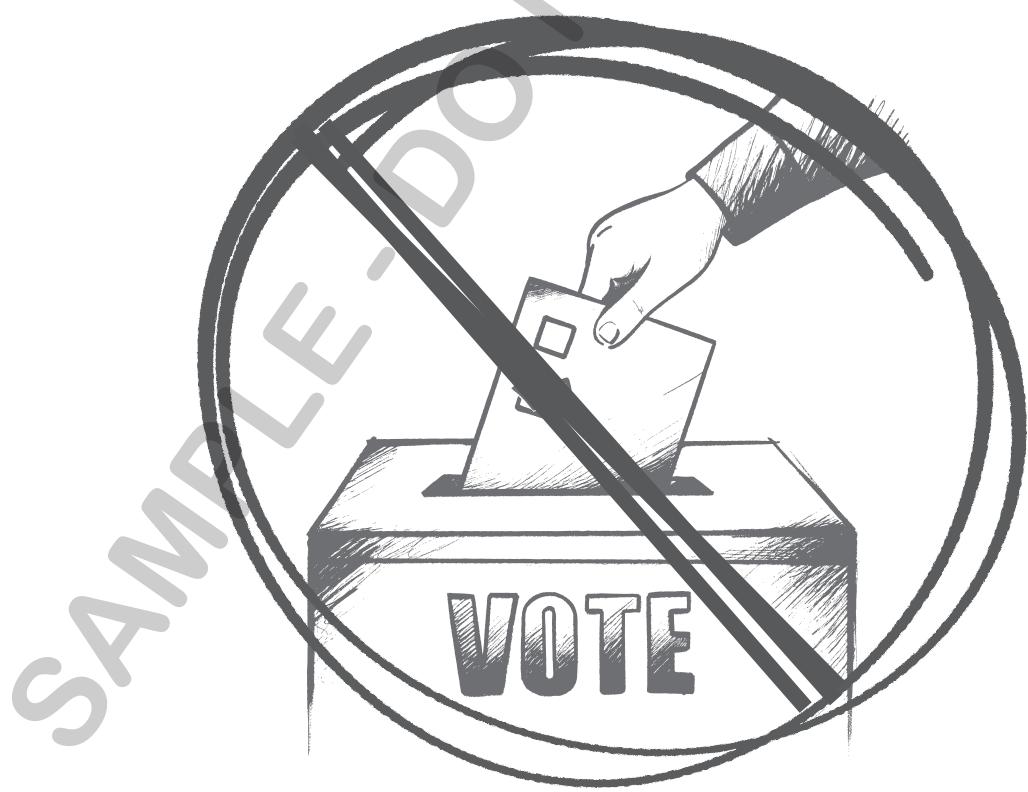
If more candidates are available than slots, the candidates may offer themselves for balloting by the parish assembly. Overseen by the pastoral council, a ranked selection process would be most suitable for balloting.

Pastoral Council Versus Finance Council Election

Election to a pastoral council differs from that to a finance council.

Finance council ministry requires a technical interest, expertise, and experience unnecessary for pastoral council ministry. Consequently, parishes feel blessed to even find five finance council members to elect.

Nine pastoral council members—three new each year—are most often easy to muster. ■



Meeting Facilitation

Meeting Prayer

The Holy Spirit's presence and power are invoked in prayer at the start of every meeting. God always receives the glory at a meeting's end.

FORMS OF PRAYER

Some parishes begin council meetings with an extended reflection on the Sunday readings. Others pray briefly. Yet others invite participants to take turns offering prayer. Still others group-share petitionary prayer.

All these ways of praying can work. Some, however, take time and either extend the meeting or limit the possibilities of the meeting's work. Other methods stand as an imposition and are uncomfortable, especially for the introverted.

Originating in the monastic tradition, an ancient and venerable understanding of prayer is that it is like hurling javelins to the heavens. The image well-characterizes what council prayer ought best to look like.

