



The Parish Leadership Team

Parishes are the most important organizations in the world. If this is true, and we are convinced that it is, then the leadership of the pastor is critical. He is the spiritual leader and executive authority of a parish. But he cannot run a parish alone, or in a hub and spoke manner that forces him to be responsible for most decisions. Great pastors surround themselves with a team of leaders who share the responsibility of leading the parish, and we call that team the parish leadership team.

The vast majority of pastors agree that they need support in order to best fulfill their role as pastor. Unfortunately, they also find that establishing a leadership team is not as easy as it would seem to be. That's because there are a number of issues that need to be addressed and questions that need to be answered before a team can be effectively formed.

For instance: *What is the role or purpose of a leadership team? Who and how many people should be on the team? How do you avoid hurt feelings and politics when some people don't get to be on the team? Who picks the team?* The purpose of this essay is to answer those questions so that a pastor can more easily establish a leadership team in his parish.

What is the role and purpose of a parish leadership team?

A parish leadership team exists to assist the pastor in managing the parish. This involves everything from strategic decisions and people management to operations and finances. The role of leadership team members is to look beyond their areas of expertise or responsibility in order to help the pastor protect the good of the entire parish. A pastor is a better leader when he surrounds himself with good leaders and opens himself to their input and influence.

It's important to understand that the leadership team is NOT an advisory or oversight body, like the parish council or the finance council. The leadership team is an operating body, which means that each team member is actively involved in implementing the decisions of the team. In general, the pastoral council is a representative body of parishioners serving in an advisory capacity. The finance council has oversight of the fiscal responsibilities of the parish. These councils typically meet monthly, whereas the parish leadership team meets weekly because it is so involved in the day-to-day happenings of the parish.

It's crucial that the leadership team of a parish meets weekly to look at the overall health of the parish. While weekly meetings are the norm, this team may need to come together more often at times, even at a moment's notice. For example, when there is a crisis at the parish or when an urgent matter arises, the parish leadership team is the group of people the pastor can rely on to help him address the issue. It's also important for members of the leadership team to

understand that being on the leadership team is NOT a reward or a privilege, but rather a serious responsibility.

Who and how many people should be on the team?

The leadership team should be small, between three and five people. Having too many members makes it very difficult to build strong trust and to engage in the difficult conversations that a team must have.

As to who should be on the team, that will depend on the maturity level of the individuals under consideration and their roles and responsibilities. Because no two parishes are the same, there are no easy formulas for determining who should be on the leadership team. However, there are four qualities that are essential for each leadership team members to have, regardless of the size, location or demographic of the parish. Here’s a chart to help explain them:

The Four Qualities of a Parish Leadership Team Member

Committed and Present	Mature
A committed parishioner (staff or volunteer) who is present at the parish throughout the week and available for weekly meetings.	A committed parishioner who is mature, humble, prayerful and able to handle sensitive and confidential information.
Team Player	Whole-Parish Oriented
A committed parishioner who is vulnerable and capable of engaging in productive conflict. Will hold people accountable and is willing to be held accountable.	A committed parishioner who is focused on the collective results of the parish more than their individual areas of concern.

Regardless of your parish size or geographical location, the most important thing is to choose parishioners that fit the four qualities. Some pastors may be tempted to choose people based on their role, title or contributions to the parish, but they will experience more success with their team if they are choosing individuals based on the qualities in the chart above.

While every parish leadership team is different, what they should all have in common is that they are small. In addition, the team is collectively responsible for the good of the entire parish regardless of their individual duties. Each team member is an active part of the parish operations, spending time there more than once a week. Also, the pastor is an active member of the team, preferably taking the lead role in driving meetings and discussions and decisions forward.

For specific examples of parish leadership teams based on parish size and location, see the addendum at the end of this document.

Who picks the team?

The pastor picks his team, and he is the leader of the team. Some pastors already have an idea of the people they want involved in helping lead the parish, still it's a good idea to check those people against the four qualities of a parish leadership team member (committed and present, team player, whole-parish oriented, mature). If just one of the qualities is missing, it's important to address it or consider asking someone else who might be a better fit for the role.

Challenges a Pastor Will Face

Of course there can be challenges and roadblocks to implementing a parish leadership team, and we all know there can be personalities and politics that make this situation difficult. Generally, there are four common challenges that pastors face when building a team at their parish.

1. Hurt feelings from some who aren't selected to serve on the parish leadership team
2. Misunderstanding by staff that the parish leadership team is a special club
3. Parish council feeling threatened or confused
4. Temptation to give up and avoid the temporary messiness

Challenges 1-3 deal with communication and are minimized when the communication happens up front. It's important for the pastor to clearly communicate the role and need for a parish leadership team to the parish council members, staff and key volunteers at his parish. Communication (and over-communication) can eliminate the potential for hurt feelings, jealousy and misunderstandings. It can be tempting for pastors to avoid the direct conversations needed to bring clarity around the parish leadership team, but the more honest and clear the pastor is about the role of his leadership team, the less excluded other parish leaders will feel.

