Many dioceses in the United States have fewer active priests than parishes. Many more, looking down the road a few years, can predict that they will soon face the same situation, as priests retire and the newly ordained do not replace them. The leaders of these dioceses, the bishops and their advisors, confront difficult choices in their efforts to provide good ministry to their parishes.

George Wilson, S.J., an experienced church consultant, outlined the options for those facing this problem in a recent article in America. He laid out some “big options” that appear beyond a bishop’s authority to embrace: ordain married men, ordain women, bring resigned priests back to active ministry, allow temporary celibate service (say for a period of seven years). He implied that these options are for higher powers to decide.

Then Wilson listed some possible strategies for the immediate future: close parishes, appoint laypeople as the leaders of some parishes, import priests from foreign countries, have some parishes celebrate the Eucharist on days other than Sundays so that a priest could celebrate for several parishes during a week, cut back on the number of Masses in each parish, use the ritual for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest (“Word and Communion services”) more frequently.

The option of assigning one priest to pastor two or more nearby parishes (a choice Wilson did not include) seems to be the strategy most frequently employed today. Katarina Schuth’s recent book, Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes, states that as of the year 2005, 44 percent of all American Roman Rite parishes (9,109 out of a total of 20,668 parishes and missions) were being served by priests with more than one parish.

From the perspective of canon law, all these latter options are legitimate choices. From my point of view, the first and foremost concern is the parish community itself: which of these options best serves and preserves these communities of the Christian faithful?

Let us reflect on three of these difficult choices and try to evaluate them from the point of view of the Catholic people who make up these parish communities:

1) To close parishes, whether by suppression, union, or merger, is the most radical option and nearly impossible to undo. Still, it seems to be a reasonable avenue when the parishes are already moribund, that is, when the people who built them and were served

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by them have moved away or are now too few to support the parish. Entirely apart from the priest shortage, some parishes are no longer viable, and their closures, although painful to the remaining parishioners, seem to be justified.

Wise diocesan leaders pose such problems to parish representatives in the areas involved, fully inform them of the realities involved, and encourage them to work out the decisions themselves. It takes time, prayer, and patience, but the results of these “grassroots consultations” have been remarkable. “Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (see Rev 2 and 3, repeated six times). Such processes are ongoing in several dioceses.

(2) To entrust two or more neighboring parishes to one priest-pastor (newly permitted by canon 526.1 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law) is an easy-sounding option that is frequently attractive to bishops and their planners but often burdensome for the pastors. It is no simple task to serve as pastor to more than one community; each one is unique. If two parishes are close to one another, and it seems that they are headed toward some sort of merger eventually, then this option may be advisable. But what message does it send to the parishioners? Are they really well served by the pastor who has another flock or two to shepherd? How much of his attention can they expect to receive? Does it disvalue or downgrade each of the parishes involved? Can the pastor adequately care for each parish and represent each to the diocesan bishop and the other parishes of the diocesan communion?

(3) To entrust the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish to a non-priest (layperson, religious, or deacon) pastoral administrator is another new option (permitted by canon 517.2 of the Code when priests are lacking). These non-ordained parish leaders are not ordinary parishioners or glorified parish secretaries, but highly trained and experienced professional lay ministers. They often are given the entire pastoral care of the parish with the exception of those sacramental ministries reserved to ordained priests. They serve under the supervision, often distant, of a priest who has the faculties of a pastor (but who is not the pastor of the parish). This option of pastoral staffing has been utilized with success in several dioceses. A 2004 Report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate said that 566 parishes in the United States were entrusted to these non-ordained pastoral administrators, about 3 percent of total parishes. The parishes were usually smaller; they had an average of 401 households as over against 902 households in an average American parish.

One must ask how the choice of this staffing option affects the parish community. To lose their own priest-pastor is usually disappointing to the people, and it may send a message of diminished status to the parish. However, it does not sound a death knell. The parish does not feel abandoned or beyond hope. When the pastoral administrator proves to be a capable leader and the people bond with him or her, the result has been more than satisfactory. Active lay participation in parish life and activity has often improved. Of course, the parish must also be served by a priest for the celebration of the sacraments of Holy Eucharist, penance, and anointing of the sick.

Recently, to my surprise, several dioceses have quietly retreated from this third option and moved toward the second, assigning more and more parishes to pastors who already serve at least one parish. These have usually been in situations where a new diocesan bishop disagreed with the pastoral staffing strategy of his predecessor. But why?

I have actively sought to ascertain their reasons and have not been very successful so far. It does not seem to be a matter of finances—that the small parish cannot af-
ford the salary of the lay parish administrator. It does not seem to be a pattern of rejection of the non-ordained person or a lack of the quality of pastoral care they offer. It does not seem to be a gender issue; a majority of them are women, lay or religious, but they seem to be well accepted and report positive interactions with both their parishioners and the bishop.

From speculation and anecdotal evidence I surmise that the following are some of the reasons for this change in policy. The Congregation for the Clergy in Rome has issued instructions that seem to cast these pastoral administrators in a bad light, one that shows them to be rivals of priests or usurpers of their prerogatives. The Congregation feels that only the priest, who represents Christ as the head of the Mystical Body, can really serve as the pastor of a parish. Some bishops, for these reasons or others, put a very high value on the sacramental bond of the sacrament of orders, and hence greatly prefer a priest or deacon to a layperson as parish leader. Closely related to the sacramental bond is the promise of obedience; the ordained make a promise of obedience to the bishop at ordination. Other bishops feel that lay parish leaders give the impression over time that they are providing the “full care of souls” to the people, which office is reserved to those in priestly orders (canon 150). Finally, there is a sense that the Christian faithful share an abiding connection of loyalty to their priest-pastor, even if he is also the pastor of another parish some distance away. These are serious reasons, not readily dismissed.

Still, I am convinced that a diocesan policy that calls for priest-pastors of multiple parishes to the entire exclusion of lay parish administrators is mistaken for the following reasons:

• The arrangement devalues and jeopardizes the parish communities. It sends the message that they are no longer autonomous communities, but are on their way toward merger or closure. They no longer have their own pastoral leader.

• A diocese is a particular church that consists of a communion of local churches, usually parishes. The priest-pastor represents his two or several parishes to the bishop and to the other parishes of the diocesan communion of churches. Hence, the arrangement weakens slightly the connection between some of those parish communities and the bishop, and thus dilutes, at least to some degree, the diocesan communion.

• The arrangement creates a new level of local administration. The priest-pastor functions like a dean or a regional vicar in relation to the parishes wherein he does not reside. He is not the immediately present pastor, but a slightly distant authority figure. The “de facto parish leaders” are authorized by and report to him and not directly to the bishop; they function as his associates.

• It must be very difficult for anyone to really “pastor” more than one parish community at the same time, and trying to do so probably contributes to burnout unless one takes on the role of a slightly removed administrator of the other parishes (where he doesn’t reside).

The emerging patterns of parish ministry bear watching. They have the potential for reshaping the diocesan church as well as the local church.

References
