



Darren Thompson

# All together now

To ensure a smoothly running parish or diocese, clergy and laity must learn how to work as a team.

**A** number of years ago I worked as a planning consultant with three parishes that wanted to collaborate more closely. We designed a process in which hundreds of parishioners spent dozens of hours identifying areas in which they wanted their parishes to work together better.

One of the most important areas that emerged was Catholic schools. Two of the three parishes had a school. One parish offered grades 1 through 8, and the other offered grades 1 through 5. A steering committee began to explore collaborative options such as one school offering grades 1 through 4 and the second offering grades 5 through 8.

Then the committee learned that the pastor of the parish with grades 1 through 5 had added grade 6 and was aggressively moving to add grades 7 and 8 without consulting the other

parishes or his parish council. Everyone was shocked, including members of his own parish council, who also learned that there was nothing they could do to stop him.

In my work with more than 25 dioceses and dozens of parishes around the United States, I have heard stories like this one on a number of occasions. They are discouraging, but they also represent a major challenge, since the current priest shortage makes effective collaboration between priests and laypeople more important than ever.

In recent years there have been a number of initiatives to enhance collaboration among priests and laity. These programs have been a great help, but there are also barriers that need to be recognized and overcome so that priests and the laity they work with can minister more effectively.

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*By Dominic Perri, principal consultant of the Essential Conversations Group in Forest Park, Illinois, which provides management consulting services to dioceses, religious communities, and national church organizations.*

## He said, they said

Laypeople and priests each have their own perspective on the challenges of working with one another. Here is a sample of the comments I frequently hear.

## The single most important step toward collaboration is for priests and laity to be explicit about how they think about their partnerships.

On relationships in the parish, priests say things like: "Laypeople don't understand what a difficult position I am in. It's not easy to be someone's pastor, employer, and friend."

Laypeople, on the other hand, might say: "Father Mike is difficult to get to know and work with. I don't know if he just wants to be my boss, my pastor, or both. It seems to change based on the day of the week."

When working together, priests often say: "I wish laypeople weren't so passive! They won't take even the smallest step without checking with me first." Laypeople tend to reply: "I am nervous to take even the smallest step because he can be very controlling."

This disconnect extends to skills as well. "I want to empower laypeople," say some priests, "but when I give a layperson a key task, he or she often messes it up. Then I have to come in at the 11th hour and clean it up."

A layperson in the situation might respond: "Father Bill isn't very clear about what he wants. He says things like, 'Go take care of the youth,' and then gets upset when I don't do it the way he wants."

Each of these examples of what priests and laypeople say reflects different models of working together. Since having conflicting models inevitably leads to tension, the most important step toward collaboration is for priests and laypeople to be explicit about how they think about their partnerships.

### Let's be clear

Ministry is fundamentally relational, yet Catholics often overlook the complexity of the relationship between priests and laypeople. We ask the same man to be our spiritual leader, friend, family member, counselor, and employer (in the case of parish staff). The closest analogy I can offer to this is the family restaurant, where family members must intertwine family relationships with business transactions. It is not easy, as the old saying "don't mix business and pleasure" suggests.

Father Frank retired as pastor of St. Ursula Parish after 15 years. He was a beloved, grandfatherly figure among his staff. He was always available to them (even on his days off), coun-

seled them, baptized most of their children, and even made several loans to them in times of need.

The new pastor has a different style, with a much greater emphasis on boundaries. He is not reachable on his days off and is reluctant to be involved in the personal lives of the parish staff. This has led to complaints that he is "aloof" and "unfeeling," despite the fact that he is an excellent leader and highly collaborative. Over the course of his first year, several staff left the parish, one retiring and another moving to another position. The ones who remain long for "how things were back in the good old days" under Father Frank.

The situation at St. Ursula illustrates the often huge unspoken assumptions at play in priest-lay relationships. The following is a sample of quotes I have heard from lay staff working in parishes.