Ongoing communication with the staff, parish council and volunteers also maximizes clarity. The pastor and leadership team members should remember to practice "cascading communications," promptly informing the staff, councils, and key volunteers about decisions made by the parish leadership team.

The fourth challenge has more to do with the emotions some pastors feel throughout the process of forming a leadership team. It can be difficult for a pastor to navigate these conversations with his staff and councils and to continue charging forward without having all the answers. The messiness is a temporary thing, and that temporary discomfort is well worth

it in the end. Pastors that have successfully led their teams through this transition now look back and wonder how they did everything before without the help of their team.

How do you avoid hurt feelings or politics when some people don't get chosen for the team?

This is one of the biggest fears that drives pastors away from establishing a leadership team. To overcome that fear, a pastor has to know that weeks after the initial disruption, the parish will begin benefitting remarkably as a result of creating the right team. In other words, the rewards outweigh the costs. That seems easier said than done, but as long as you go about it with confidence, clarity and sensitivity, the benefits will have an incredible impact on your parish.

To be clear, it is the job of the pastor to present the new structure for parish leadership team meetings in a clear, mature, compelling way. He might say something like...

"Listen everyone. I've recently come to the conclusion that the only way to take the parish to the place we all want it to go is to change the way we lead and manage. That is my responsibility and I take responsibility for not having done this better and sooner. I'm convinced that it is what we need, and that after we dig into this and ask questions in a frank and honest way, we'll all come to the same conclusion."

"First, we are going to establish something called a parish leadership team. I'm not talking about the parish council or finance council, and I'm not talking about the staff team that includes everyone who works in the parish office."

"What I'm talking about is a small group of people, three or four probably, who will take on considerably more work to help me oversee and manage the entire parish, regardless of what their day jobs are. This parish is too important, and we have too many wonderful opportunities to bring people to Christ to allow our current way to continue. We need to be more nimble, strategic, informed and clever. That doesn't happen with all eight of us in a room, or with twelve people in the conference room on Mondays. We have to do something different. Now, that doesn't mean we still won't have meetings with all of us to talk about what is happening in the parish or to brainstorm how a new program might roll out. But we can't possibly vet out the right answer and argue about it and pray about it and push back and forth with more than a small handful of people on the leadership team."

"Now, I realize that there is potential in situations like this for people to be nervous about whether they'll be on the team or not. I get that. And I realize that much of that nervousness comes from the idea that if we aren't on the parish leadership team, we have somehow been demoted or disrespected. I get that. But it just isn't the reality of what we're doing here."

“Being a member of my small leadership team is not a reward for good service. It’s not an indication of where you stand in the parish in terms of importance and impact. And it is not a message to you about whether you are considered a strong member of the parish staff. Some of our most talented and senior and committed people might not be on the leadership team, not because they aren’t fantastic at what they do, but rather because they are appropriately focused on one particular aspect of what goes on in the parish. Or perhaps they won’t want to sign up for what I’m requiring leadership team members to do. Because being on the leadership team carries with it a weighty set of responsibilities, with little or no public attention or formal upside.”

What is important here is that the pastor is up front with people about what it means to be on the leadership team.

When a pastor is confronted with a disappointed staff member or volunteer who thought he or she should have been chosen, it is best for that pastor to listen kindly and with genuine empathy. The pastor must then explain, in confidence, the purpose for the new team and the fruits that it will have to yield. He should also remind them, “you will not be excluded from providing insight and ideas relating to your area of responsibility, and your input will always be welcomed in any area where you want to contribute.”

If a disgruntled person persists in his or her belief that they should have been on the team, that is where a pastor can communicate kindly and in a dignified way, but with NO sense of apology, the specific reasons that the person wasn’t seen to be the best for the limited spots on the team.

If all this can be handled with eagerness on the part of the pastor and other leaders, and with genuine concern and dignity for the person who is upset, and with no sense of apology for what the parish is trying to do, then I think a reasonable person is going to understand. If not, this may be a sign of a somewhat self-serving attitude.

We’re Here for You!

Amazing Parish is committed to helping you select the best people for your leadership team. We have resources available on our website including a webinar with Pat Lencioni ([click here](#) to watch it) as well as a dedicated staff that is eager to help you. If after reading this you’re still struggling with the selection of your team members, don’t hesitate to call us at 303-481-4320.

We are praying for you. Thank you for your vocation and commitment to leading your parish!

Addendum

Parish Examples

A few hypothetical examples might provide the guidance necessary for figuring out what is best for your parish.

Example 1: Small Parish Size

Sacred Heart is a small parish located in a farming community thirty-five miles from a city. Two hundred families make up the parish, many of whom drive more than ten miles to attend Mass. There are just a handful of active ministries, including a Bible study, an outreach to migrant farmworker families, and a Knights of Columbus group.

