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Editorial: Changing church needs new models

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Editorial

Steve Mullin is an unusual Catholic leader -- a parish life director widely viewed as the de facto pastor of All Saints Parish in Hayward, Calif. -- in a most unusual setting.

It was an unusual bishop who originally entrusted him with supervision of the parish 12 years ago. And it is a pair of unusual priests who feel not only comfortable with the arrangement but enthusiastic about having a layman run the show, as it were. "Here I get to be a priest full time," Fr. Filiberto Barrera told writer Paul Wilkes [1]. "I have time to read. I don't have to worry about the roofers, who is going to paint the church or who has the keys for the storeroom."

From a distance, it appears an idyllic setup, an answer to the shortage of priests and sisters. In some respects, it is that answer, but All Saints also raises far more questions for the larger church than it answers. Those questions are important and will become more compelling in the not-to-distant future. The shift in demographics -- drops in the numbers of priests and nuns and population movement away from the traditionally robust Catholic metropolitan centers of the Northeast and Upper Midwest -- are changing the face of U.S. Catholicism.

The influx of other cultures, notably Hispanic Catholics from throughout Latin America, but also Africans, Asians and others, are bringing with them different expectations from their European predecessors and often a different sense of ecclesiology.

The question for all of us, and one that *NCR* will return to with some frequency in the coming months, is "What will the church look like in 10 years?"

In less time than that, we know, the number of active priests available for parish work will be half the current number. We also know those priests are not evenly distributed according to need. Some places are priest-rich and other places -- often the places where Catholic numbers are growing -- struggle to keep the local parish system functioning.

While all of these demographic shifts and diminution have occasioned some interesting experimentation, there has been very little conversation at the national level about how to reimagine a church to conform to all of these changes.

Some imagining has gone on, as was the case with the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership, a project funded not by the church but by the Lilly endowment. Such imagining, however, hits an episcopal ceiling. While there are bishops here and there who might want to engage such discussion, to this point they've been the outliers. Opening discussion about how the church might look without the full complement of priests and nuns can run into difficult terrain rather quickly. Centuries of clerical presumptions and privilege are often at stake. In fact, Barrera's assertion raises a fundamental question: What does it mean to be a priest in the current circumstance?

The approach taken so far has been an array of responses to emergencies, cases of theology meeting need, but with little thinking or discussion about long-range consequences.

One result has been an explosion of the permanent diaconate. Of the more than 39,000 permanent deacons in the world, more than 40 percent live in the United States. Nearly all are married (92 percent) or widowed (4 percent). Most work full time in careers outside the church. They tend to be well-educated and are more ethnically diverse than our priest population.

But does anyone have a reliable definition of what they are to do? We know that they now fill lots of gaps and arrive at their tasks with a certain church seal of approval. But is another thick layer of male-only ordained ministry the answer to the foreseeable personnel problem? Are they a bridge to a broader married clergy (realizing that in transfers from Protestant denominations, the church already has a version of married priests in place), or will they remain an ordained order devoted to service?

Throughout the country, foreign priests, mostly from the developing world, are being used in an attempt to maintain the status quo. But is a strategy that is reliant on taking priests from countries far poorer in the ration of priests to Catholics an approach that can be justified, much less sustained? is it fair to take foreign priests away from the great needs of their own people? If deemed a long-term solution, is it best to "borrow" foreign priests for a time or have them incardinated into a diocese so there's a long-term commitment?

What about the laity in all of this? Is Mullin a one-off phenomenon or are other lay leaders capable of reinvigorating moribund parishes, evangelizing their neighborhoods, and pulling in the talent and treasure to do meaningful ministry? If Mullin is not a singular marvel, then how do we recognize the others? How does the community confer on them the responsibility and the credentials to do such work?

The challenge in imagining the future is formidable. If the approach is to keep applying quick fixes to fill immediate needs, the risk is a hodgepodge of disjointed and ill-defined initiatives that will only increase the uncertainty and instability of the Catholic community.

Alternately, a one-size-fits-all solution risks running roughshod over regional and cultural differences and overlooking other solutions that could broaden responsibility for the community and incorporate a greater range of talents and gifts.

The indisputable facts are that the church has changed dramatically during the past half century; that it will continue to change dramatically in the near- to long-term future; and that the old forms that served immigrant populations of the last century no longer work and are unsustainable.

A further undisputable fact is that while a lot of alternate forms of Catholic engagement have grown up in the past 50 years (think of Newman Centers and religious houses and intentional communities of all sorts), the parish remains the place where the vast majority of Catholics encounter fellow believers and the core of the faith.

Saving parishes is a worthy project, but the thinking must change. Calculating the need for parishes based on the number of priests available seems a backward way to approach the problem. While sacramental ministers will remain essential to the Catholic community, the needs of the people of God, not the ordained clergy, should be uppermost. The need to form communities, to sustain them in a model that Pope Francis encourages, as places that not only feed people with good teaching and a vibrant sacramental life, but send people out into the world, is essential.

It is time to move beyond the insistence that somehow there will be enough priests to sustain an old model of church when for decades the very clear indications have been that such a church existed, as far as it did, within a limited geography in this country and for a very limited time. It is long overdue that church leaders and their people open things up and allow for some Spirit-led imagination. The future beckons.

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