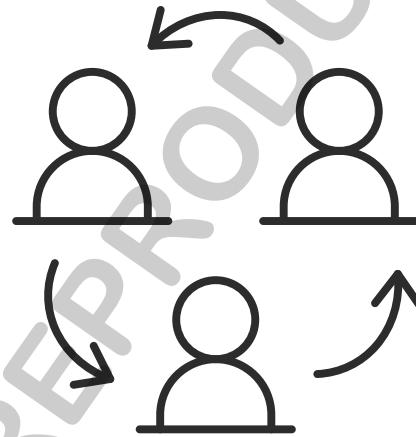
LET PRAYER BE BRIEF!

At the meeting start, a brief and relatively formula-oriented prayer puts most people at ease and serves the meeting's purpose well. This prayer form can be instructive and moving when mindful of the liturgical year.

The meeting should always end with the briefest of prayers, a set formula. Everyone wants to get home. The doxology, "Glory be to the Father..." works exceptionally well. People respond instantly and automatically, the prayer is appropriate, and the praying says to a group of tired people: "The End."

Meeting Start

Every meeting begins with brief information sharing to put everyone at ease and dispel concerns beyond those on the agenda. The chair then



offers the group a brief overview of the agenda, which allows members to offer caveats based on unknowns or new information. It also gleans for the chair informal consent to what is to come.

The Meat of the Meeting

The chair begins each agenda item with a brief contextual introduction. Meeting participants need reminders about what agenda items mean for the parish and Gospel ministry. Developing item context saves time in discussions because people forget where an item comes from, how it fits, what it is connected to, why it is important, or why it needs to be discussed at this time.

Meeting Breaks

Ordinarily, a 90-minute time frame for pastoral and finance council meetings precludes break times. However, circumstances may arise when the chair might call for a break:

- * A personal reflection and prayer break might assist the consensus process.
- * A time out when a controversial conversation becomes too heated.
- * A rest period after an intense processing segment of a meeting.

In all cases, a break should be only long enough to serve the meeting's purpose and short enough to avoid hobbling meeting momentum.

Meeting Length

Nothing worthwhile happens in a meeting beyond 90 minutes. Long meetings tire people out, drain their energy, and lead to fuzzy thinking, crankiness, manipulation, and bad decisions.

If a meeting extension is necessary to complete discussion, then group permission should be sought. If given, the extension ought to be less than 15 minutes. Failed consensus permission means the meeting ends on time.

Meeting Wind-Down

The meeting approaches its landing ten minutes before the projected end time. By five minutes before the projected meeting ends, the last three always-stable agenda items are reviewed.

- ＊ The chair summarizes the meeting, which allows the group to offer clarifying and forward-moving observations that sharpen agenda planning.
- ＊ The chair asks about the agenda next time. Consent about the following agenda bolsters group participation for the next meeting, affirms the group members' value and simplifies agenda assembly work.

- ＊ The chair affirms the date, time, and place of the next meeting. If meetings are scheduled in advance, this task is simple. If not, it may require some processing time.

Guests at Meetings

Occasionally, a pastoral or finance council meeting may require that a guest be present to offer expertise, perspective, or clarity to an agenda item.

A council meeting agenda ought to be framed to accommodate a guest conveniently. The presence of a guest would ordinarily be limited to designated agenda items, with the visitor noted on the agenda.

Hospitality to a council guest includes:

- ＊ welcoming the guest promptly,
- ＊ fully availing the council of the guest's contribution by providing ample time,
- ＊ bringing the guest's segment of the meeting to a distinct end,
- ＊ thanking the guest,
- ＊ and allowing the guest to leave as soon as their contribution is concluded.

The guest's withdrawal would ordinarily require a brief break before taking up the next agenda item or concluding a meeting. ■

Discerning Together

The Essential Synodality Practice

Implementing synodality practices calls parish leadership to discernment as the essential mode for decision-making. Why? Because honoring our common human dignity and exercising the co-responsibility we share as the baptized calls us to inclusive listening and dialogue. From that mutual exchange—consensus decision-making naturally flows, building life in the Holy Spirit and the Church’s universal communion as the one body of Christ in a universal consensus in faith.

