

INSPIRE, Parish Leadership, and Ecclesial Ministries

Précis: INSPIRE, a partnership initiative of Loyola University Chicago and the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, serves the communion and mission of Church as expressed in parish life. The project aims to assist pastoral imagination, so that leaders envision concrete ways their communities proclaim and give witness to Jesus Christ's Incarnation and Paschal Mystery. Pastoral imagination is sustained by personal holiness and becomes actionable through enhancement of theological, ministerial, and organizational competencies. Pastoral imagination helps pastoral leadership teams align diverse gifts for the purpose of more effectively giving God thanks and praise, witnessing and proclaiming Christ to the world, and offering service, solidarity, and hope to those who suffer. Finally, pastoral imagination nurtures vital relationships among parish communities, local church, and universal Church.

Parishes in the United States are gifts to the Church world-wide. In an era of cultural shifts and proclaimed decline, these North American communities achieve exceptional participation rates as reflected in mass attendance, enrollment, sacramental initiations, and support for missions. Moreover, these parishes exhibit wide varieties of staffing arrangements, formed in response to diverse community needs and resources. Pastoral leadership teams often mix and match ordained and non-ordained ministerial roles, full-, part-time, and volunteer roles. They exploit professional roles supported by formal academic preparation, certifications, and skilled performances acquired through training.

The variety of roles and titles comes as a blessing and a curse. Complexity and variation can enhance survivability and vitality. They can also diffuse missions, misalign priorities, and generate incoherent expressions of tradition and Gospel. Parish ministerial and leadership roles, however, can only exist to serve *communion* in a particular place and time. Communion is the way people experience Christ's saving presence and understand the Church herself as the world's light and leaven. Parishioners share that experience most immediately in their local church, the diocese, and their parish community. Bishops, pastors, and parish ministers serve communities challenged by tumultuous moral, ethical, political, technological, and cultural demands. If they are to be faithful to mission, these leaders will succeed only because they have learned to appreciate, support, and complement each other's roles and gifts. In the parish, the pastor makes a critical contribution to this end. Like his bishop, the pastor must serve both by fostering diversity and ministering to order.

Many of those who undertake roles in parish life as public ministers share common histories. At some time in their lives they profoundly experienced God's love, Christ's presence, the Holy Spirit's urging. Such experiences are complemented by their love for the Church and a desire to share this ultimate good, in and through the Church, with others. By pursuing and developing particular forms of service, they each respond to a sense of personal call.

Some men take paths to ordained ministry. Other men and women, either as lay persons or professed religious, follow callings to prepare themselves for pastoral, teaching, or social service roles in parish settings. Sometimes these latter callings rise out of secular professions or occupations. The growing services of parish administrators or business managers are recent examples. In widely varied arrangements, these persons gather as leaders, sometimes describing themselves as parish staffs or as parish teams, as "generalists" or "specialists." They aspire to common mission and purpose.

However, the exigencies and contingencies of parish life weigh upon them. They are servants, and they are considered to be on call. Few ever have more than several minutes of time dedicated to one task without a distraction or interruption. Each has particular performances to make, deadlines to meet, and publics to serve. Most come to the work because they are attracted to serving persons and forming with them significant bonds of relationship and shared faith. Such good work becomes challenged by diminished time frames and multiple requests for personal time and presence. Moreover, there is the requirement to *administer* rather than just minister. Without organizational competence, one risks effectiveness, accountability, and even one's own personal sense of integrity.

One critical and insidious outcome of these demands can be loss of common purpose. Another is loss of spiritual life that nurtures a person's well-being and ability to serve the Church. Common purpose may be expressed as mission, connection to the wider Church, shared vision, integrated ministries. It can be lost to the gradual build-up, conscious or unwitting, of silos in parish life. The school becomes an entity in itself. What the DRE actually does with her time is a mystery to all. The youth minister keeps hours that no one understands. The pastor is never "around" but expected to attend every meeting. Each one is at risk of personal fragmentation often experienced as burnout. Time for personal prayer, let alone disciplined spiritual formation, gets lost in the rush. With demagnetized internal compasses, the team becomes a staff, the staff becomes a group of persons who occasionally cross paths, and ministers suffer for want of ministry.

During 2003, a remarkable collaboration of the Archdiocese of Chicago and Loyola University, each dedicated to developing persons in church ministries, resulted in formation of a strategic response to the needs of pastoral ministers. Countering institutional histories of experiencing each other as silos, representatives of the University and the Archdiocese agreed to study the forces impacting parish ministry and ministers, then to design a collaborative response.

The result of the years-long effort is "INSPIRE," organized to "Identify, Nurture and Sustain Pastoral Imagination through Resources for Excellence." Abandoning programmatic, unilateral strategies to resolving complex and varied issues of parish ministry, the Lilly Endowment funded project identifies resources for spiritual as well as theological, doctrinal, ministerial, skill-based, collaborative, and administrative learning, and situates them in a context of planning, shared accountability, and praxis. Participants will learn as individual ministers and as teams; they will fortify their spiritual lives in the same way.

The intended outcome of INSPIRE, as expressed in its self-description, is not only "to increase the essential unity of ministries in the Archdiocese of Chicago," and not only to "promote a shared ecclesial vision," but to assist the growth of parishes as "vibrant center(s) of faith." Therefore, INSPIRE is ultimately aimed at developing parish communities, served by leaders sharing common Catholic vision, poised to engage uncommon mission, as vital expressions of the Body of Christ in the world. The five-year project also has the potential to invite deconstruction of perceived silos that frustrate positive working relationships between the University and archdiocesan agencies.