"The reason I took this job was for the chance to work with Father Tom, whom I view as a mentor and father figure."

"I would like the opportunity to pray more with Father José in my work."

"I am not in this job to pray with anyone. I am here to do my work and then go home."

"The great thing about this job is that if I have a personal spiritual question I can just go down the hall and ask Father Mark. How many people can say that about their boss?"

This is an extraordinary range of statements you would not hear in corporate America. That's not bad, but the challenge arises when priests and lay ministers have different ideas about what the relationship should be.

Instead of assuming a certain relationship—father, friend, counselor, spiritual guide—priests and lay ministers who work together should articulate what they each seek. My experience with priests and bishops around the country has been that they greatly appreciate people who allow them to be themselves and don't have expectations of them simply because they are "Father."

Here are some tips on clarifying relationships between priests and laypeople.

**Make the relationship a top priority.** Take time to get to know one another. Many priests do this with an annual lunch

with each of their staff members. Others have everyone on the parish staff participate in a session on personality styles, using assessments such as the Myers-Briggs. Research suggests that collaboration is much more likely to be successful when people trust one another and know one another's strengths and preferences.

**Clarify the dimensions of the relationships among ordained and lay staff members.** What are each of you looking for and/or expecting? How do each of you view your position?

Just after college I was hired at an office job by a priest who had previously worked for 25 years in inner-city parishes. On my first day he spent the morning taking me around the old neighborhoods he had served, saying, "I am a pastor and I will never stop being one. And to work well with me, even in an office job, you need to understand that. You aren't just starting a new job. You're helping me with my ministry." That signaled to me that this was not a conventional job. But it worked because I understood what I was being asked to do.

There is no one way to do this, but try to answer the following questions: How do each of you see the relationship? Is this simply a working relationship? Or are there other dimensions? Pastor? Friend? Counselor? Mentor? What would success look like in this position? What would you accomplish together? What would you not do?

### Get on the same page

I once heard a story about a high-profile archbishop and his archdiocesan pastoral council. Shortly after the council had been created and its members had completed orientation, a lay member asked the archbishop, "I need to understand something. We can talk all we want here, but at the end of it all, you can simply ignore us and override any decision we make. Is that correct?"

There was a pause and all heads swung toward the archbishop to see how he would reply. The archbishop calmly responded, "While canon law certainly gives me that power, that is not how we will operate here. We will work to reach consensus on all our decisions."

There is clearly a wide range of options for how laity and clergy can share power and decision making. Since we live in a democracy, many U.S. Catholics who serve on parish councils expect they will relate to the pastor the way the Congress relates to the president—and that they therefore have the power to override his veto. Of course, this is not the case.

Canon law gives the pastor nearly unchallenged power in his parish. One comment from the director of an archdiocesan office in Chicago sums up this point: "On the local level I always tell people: In a fight, bet on the pastor. Not that I agree with that, but it is the harsh reality of the church."

Of course, priests and bishops are free to decide to what extent they exercise that power. And there are a multitude of options. The vicar general of a Western diocese offered a liturgical model: "The liturgy might be an effective template for how we are intended to collaborate daily. Within the liturgy no one does everything, yet everyone has a role. If each one fulfills their role competently, the liturgy will be celebrated well. Where competence is lacking or a role goes unexercised, the celebration is negatively impacted. No one is meant to exercise the role entrusted to another."

My experience is that it is not enough for a priest or layperson to say, "All we have to do is understand our unique roles." Both sides need to know what the other means. The key issue here is the model of consultation. The pastor or bishop is free to determine how he will use (or not use) the advice of pastoral councils, diocesan councils, and presbyteral councils. It is therefore essential that priests and laypeople who work together be as clear as possible about their model of collaboration and decision making. There are some helpful ways to approach this issue.