The Aim of Discernment

The Gospel call to shape pastoral ministry is the fundamental aim of all parish decision-making. That aim requires a process in which the decision-makers entrust themselves wholeheartedly to the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit, who animates the life of the Church and knows the way for us as a community of faith.

Parish ministry decision-making is neither solely the pastor’s business nor the business of a particular leadership group or set of interest groups. Pastoral ministry decision-making remains always and essentially God’s business.

Thus, the transforming method for communion-building decision-making in the parish is discernment: seeking together God’s way for us as a community of faith.

A Spiritual Way

Discernment decision-making calls us to trust in the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit of God. Patient and reciprocal listening, prayerful dialogue and reflection, and surrender to whatever it is that God wants of us—these are the attitudes that ground discernment decision-making.

A Demanding Way

Discernment decision-making can be conflictual and arduous. It requires time and patience. New possibilities often arise, calling us in surprising directions. On the synodal path, discernment opens the parish beyond our vision to the Spirit’s revelation and to the way of communion with one another and with God.

Discernment demands spiritual attitudes rooted in two questions we need to wrestle with in the decision-making process.

Question One: What Does God Want of Us?

The first and most fundamental question in discernment decision-making is this: what does God want of us?

On behalf of parish leadership and the whole assembly, discernment seeks God’s will for the parish’s Gospel ministry. Synodality practice places all parish decision-making, in every instance, under the wide umbrella of this penetrating-between-the-bone-and-the-marrow question.

The pastor’s role in discernment is to keep the question—what does God want of us?—before the minds and hearts of council members, pastoral staff members, and the parish assembly.

The pastor exercises this role because the question connects the decision-making process to the Tradition and underlines the reality that the parish belongs to God and to the Church, not to the pastor or interest groups. The parish’s vision, direction, and activity belong to God, the Church, and the whole parish community, not simply the pastor or the councils.

Parish decision-making, therefore, is grounded in prayer, not pastor-pleasing, whim, the best bargain, parishioner polls, people-pleasing, or even educated guesswork.

The whole process of decision-making for the

pastoral ministry of the parish is nothing less than sorting through the gifts and demands of the parish community's relationship with God.

Question Two: Can I Live With It?

Discernment decision-making always aims at unanimous decisions. Unanimity offers the best hope, practically and before God, of the rightness and peacefulness of decision.

Setting the bar at unanimity places a second question for participants in the discernment process: can I live with this decision? The answer to that question is the practical baseline for discernment decision-making. Not "Do I like it?" Not "Do I want it?" Rather, "Can I live with it?"

If a person cannot live with a decision made by the leadership group or community, that restless spirit raises fundamental questions about the advisability of the decision.

God abides deep within each human person, somewhere underneath our emotions and even below the depths of what we call "the gut." If a person cannot live with a decision, that fact needs to be made known, and the process needs to plunge deeper into the sorting—before God—until the way to unanimity is revealed.

If "What does God want of us?" is at the heart of the spiritual process of discernment and "Can I live with it?" is the practical baseline-before-God question for process participants, achieving unanimity among parish leaders and near unanimity in the parish assembly is nigh guaranteed.

Unanimity in the Parish Assembly

What precisely constitutes whole parish assembly consensus may itself need to be discerned.

For example, as roughly suggested by the rules of the German synodal way, actionable consensus may require 90% affirmation of the women gathered, 90% of the assembly gathered, and 100% of the parish pastoral leaders gathered—three separate votes.

While this kind of formula, which aims to right historical wrongs and give full voice to everyone, may be worthy of consideration, each parish needs to discern what constitutes consensus in its parish assembly.

