

Challenges and steps of a U.S. "synodal" parish

A path in listening to the Spirit

Clint Ressler

St. Mary of the Miraculous Medal is the only Catholic parish in a town of 50,000 in the Galveston-Houston diocese in Texas (USA). The pastor, Clint Ressler, is assisted by two permanent deacons and a staff of seven others¹. He speaks of challenges, fears, failures and successes, in initiating and concretizing synodality in the community.

The parish has a rich mixture of ethnicities, reflecting the long-standing presence of both English and Spanish speakers in Texas. There are 60 parish organizations and ministries, a parish elementary school, and an early childhood center, together serving 175 children.

When the pandemic closed the parish, it became clear that we needed to change our approach. We realized that much of our energy had been focused on those who come to us; and very little thought was given to going out after lost sheep. We were already busy enough tending the sheep we already had. I remember having conversations with parishioners, many of whom had family and friends who had drifted away from the parish community and Sunday Mass. The call of Pope Francis to be missionary disciples now became the clear and obvious path forward.

Prior to the pandemic, the pastoral council undertook a process to understand if the parish should eliminate one of the Sunday Masses. We discussed it at the pastoral council, and we asked for input from parishioners. The process took several months, and in the end, I can honestly say, it did not go well. Something was missing. I can see now that we struggled to engage the process *spiritually* and not merely politically. We may have tried to listen to the parishioners, but I think we failed to listen to the Holy Spirit.

Successes and Failures

When the Synod on Synodality was started, we held several Listening Sessions. Having been trained as facilitators and then conducting them we understood in a new way the need to get better at listening, individually, but also as a parish.

Enthusiastic about this new tool for communal discernment, I decided to use a listening session to help in a current proposal before our Catholic School Board. We discussed the spiritual attitude needed for this but on some level several participants didn't trust what we were doing. It was unfamiliar to them and the atmosphere of trust was lacking.

On the other hand, we also had a positive experience with another parish organization. A division had erupted within their leadership, and among the members. There had been anger, tears and feelings of broken trust. Two of us on parish staff agreed to meet with anyone from the group who wanted to share with us their feelings and concerns. With each person we prayed, listened, took notes and asked them to continue praying for the unity of the organization. After all those meetings, we gathered together and spoke honestly about all that we had heard. Everyone felt the need to ask forgiveness and to start over again. This parish organization is now a leader among other parish groups.

Pastoral council renewal

Following the parish listening sessions for the Synod, the pastoral council read through copies of all the collected inputs. And that effort kicked off a renewal of the Council itself. At some point, we started dedicating time at the beginnings of the meetings to sharing experiences from the past week or so. Members shared joys and also difficulties. This really helped our relationships improve and deepen. Together, they established a type of covenant to guide and guard the relationships of the members, both within the meetings and outside the meetings. The council prayed for the Holy Spirit to guide us toward his vision for the parish. The council spent an entire year evaluating the parish ministries and systems and creating a pastoral plan.

We had to face an uncomfortable truth – The parish was maintaining a certain level of core services, ministries and sacraments, but over time many parishioners had stopped coming to Mass, younger families were not making parish life a regular part of their lives. Several parish leaders and the pastoral council came to believe that the parish needed a vision; a ‘God-given picture of the future that inspires passion and commitment’.

At each monthly meeting, the members would reflect together on a particular theme, for instance: worship, evangelization, community life, growing as disciples, gifts in service, etc. These reflections prompted the newly constituted Council to call on the Holy Spirit, seeking answers to the ‘big’ questions for our parish: *How are our ministries and projects building God’s kingdom in our community? Are we consciously seeking the Holy Spirit in our every movement? Are we prayer-centric in all aspects of our life?*

Using a S.W.O.T. (*Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats*) analysis exercise² with these questions, we could establish various goals: 1) What are our strengths? What do we do well? 2) What do we struggle with? What are our weaknesses? 3) What opportunities exist? 4) What threats and obstacles do we face?

The results of this kind of analysis yielded a vision for the parish and the initial draft of a Strategic Plan. Of course, everything was predicated on seeking the presence of the Holy Spirit for courage and wisdom. A path forward began taking shape, in the form of addressing needs and desires that were articulated as goals. They were prioritized based on importance, short term vs. long term, and ‘easiest-to-most-difficult’.

Parish “Leadership Synods”

While that was happening something new was 'invented' by the Holy Spirit. It began with a request by some parish leaders to have a recruiting drive for new members to their ministries and organizations; a 'ministry fair'.

Listening to the leaders at that initial 'breakfast meeting' led to a second meeting to understand other challenges they were facing.

The first 2 'leadership breakfasts' opened our eyes to new possibilities. The pastoral council and the parish staff³ really needed to be in dialogue with each other and with these key leaders and volunteers. Every 2 months a new 'breakfast' would take place and more insights would come. We dedicated ample time to music, prayer and conversation over breakfast. The Pastoral Council proposed topics for prayer and discussion at the tables; often these topics were the goals and action plans the council were proposing. Responses would then be presented to everyone and collected for further discussion at monthly pastoral council meetings. At some point, someone proposed that we call these gatherings 'leadership synods'.

A 'Leadership Summit'

This past June the Pastoral Council hosted the first annual 'leadership summit', inviting the School Board, Finance Council, Parish Staff, Key Volunteers and everyone in leadership of a parish ministry or organization. We gathered for a full day of prayer, sharing, workshops and planning. Following breakfast together and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, tables began a prayerful reflection, discussion and sharing. They were asked to look for signs of God's action in the parish this past year. What should be celebrated? Then, what from our prayer and lived experience do we think God may be indicating for the year ahead? We asked: "How is 'Communion' the first step in Evangelization?"

'Tactical Discernment Team'

As the vision and goals of the parish came about there was a new realization. I as the pastor, and our staff and volunteers need help discerning 'how' to implement and incarnate them. Furthermore, I would look at my desk, covered with questions, proposals and problems and get overwhelmed. How do we engage the Holy Spirit in guiding the day-to-day decisions as well?

About 2 years ago, six parishioners and staff accompanied me to a conference on Evangelization and Parish Renewal. It became clear that we needed a diverse team who could discern together how, concretely, to go forward.

That initial group committed to meeting every week for 2-3 hours for prayer, discernment and decision-making. It was a blessing and a challenge for all of us. For my part, I recognized a need to grow in humility. We all realized a need to really learn how to listen in depth. All of the lay participants were challenged to speak boldly and honestly in the presence of the pastor.

One of the first fruits of this new '*Tactical Discernment Team*' was that I felt 'accompanied' in my role as pastor. As time went along these six people in particular began to understand

the myriad of issues, questions and problems confronting me and the parish. I began to see a concrete realization of 'synodality'. We are walking together, listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit.

1 These are more or less informal "interest groups" within a parish, with a leader representing the group at the parish level.

2 A tool used in businesses for strategy setting and project management. The acronym is formed from the initials of the words: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

3 The parish staff consists of the business manager, accountant/facilities manager, receptionist, youth minister, music manager, religious education manager, and parish secretary.