The pastor has one full-time Parish Secretary and two part-time volunteers in the parish office. One of the volunteers handles RCIA, Confirmation and Faith Formation for the children in the parish, as well as family outreach. The other takes care of the church ministries, oversees the choir, readers and sacristans, and organizes baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Who would be on Sacred Heart's leadership team? In a situation like this, it might make sense that all of the parish staff be a part of it. But then again, it is possible that the Parish Secretary doesn't have the insights or whole parish perspective needed to be part of the team. If he or she doesn't, it is better to limit the team to the other members. And perhaps in a small, rural parish like this one, there is a unique volunteer who spends a few days at the parish working on various projects or programs. Depending on his or her talents and involvement, he or she might be a good candidate to be a functional member of a leadership team. Oftentimes rural parishes will only have three people on the leadership team (the pastor plus two others), which is reasonable for a parish like Sacred Heart.

The members of the leadership team will probably not always be in the office at the same time, so they will have to be active in scheduling meetings to discuss the needs of the parish. What is important is that they provide the pastor with support in making decisions and executing plans.

Example 2: Medium Parish Size

St. Mary's is a medium-sized parish located in a suburb. There are almost fifteen hundred families in the parish and several ministries, some large and active, others small and somewhat dormant. In the office, there are seven paid staff members, five full-time and two part-time, as well as a handful of volunteers, and an associate priest.

The office consists of the following paid staff:

- Full-time Director of Faith Formation
- Part-time Youth Minister
- Full-time Business Manager
- Full-time Liturgy Coordinator
- Part-time Music Coordinator
- Full-time Parish Secretary

- Full-time Facilities Manager

In addition to his priestly duties, the Associate Pastor helps run outreach programs which include the St. Vincent de Paul food pantry and an annual mission trip. Regular volunteers in the office include two part-time administrative assistants, an adult Bible study leader, a part-time bookkeeper and three music ministers who lead music at the weekend Masses.

Who should be on the leadership team at St. Mary's? That will depend on the maturity levels and capabilities of the individuals who work in the parish. But it might look like this: The Pastor, the Director of Faith Formation, the Business Manager, the Liturgy Coordinator, and the Associate Pastor. That would be a total of five people, which is a good size for a team.

Should the Associate Priest always be on the team? Not necessarily. There are teams that didn't include the associate, who was NOT AT ALL upset by not being included. As he said, "I trust the leaders and I need to spend my time and energy doing what I do best."

Does the Business Manager or someone from the finance department need to be on the team? Not necessarily, but it is often the case. Again, that person must be mature and have insights into the parish beyond his or her tactical role.

What about the Director of Faith Formation or DRE? Again, it depends. Certainly, the title and responsibilities of a faith formation leader would suggest that he or she be on the team, but it will depend on that particular person and his or her ability to add value in a leadership capacity and to have a whole-parish oriented perspective. No two DREs are the same.

Example 3: Large Parish Size

Holy Family is a large parish located in a thriving suburb of a major U.S. city. More than three thousand families are registered, many of whom have children who attend the parish's grade school. There are dozens of ministries at Holy Family, some more vibrant than others. Holy Family has an associate pastor as well as two deacons that serve in different liturgies and ministries.

The parish office has ten full-time paid staff members:

- Business Manager
- Director of Parish Operations
- Facilities Manager
- Parish Secretary
- Director of Religious Education
- Director of Children's Ministries
- Youth Minister
- Director of Outreach and Evangelization
- Music Coordinator
- Liturgy Coordinator

There are also five part-time paid employees:

- Stewardship Coordinator
- Accountant
- Administrative Assistant
- Janitor
- Coordinator of Marriage and Family Ministries

In addition to the paid staff, there are a half-dozen regular volunteers (office assistants, small group leaders, youth group core team members, music volunteers, etc.).

Who would be on the leadership team? The temptation would be to have a larger leadership team than other parishes, but that isn't a good idea. A larger team has a harder time getting through discussions and achieving clarity and closure. And remember, because the team should be based on people's maturity, commitment, and ability to be a team player, rather than their roles and responsibilities, it's impossible to predict who would be on this leadership team using titles alone.

But it might look like this: The Pastor, the Director of Outreach and Evangelization, the Director of Parish Operations, the school Principal, and the Deacon who oversees Liturgy and Sacraments.

Or it might include the Pastor, Associate Pastor, Youth Minister, DRE and Business Manager. Or perhaps it would be made up of the Pastor, Director of Outreach and Evangelization, Music Coordinator and Coordinator of Marriage and Family Ministries. What is most important is that each person meets the four qualities of a parish leadership team member, regardless of their role or title at the parish.

Parish Clusters and Collaboratives

Recently, many dioceses have combined parishes in an effort to share and conserve resources. In these parish groupings, called clusters or collaboratives, pastors can have a difficult time determining who should be on their leadership team(s).

So, who should be on their leadership teams? Here's the answer: it depends on whether the worship sites operate as one parish or have their own unique congregations and identities. If the parish grouping has multiple sites that operate independently from each other, the pastor should have leadership teams for each unique location. If a parish grouping is operating as one unit with multiple worship sites, then the pastor should bring parish leaders together from each location and they should work together as one leadership team.

These arrangements for parishes are becoming more common, and it's important that a pastor has the support he needs at each unique parish community he serves.