In Pastoral Leadership Groups, Consensus Affirmation Needs to be Personally Registered

Fr. Roger laid before the finance council a delicate, touchy personnel matter that was highly controversial. After a lengthy discussion, he summarized the agreement he sensed. Then, briskly surveying the room, nodding heads confirmed a recommendation. Fr. Roger went with it.

When this issue broke out publicly in a parish assembly meeting, and with some heat, Fr. Roger told the assembly that the finance council unanimously agreed with his position.

A trustee stood up and publicly disagreed. Whatever the pastor thought he might have achieved by nodding heads did not constitute unanimous consensus in the trustee's mind. Though he said nothing in the meeting or to Fr. Roger afterward, he disagreed and had not nodded. This event undercut trust in Fr. Roger and halted the forward movement of his pastorate.

Consensus Decisions are Trustworthy

Particularly in parish leadership groups, when a consensus is reached, the pastor or process leader needs to ask each group member to speak out loud his or her "I can live with it" agreement. Why? Because once the group makes a decision, everyone in the group—including the pastor—must publicly stand with the consensus decision for the sake of the common good. That is, when group members leave a meeting where they have reached consensus, they go forth into the parish as ambassadors, not partisans. ■

School As Parish Ministry

Creative Tension

In 2023, there were 5,935 parish schools across the United States. A parochial school graces and strains a parish community. Some parishes support the school vigorously, while others feel ambivalent. In either case, many tout the school as the parish's central mission.

While educating and forming children is at least as much of a gift to a parish as it is a responsibility, the tendency to supersize the school's importance, fog its purpose, isolate it from the rest of the parish, and see it as competing for parish resources can create stress for parishes with schools. A balanced perspective on a school's proper place challenges every parish with a school.

Three areas deserve particular attention:

- * the tendency to see the school as a separate institution instead of a parish ministry,
- * the proper relationship balance between the principal and the pastor and pastoral staff, and
- * the governance structure that best serves the parish and the school.

Not a Separate Institution But a Parish Ministry

Most parishioners and pastoral leaders, as well as parents with children in the school, tend to treat a school as an entity independent of the parish. This sense of separation begins with language that refers to "the school" and to "the parish" or "the church." It is reinforced in many ways:

- * A physically separate school building/address.
- * The high visibility and regimented calendar of a school ministry—175 days of children, parents, patrols, visiting teams, and traffic.
- * The focused intensity of parents for their children and the commonality families share.

* The disconnect between families' school commitment and parish commitment—participating faithfully in school activities but haphazardly in Sunday Mass and stewardship

Further, teaching staff tend to be understandably bonded and hold themselves apart from the rest of the parish staff. They sometimes give loyalty to the principal over and against the pastor. Teachers are often ambivalent about their faith and often not parishioners (certainly more so than the women religious teachers of the past).

Most pastoral leaders acquiesce to this sense of separation because it seems natural. Accepting it, however, serves as a contrary sign within the parish and to the world.

The School: Parish Ministry

A school is one among all the parish's ministries.

The fundamental justification for a parish school is its forming children in faith. That was the parochial school's original purpose beginning in the 1850s. As immigrants arrived on our shores, parish schools multiplied—mandated in the 1880s—so that the Church might educate newcomers to thrive in American culture, yes, but primarily to form future generations for participation in the Catholic Church.

This purpose remains the same today: forming children in worship, Catholic Tradition, spirituality, service to others, living and valuing community, charitable work, and social justice principles and action. These are the parish's Gospel-based ministry to its school children. A community of faith owes its children this ministry.

St. John School Ministry

When Fr. Frank became pastor of St. John the Baptist, he saw immediately the school's strong sense of separation from the parish. He heard the ordinary language indicating that but also read in

the school's PR materials that the school was private and Christian, not parochial and Catholic. The principal told him she expected little connection with Fr. Frank. The school board sets tuition, staff salaries, and budget. Competition for parish financial resources was fierce. Parents often put the principal on the spot about day-to-day school matters at school board meetings.

