

A Resource for Persons Considering Forming a Multiple Point Parish

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Based on a study of rural, multiple point parishes conducted by the Small Town and Rural Team of the Division for Outreach. The members of the Team includes: Len Dale, Kathy Gerking, Helen Harms, Sandy LeBlanc, Glenn Simmons, and Keith Zeh.

More and more congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are thinking about sharing the costs of a pastor. One way to do this is to form a parish—a multiple point parish. This is a resource designed to assist persons who are considering the possibility of become part of a multiple point parish.

WHAT IS A MULTIPLE POINT PARISH?

There is no standard set of criteria that defines a multiple point parish in the ELCA. This means that almost any arrangement that can be agreed upon by the participating congregations is within the realm of possibility. There is, however, a kind of continuum along which multiple point parishes position themselves from two or more congregations agreeing to share some aspect of their ministry while maintaining their separate identities to those parishes that, for all practical purposes, share a single identity with multiple sites where ministry takes place.

The one thing almost all multiple point parishes have in common is that they share a pastor. Most do retain their own separate identities with their own building, council, budgets, and so on. When the congregations share only pastoral leadership, agreements about how that leadership is shared can be maintained by relatively simple oversight structures like a mutual ministry committee made up of members from the separate church

councils (or the oversight committee can be elected/appointed in any agreed upon way) from the participating congregations.

Many existing multiple point parishes also share some programming which most often has to do with youth ministry including confirmation ministry, or Sunday school, or vacation Bible school. Less frequently congregations share other staff persons in addition to a pastor (or pastors) like an organist or a secretary (parish coordinator). Some share a parsonage. When the extent of sharing goes this far, the agreements are typically negotiated and managed by a parish council. These parish councils are often composed of members from the individual congregations councils with the proportion of parish council members reflecting the size of the individual congregations. The parish council would meet less often than a church council perhaps on a quarterly basis for example.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO FORM A MULTIPLE POINT PARISH?

Just as there is no single set of criteria for defining a multiple point parish, there is no single way of forming a multiple point parish.¹ Because congregations are

¹ If the multiple point parish includes a congregation from another church body which is in full communion

sometimes very independent, perhaps even more so when they are in the midst of making difficult financial decisions, most Bishops (and their staffs) express caution about proposing, at least in detail, how ministry should or could be shared. Forming a multiple point parish can also be extremely complicated particularly if the financial condition of one congregations is significantly weaker than the others or an extensive amount of sharing is needed. Because of the complexities, there are many places for things to go wrong and if they do go wrong the synod sometimes becomes the focal point of discontent. So, in most cases, the synods will play a more passive role and let the congregations engage each other on their own terms. The congregations can take whatever route that seems most appropriate to them given their setting and characteristics. Then, as the process moves along, the synod will offer its support and, hopefully, its approval.

While there is no single process for forming a multiple point parish, there are important and helpful insights that come from a study of multiple point parishes conducted by the Small Town and Rural Team (STAR) of the Division of Outreach, ELCA.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Over the course of the study, one principle emerged as key—so key that everything else was dependent upon it. **In short, the success of a multiple point parish depends on the strength of the relationship that can be established (and maintained) between the various partners.** Because this relationship is so foundation, considerable attention should be paid to it. It is like a marriage. If it is impossible to establish a positive, supportive, caring relationship of respect between the

with the ELCA, there are very specific procedures to be followed that are set out in Chapter 9 of the ELCA constitution.

partners, the partnership will be limited, if not totally dysfunctional from the start.

The components of the relationship are presented below.

Common Purpose

It is very important that the congregations establish and agree on the validity of, at the very beginning of the process, a clear sense of their common purpose in sharing. What will be shared? Why will it be shared? How will this sharing strengthen the ministry of all the congregations in the parish?

