



Structure

Introduction

Lots of things can conspire to make us priests 'lone rangers': a shortage of financial resources to hire people; the lack of volunteers; our own acquiescence in the face of the clericalist mindset that expects 'father' to do everything; as well as increasing pressure from diocesan agencies that attribute more and more responsibilities to the parish priest. Add to this our own internal pressure to meet the expectations placed upon us and we have a model of priestly ministry almost designed to sap our joy and contribute to priestly burnout. It is also a model which is deeply unscriptural.

In Exodus 18, Jethro is shocked to see Moses, his son-in-law, doing everything. He warns him about the dangers: "This isn't the right way to do this. It is too much work for you to do alone. You cannot do this job by yourself. It wears you out. And it makes the people tired too". In other words it is not just bad for Moses it is also bad for his ministry. Jethro helps Moses discern what aspects of his ministry are specific to him and what he can delegate to others: "You should continue listening to the problems of the people. And you should continue to speak to God about these things. You should explain God's laws and teachings to the people. Warn them not to break the laws. Tell them the right way to live and what they should do. But you should also choose some of the people to be judges and leaders".

In the Gospels we see how Jesus applied this principle of working through others. He not only invested disproportionately in the Twelve, but even within them he paid special attention to Peter, James, and John. He also had the 'seventy-two' whom he sent out in pairs to the towns and villages he was to visit.



In the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-7) we see the Apostles entrusting to deacons the practical work of distributing food to those in need so that they could devote themselves “to prayer and to serving the Word”. In other words, to be effective, the work of ministry needs the help of others. It needs others to embrace their ‘co-responsibility’ for the church rooted in their baptism. As priests and pastors we need to raise up other leaders and learn to work through them. For that to be effective ‘structure’ is going to be important.

What do we mean by ‘Structure’?

You have probably seen those old-fashioned nursery mobiles where every element supports two or three others hanging from it so that the whole is perfectly balanced. By ‘structure’ we mean something similar: rather than have a parish full of disparate and unconnected groups, the idea is to ensure that every parish ministry is supported and connected to the whole and aligned towards the ultimate vision.

An organisational chart or organogram expresses the same idea. If a parish has a Senior Leadership Team of four or five people and each member of the team supports three ministries, already twelve to fifteen ministries are being directly supported. That would be impossible if they depended solely on the parish priest. In a larger parish the SLT members might be directly supporting ‘heads of departments’ who in turn support the specific ministry leads. A working structure enables ministry to be scalable, supported and efficient. It also enables two-way communication and clarity surrounding roles.



What does 'support' look like?

Rather than a hierarchical notion of who is 'reporting' to whom, in a parish it is better to model servant leadership and to ask ourselves how we support the different ministries to set them up for success. Support can be as simple and straightforward as a regular check-in that asks three questions:

- What's going well?
- What are the challenges you are facing?
- What do you need from me?

Once these three things have been determined, there needs to be clarity and agreement around who will do what by when, and what do we need to communicate.

What does 'sustainable' look like?

Most Catholic parishes do not currently have the funds to employ lay members of staff. This can lead to priests lowering their expectations with the result that a topic such as 'structure' becomes merely theoretical. But the question of structure becomes increasingly urgent as parishes are merged and when we recognise that a large church is not simply a bigger version of a small one. They have different strengths and weaknesses. Smaller churches can be dominated by immature, outspoken, opinionated and broken members who have to be confronted. Larger churches have difficulty integrating new members or offering adequate pastoral care.



In a fascinating article entitled, “Leadership and Church Size Dynamics”, Tim Keller, a leading evangelical minister, observes:

The larger the church, the less its members have in common. There is more diversity in factors such as age, family status, ethnicity, and so on, and thus a church of 400 needs four to five times more programs than a church of 200—not two times more. Larger churches are much more complex than their smaller counterparts. They have multiple services, multiple groups, and multiple tracks, and eventually they really are multiple congregations.

He also gives the size criteria for employing new members of staff:

The larger the church, the more staff per capita needs to be added. Often the first ministry staff persons are added for every increase of 150–200 in attendance. A church of 500 may have two or three full-time ministry staff, but eventually ministry staff may need to be added for every 75–100 new persons. Thus a church of 2,000 may have twenty-five staff.

For Tim Keller a ‘large church’ is one with a weekly attendance of 400-800 people. Generally, he says, “in small churches policy is decided by many and ministry is done by a few, while in the large church ministry is done by many and policy is decided by a few”. The whole essay is worth reading* but perhaps the most important point for us to consider is that the evangelical churches **expect** to be able to employ lay members of staff and their congregations are conscious of the need to fund the mission by providing sufficient income to support staff members in addition to paying a wage to the lead pastor.

* You can get read it online here: [https://seniorpastorcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ 2 Tim-Keller-Size-Dynamics.pdf](https://seniorpastorcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2-Tim-Keller-Size-Dynamics.pdf)



The question of structure applies to a parish whether we have members of staff or rely on volunteers. As a parish begins to evangelise more people will come forward who are willing to help. As that happens the priest needs to share the expectation that 'help' includes generously funding the mission so that lay members of staff can be employed. This may require a shift in expectations on the part of the priest himself. The parish needs to grow in its awareness of the need to fund the mission because without adequate staff and volunteers and without a proper structure the priest is liable to take too much on which will have negative effects both on his ministry and on his health.

Practical Exercises

The purpose of structure is to free you up so that you can dedicate sufficient time to what really matters without being overwhelmed and exhausted by other things. Structure also helps expand your ministry because it is now being shared by others who themselves are reaching more and more people. In that way structure is important because it makes your ministry both sustainable and scalable. Someone once suggested that most priests spend 80% of their time on administration and 20% on ministry. What would it be like if we could reverse that?

- A good exercise is to jot down what percentage of your time you spend on:
 - ◊ Preaching (including preparation)
 - ◊ Administering the sacraments
 - ◊ Leading (i.e. supporting people)
 - ◊ Administration and the rest.

Of all those tasks what do you find least life-giving? And what is being left undone because of the time you dedicate to it? Finally, what would a healthy balance look like?



- Another exercise would be to map out all the different ministries in your parish and then group them according to some workable criteria. For example, some ministries might be formation, others might be charitable, others might be administrative or operational. Which of these ministries are already being supported? What might a sustainable support structure look like? Is there anyone currently on staff or volunteering who could support some of these ministries
- What structure could you begin working towards?