Firm that school was a parish ministry, Fr. Frank began to talk about that. He won over the principal largely by protecting her from being put on the spot in school board meetings. When the middle school religion teacher retired, the pastoral associate for religious formation consented to teach middle school religion with an eye to winning over the faculty enough to reshape the elementary and intermediate religion curriculum. The pastoral associate for worship consented to teach a middle school liturgical music and history session each week.

Offering a money-saving rationale, Fr. Frank gradually took all bookkeeping, technology assistance, and public relations services for the parish's ministries into the parish's main office. He modified the school board's place in the budget process by asserting that, while the board needed to offer input, it was the role of the finance and pastoral councils to approve the parish budget, and that included the school.

Eventually, as the pastor, principal, pastoral staff, and other pastoral leaders reflected and conferred, they decided to implement a language shift. They began to call the school "the school

ministry." They modified the street signs that said "Nativity of John the Baptist School" and "Nativity of John the Baptist Church" to say simply "Nativity of John the Baptist." Since it served the religious education program and the school ministry, the staff began referring to "the classroom building" instead of "the school." After they moved the parish offices into the building, they began to refer to it as "the ministry center" and had that name placed above the main entry. After some years, the school board voted itself out of existence and voted in a school ministry commission to replace it.

These changes, done gradually over eight years, won attention. Staff and parishioners talked and asked about them. Despite occasional irritable exchanges expressing fears that the school was losing importance, two pastors after Fr. Frank, the changes remained. Nativity of John the Baptist grew ever more deeply into the understanding that the school is a ministry of the parish, not a separate institution.

Embracing School Ministry

On the synodal way, pastoral leaders would do well to structure language, staff relationships, and governance structures to clarify that the school is a ministry. Parishes with schools need to proclaim in word and act, and on every level of their life that the school is not a separate institution but a parish ministry.

The Notes of a Parish School Ministry's Catholic Identity

- ⌘ Regular Mass and worship.
- ⌘ A Catholic administrator.
- ⌘ Mostly practicing Catholics on the faculty.
- ⌘ Parish council oversight of governance policies and finances.
- ⌘ Parent participation in governance and policymaking.
- ⌘ Non-shaming and formational discipline.
- ⌘ Differentiated instruction.
- ⌘ Parish pastoral associates engaged in teaching religious studies, liturgy, and service.
- ⌘ A carefully structured and focused religion curriculum.
- ⌘ Sacramental preparation
- integrated with the whole parish.
- ⌘ Commitment to community service.
- ⌘ Religious art throughout the environment.
- ⌘ A spirit of quiet and order.
- ⌘ School building use for other parish ministries.

A Large Group Listening Process

The Synod Model

The Synod on Synodality required a process that would be effective with and for over 365 participants. It offers us an effective model that might well be adapted for a parish setting.

The Process Itself

The process the Synod followed taxed some of its participants. Interestingly, the lay participants found the process more natural and agreeable than some of the ordained. Perhaps daily immersion in family is the best preparation for synodal practice. It is helpful to remember that when we implement synodal practices, we are simply striving to be family together.

A structural note: at the Synod, every conversation table of ten had a designated facilitator and a secretary. The role of the facilitator was to keep time and safeguard everyone's participation. The secretary was the recorder and presenter of the group discussion.

The Synod's process, re-framed for the parish, follows:

1. Prayer

The Synod began with an ecumenical prayer service, a three-day retreat reflecting on the dispositions of faith and practice required for participating well, and a Eucharist.

Beginning with prayer sets the stage for entrusting the whole process to God's tender care and enlarging the participants' hearts toward detached listening. This opening prayer best includes some form of reflection on what dispositions of faith need to be in place for synodal listening.

The retreat master, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., reflected on topics such as: do not be afraid, but open in hope; be alert that our understandings of the Church as home differ; we move forward reaching for friendship with the Lord and each

another; remember that conversation is an art; remember that anger arises from fear, so gently address the fear; dare to face the truth and trust in the Holy Spirit.