Secondarily, each congregation in the parish should be committed to building up the other—to making each partner stronger and more effective in ministry. This building up should serve as the litmus test. If any agreement is proposed that makes one of the partners weaker or less effective in its own ministry, then some other way of achieving the desired outcome should be considered. If any agreement is proposed that does not receive the support of a plurality of congregational members in all the participating congregations, then some other way of achieving the desired outcome should be considered.

Identity as an Asset Instead of a Liability

As noted above, most of the multiple point parishes maintain their own identities. Given this fact, the STAR Team study suggested that it is best to build a strong relationship between the congregations, not by breaking down the individual identities, but by building them up. The goal is to achieve unity through diversity rather than unity through similarity. This means forming a complimentary whole that is strengthened by different assets. What are the strengths of each of the congregations? (An asset based

approach is a good strategy for identifying strengths.²) What gives each of the congregations its personality or character? How can these strengths being enhanced through the arrangements for sharing?

Communication

The more members of each of the congregations in the parish know and understand about each other, the better. This knowledge base should include familiarity with the history and traditions of each of the congregations. Secondly, there should be an ongoing means of communicating directly to the members about the activities of each of the congregations in the multiple point parish. This can include shared bulletins or common bulletin inserts, a parish newsletter, etc.

WRITTEN AGREEMENTS

Chapter 20 on Parish Authorization in the ELCA model constitution for congregations does specify three provisions with regard to parishes. The first provision does require a written agreement between two or more congregations that should be “developed in consultation with the synod and approved by the voting members of each congregation participating in the parish.” The written agreement should also specify the “powers and responsibilities that have been delegated to a Parish Council.”

In most cases, the written agreement also clarifies the common purposes of the congregations forming the parish; the composition of the parish council; a detailed plan for the sharing of pastoral leadership;

² See, for example, the Asset Based Community Development Institute Religious Network at <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd/abcdrn.html>

worship service times; the nature and extent of other shared programmatic activities; and all financial obligations. There may also be other more general understandings that set out guiding principles for the cooperative work.

Several examples of written agreements are provided at the end of this document.

MISCELLANEOUS STRATEGIC DETAILS

The study surfaced several other miscellaneous items of note.

- Whenever possible parish “boundaries” should be within the boundaries of a single school districts particularly if youth ministry activities are to be shared.
- Communication with regard to stewardship issues is also important. The additional resources that are available in a multiple point parish can easily be offset by a decline in giving which may be tendency particularly if there is an immediate, driving financial crisis.
- The setting of worship times appears to be a source of regular conflict. Flexibility in behalf of the whole should be emphasized.
- There is some evidence to suggest that members of congregations divide into two camps with regard to their views of forming a parish. Some see the rich history of a their congregation (and its identity) and they fear that it may be lost. Others feel just as strongly about the financial and administrative benefits of sharing. The goal is to show that in many, many cases the identity of the existing congregations can be maintained while simultaneously gaining the financial advantages of sharing costs.
- The demands on the pastor (or pastors) in multiple point parishes are significant and complex. Each congregation in the

parish has its own identity and therefore, in addition to its special gifts, its own special needs. Then, there are simply the difficulties of having to “rush off” to be at another service or late because of not rushing off soon enough. The members of each of the parishes should be helped to see these challenges as part of the larger picture of doing ministry together as part of the parish.