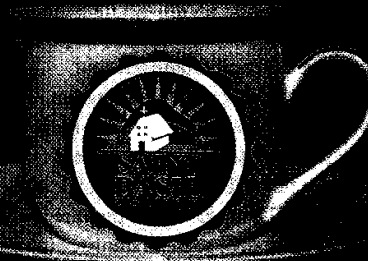
**Priests should be clear about how they understand collaboration and the role of laypeople.** Since they have all the

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## Good collaboration is the product of honesty about one's assumptions and a willingness to put in the time and effort to nurture effective partnerships.

canonical power, I advise priests to be as clear as possible with laity upfront, especially in terms of decision-making authority.

**Priests and laypeople who work together should take time to clarify how they will consult, collaborate, and make decisions.** I recommend making this explicit. Pastors should review this with new parish hires. Orientation for new members of parish or diocesan pastoral councils should address these questions.

Lastly, priests range widely in their view of collaboration. Some take a very broad view and others take a very narrow one, with the latter believing that their priestly role as leaders means they should be the sole decision makers. I know laypeople who are very happy working for priests with this more limited view of collaboration, but only when their own expectations of collaboration are in alignment.

### Practice makes perfect

One of the greatest challenges many priests and their staffs face are deaths in the parish, which require a quick response and can never be planned for in advance. When several occur in short succession they can overwhelm a parish priest and his staff, upending the schedule for an entire week.

I was surprised to hear one priest with whom I worked say, "I have not been to a funeral home in years." When I asked how this was possible, he responded, "I have five trained teams of two persons each who go to the funeral home. On each team there is someone who leads prayer and another who leads music. They do a far superior job to anything I could do, and this gives me time to prepare for the funeral liturgy."

This priest and his five teams had developed a collaborative ministry model that allowed them to provide superior ministry to the people in their parish, while at the same time maximizing their own talents. It is no accident that the pastor had also studied collaborative ministry extensively.

To state the obvious, good collaboration requires good collaboration skills. But having actual skills is more than simply being able to speak eloquently about the value of working together. Too often both priests and laypeople are better at talking about collaboration than they are at actually doing it. This is because many people in ministry (priest and lay) received little formal training in collaboration during their preparation for ministry.

The questions I pose to priests and the laypeople who col-

laborate together are: How would you assess your collaboration skills in areas such as identifying common goals, being open to different perspectives, appreciating different personalities and work styles, and trusting others to take on key projects? How much training in teamwork, communication, and collaboration do you and other key laypeople in the parish have? Is it time to seek formal training? What price are you and your team paying for your lack of collaboration skills? Are there missed opportunities to minister and meet the needs of your people? Are the skills of those on your team being underutilized because of a lack of collaboration?

### Putting it all together

If priests and laypeople want to work together, they should recognize that good collaboration doesn't just happen. It is the product of honesty about one's assumptions and a willingness to put in the time and effort to nurture effective partnerships.

There are some steps that can be taken to avoid some of the barriers to working well together:

**Build a relationship:** This is the key to everything in ministry. Take time to get to know one another and what you each are truly seeking.

**Put it in writing:** One way to clarify everyone's expectations is to write them out. To some this may seem overly formal. But the exercise of writing out expectations will force everyone to put their assumptions on the table.

**Acquire collaboration skills:** Collaboration is a skill. Commit to increasing your collaborative skills and, to the extent you can, the skills of those you minister with. There are many courses, seminars, and written materials to draw upon, including books on collaborative ministry, such as *The Collaborative Leader* by Loughlan Sofield and Donald H. Kuhn (Ave Maria Press) and the *Wisdom of Teams* by J.R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith (Harperbusiness).

Research on creative approaches to ministry includes the Emerging Models Project ([emergingmodels.org](http://emergingmodels.org)). Resources such as the Group Styles Inventory offered by Human Synergistics ([humansynergistics.com/products/gsi.aspx](http://humansynergistics.com/products/gsi.aspx)) provide an excellent tool to help parish teams assess their collaborative style.

I have always believed that people in ministry, because of the value we place on mission and honoring each person, should excel at collaboration. Removing the barriers is an essential step to achieving that goal. **USC**