If we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit of truth, we shall doubtless argue. It will sometimes be painful. There will be truths we would rather not face. But we shall be led a little deeper into the mystery of divine love and we shall know such joy that people will be envious of us for being here, and we shall long to attend the next session of the Synod!

Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., October 3, 2023

Note that all prayer for synodality practice needs to be intentional, not heavy-handed, but graciously aimed to offer space for the Spirit's work and offer encouragement or stimulus for the participation of everyone. A thoughtful, astute planning group is required for structuring prayer interventions.

2. Lay Out the Question

Each consideration for the whole assembly is offered to the participants in a little talk that focuses the question for them.

This reflection on the question allows participants around the tables to begin their sharing and listening by considering their thoughts and feelings in relation to the question.

3. Share about the Question

Each person is then given four minutes to share his or her perspective from their thought and prayer. This sharing is generally more about communicating experiences than making arguments.

This listening step ends with a few minutes of silent prayer and reflection.

4. Share about What Struck You

Each participant then offers a brief, two-minute reflection on what resonated or sparked internal resistance in what they heard. No judgments are made. All simply listen.

This step is also followed by a brief period of silent prayer and reflection.

5. Open Dialogue

This open time of conversation seeks to recognize intuitions and agreements, to identify disagreements and points of discord, to note new questions, and to allow new insights to emerge.

The purpose of this time is not to force agreement but to comprehend the breadth and contours of the participants' responses to the question.

6. Report to the Assembly

In this step, the secretary from each group collates and reports the group's experience to the whole assembly.

Whether the group forges the report together or entrusts the report composition to the secretary, the secretary needs to be careful to reflect and represent in the report everyone in the small group.

7. Process the Reports in the Small Groups

After listening to all the reports, the small groups meet again to reflect together on what they have heard in the assembly.

They then distill together the fruits of the assembly session and formulate a group report that includes proposals for the next steps. This report is offered to the coordinating group

8. The Coordinating Group Frames the Next Steps

The coordinating group takes the reports, reflects

on them, and determines potential next steps in the process. Those steps might be tabling discussion of some topics, movement toward a decision, continuing the process with a new question, or a modified direction for the whole process.

Whatever the sense of the coordinating group, their inclinations, intuitions, and proposals need to be formulated for the whole assembly as a proposal.

9. General Consensus around the Next Movement

The coordinating group then brings forward to the whole assembly their proposals for the next steps and asks for the assembly's consent. The result of the assembly consensus may be agreement on the next question, or consensus that there is no consensus.

Whatever the conclusion of the attempt to achieve assembly consensus, the process starts over with the next question, even if that question is about the steps required for moving forward to achieving consensus for moving forward.

Remember...

The aim of implementing synodality practices in the parish is not decisions. Rather, synodality practices nourish our coming together and being together as church.

That is, if we embrace the beauty of God and the beauty of our striving together to grow in harmony, if we honor the goodness of God and the goodness of all men and women as God has created them, and if we honestly accept God's truth and the truth of the lives of the pilgrim people with whom we share faith, then we are abiding within a genuine experience of God and an authentic experience of Church. We are being the family of God in all its marvelous diversity, walking on pilgrimage together in faith, hope, and love.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHAEL L. PAPESH was ordained in 1983 and is now retired from active ministry. He has served as campus minister, parochial vicar, weekend assistant, principal, CRE, and pastor; in seminary spiritual formation at the undergraduate and graduate school levels; on numerous diocesan committees and boards related to priestly life and ministry; and in diocesan chancery ministry.

He has a B.A. in English from St. Meinrad College, master's degrees from Indiana University and St. Meinrad School of Theology, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. He is also the author of *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation* from Liturgical Press and *Good News Parish Leadership* from Twenty-Third Publications, as well as articles on clerical culture and liturgical presiding. He has won two Catholic Press Association Awards. Papesh has also won four literary awards after publishing two memoirs.

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