EXAMPLES OF PARISH AGREEMENTS

Example 1: A Shared Ministry Covenant

General Understandings

1. Each congregation shall maintain its own identity, corporate structure, and its own program of activities.
- 2.. Each church agrees to pay a percentage (to be determined annually by the Joint Council) of the “ministry budget,” which will include the terms of compensation and other related costs in providing a pastor and meeting the needs of both congregations.
3. The pastor and each church council shall strive to promote greater cooperation between each church and work to provide the best possible ministry program to each.
4. At the Joint Council Meeting, each congregdtion shall list its top priorities relating to both joint and separate areas of pastoral ministry. It will be the responsibility of the congregatlon(s), in conjunction with the councils and pastor, to determine how these priorities can best be met.
5. There will be at least one Joint Council Meeting between the churches (more as needed), held as designated by both councils. At these meetings the pastor will provide a written or verbal pastor’s report.
6. The people on the Joint Council will provide feedback as to how the pastor is meeting the ministry needs of both congregations.
7. The Covenant for a Shared Ministry shall be reviewed, revised, and approved yearly by each represented council.
8. A special Joint Council Committee shall be used as needed and will:
 - a) consist of the vice-president and treasurer of each council and/or interested members of the congregation.
 - b) meet annually with the staff to review their roles and performances for that year, and meet as often as deemed necessary by the Joint Council.
 - c) help to annually assist in preparing the “ministry budget,” to be presented to each congregation at the annual meetings.
 - d) assist in coordinating worship schedules for each church. subject to council approval.
 - e) provide assistance to the staff in matters of communication, coordination, or grievance(s).
 - f) provide reports to the Joint Council.

Adoption

This agreement shall be in effect upon approval of a majority of members of both elected councils at a scheduled Joint Council meeting.

Amendments

Amendments to this “Shared Ministry Covenant” agreement shall be in effect when approved by a majority of each elected church council, voting at a properly called meeting.

Dissolution of Agreement

Each congregation hereby agrees not to withdraw from this agreement until after consultation with the bishop of the synod or a representative of said office and not without due notice having been given. Due notice will be a period of not less than six months. A majority vote of members present and voting at a properly called congregational meeting is required to approve dissolution of this agreement.

Example 2: A Plan of Operation

Purpose

1. To unify the work of the parish as it provides ministry in this place and in its relationship to the work of the conference, the synod, and the churchwide agencies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
2. To help the pastor to work out a balanced program of worship services, educational opportunities, and various group activities within the parish as a whole and within the congregations, as well as working to support the initiatives of the wider Church.
3. To encourage the congregations in fulfilling their respective obligations in regards to staff salaries, parish apportionment support and other parish financial matters.
4. To insure the proper care and administration of property held or administrated in common, such as the parsonage.
5. To work together with the synod in times of pastoral vacancy both as regards the calling of a new pastor and obtaining a suitable supply pastor.
6. To deal with all problems and opportunities that arise within the congregations and parish.

Membership

The parish council shall consist of the pastor of the parish and the members of the duly elected councils of the parish congregations. Membership on the parish council shall begin at the same time as does the term to which they are elected.

Meetings

1. parish council meetings
 - a) The parish council usually will meet every other month, but shall meet at least quarterly.

Additional meetings shall be called at the request of the pastor, president of the parish council, or the council of any of the congregations. Fifty-one percent of the membership of the parish council shall constitute a quorum.

- b) The parish council shall hold a meeting within one week of the annual parish meeting to present the proposed budget for approval, elect parish officers, and act on any other parish business.
2. parish-wide meetings
 - a) The meeting to be held during the third full week of January shall be known as the annual meeting of the parish.
 - b) Notice of all parish meetings shall be given at the worship services on the preceding two consecutive Sundays or by mail to all voting members at least 10 days in advance of the date of the meeting.
 - c) Special parish meetings may be called by the pastor, the parish council, or shall be called at the written request of one tenth of the voting members. The call for each special meeting shall specify the purpose for which it is to be held and no other business shall be transacted.
 - d) All congregational voting members shall be eligible to vote in all parish meetings.
 - e) Any number of members present shall constitute a quorum.

Officers and Duties

1. The parish president and vice-president shall be elected from among the council members. The election shall normally take place at the parish council meeting preceding the annual parish meeting. A secretary and treasurer shall be elected at the same time, although it is not necessary for these officers to be elected council members. These officers shall serve a one-year term, beginning at the close of the annual parish meeting. All are eligible to be re-elected.
2. The president shall be chairperson of all parish council meetings and ex-officio member of all committees of the parish council.
3. The vice-president shall be chairperson of the parish council in the absence of the president. The vice-president also shall assume other such duties as requested by the president.
4. The secretary shall keep accurate minutes of all meetings of the parish council in a volume provided by the parish. These records shall be preserved permanently in the archives of the parish. The secretary shall also be responsible for all correspondence pertaining to the parish council.
5. The treasurer shall receive from the congregational treasurers of the parish all moneys for the parish council's use, keep an itemized account of receipts and expenditures, pay salaries, wages and all bills as provided in the annual budget. Bills above the budgeted amount in any category may be paid upon order of the parish council.

Committees

1. Members of the parish committees shall be appointed by the congregation councils before the annual parish meeting. Committee members serve a one-year term, and are eligible for re-election.
2. The president of the parish council may appoint other committees as may be necessary for the work and ministry of the parish.
3. The pastor shall be ex-officio member of all committees.
4. The chairperson of the standing committees shall rotate annually alphabetically. Parish One begins this rotation in 1998. The chairperson of each committee is responsible for making a report to be shared at the parish annual meeting.
5. The standing committees shall be:
 - a) Executive Committee. The committee shall consist of the parish council president, the vice-presidents from each congregation, and the pastor. This committee shall be responsible to act on matters not necessitating the action of the full parish council or items that need immediate action.
 - b) Audit Committee. This committee shall consist of one member from each congregation. This committee shall be responsible for the annual audit of the parish council treasurer's book and shall report the results of the audit at the annual parish meeting.
 - c) Budget Committee. This committee shall consist of one member from each congregation of the parish and the parish treasurer. It shall be responsible for presenting the proposed parish budget for the coming year to the parish council at the November meeting and deciding on the apportionment of the budget according to the active membership roll of each congregation.
 - d) Mutual Ministry Committee. This Committee is responsible for discussing relations between the Pastor and parish members. This committee also shall be responsible for discussing the ministry provided by our parish within the community and world. This committee shall consist of two members from each congregation of the parish. These members shall be nominated by the current Mutual Ministry Committee and appointed by the parish council. Members are appointed to two-year terms, with three members being appointed annually. Members may serve no more than three consecutive terms. The President of the parish is an ex-officio member.
 - e) Parish Picnic Committee. This committee shall consist of one member from each congregation of the parish. It shall be responsible for the planning and implementing of the annual parish picnic.
 - f) Parsonage Committee. This committee shall consist of one person from each congregation. The responsibility of this committee shall be to inspect the parsonage periodically, recommend needed repairs and renovations, and see that adequate insurance coverage is maintained. Upon approval of the parish council, it shall be this committee's responsibility to arrange for improvements and see that they are carried out.
 - g) Scholarship Committee. This committee shall consist of one member from each

congregation of the parish. It shall be responsible for awarding the scholarship funds according to the parish scholarship policy.

- h) Worship and Music Committee. This committee shall consist of two members from each congregation of the parish. It shall be responsible for the selection of hymns for worship and can be involved in the planning of special worship services. This committee could also be called upon to provide ideas and suggestions for altering existing worship services.

Constitutional Control

When duly adopted by the parish, this “Plan of Operation” shall govern the parish council in its actions, but it shall not supersede the constitutions of the member congregations, the synod, or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Specific Functions

1. Payment to the parish treasurer. Payments by the congregations toward the parish budget shall be arranged in monthly installments.
2. Pastoral vacancy procedures. When a pastoral vacancy occurs, the parish council shall meet with the proper officials of the synod and conference with regards to securing a new pastor and supplying the parish during the vacancy. The current synodical procedures for calling a pastor shall be followed.

General Spirit

It shall be the aim of the parish council to maintain a spirit of peace and harmony throughout the parish, to provoke the congregations in love to a wholesome rivalry in the doing of good works, and in all things, seek the greatest good of the whole parish while serving our Lord Jesus Christ.