11 Ways to Boost Your Lay Ministry

Anyone who's been involved in lay ecclesial ministry for any length of time has accumulated a set of habits, shortcuts, disciplines, and methods that both ease our work and keep us anchored to our purpose in doing it. What I offer here is a miscellany from my own experience of this vocation of ours—a compound of whimsy, practicality, and occasional collisions with the Holy Spirit.

As this is being written, the COVID pandemic is raging, and much of life and ministry is being conducted in unusual ways. Most of this booklet will apply to both normal and crisis times, but there are also some specific suggestions for doing ministry during a pandemic.

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Build Your Networks—Plural!

A rich network of professional connections will keep you energized for ministry, provide you with a stream of fresh ideas, and give you a circle of peers for feedback, suggestions, and, when the going gets rough, emotional support. Networking is a part of ministry; it enriches the work that you do in your parish and serves the broader Church.

Some parishes, commendably, include networking in their ministry position descriptions, acknowledging that the needs of the parish can be better served by ministry staff members who are active in their respective professional associations and who collaborate with peers in other parishes and with diocesan, ecumenical, and interfaith initiatives.

So join the diocesan professional organization for your ministry area, and prioritize time for its meetings. If you are asked to take on additional responsibilities, such as serving on a board, get permission from your pastor. Serving in such a role is legitimate work for the Church and should be recognized as part of your job.

But do not limit yourself to networking with ministry professionals. Build a network of people engaged in a wide variety of secular professions and careers. This keeps you from getting stuck in a sort of ecclesial ghetto. It also enables you to tap a wide range of skill sets and experiences as you meet pastoral needs and build programs in your parish.

Make connections with the academic community, so that you can stay abreast of cutting-edge scholarship in your ministry field. You can get a lot of informal continuing edu-

cation this way. We are called to serve as translators, to make the Church's best thinking accessible and useful for our parishioners.

And connect with a sampling of people whose work has nothing to do with yours, to keep yourself anchored in the broader culture of your community.

PRAYER » *O God, keep me open to the richness of human connection in my work. Give me the humility to seek the wisdom of other workers in your vineyard and the generosity to make time for connection with them. And please let us have some fun together, to lighten both our hearts and our workloads.*

Let Volunteers Have Ownership of Their Ministries

My half-joking charge to any group of volunteers, when we start working together on a program, a committee, or some other parish effort, is that we can do whatever they decide to do, as long as it isn't illegal, immoral, or terribly expensive. This usually gets a few chuckles, but it also sets a tone: we're all baptized Christian adults, and I'm there merely in a midwife's role. They are the ones giving birth to the life of our community. Creativity generally ensues.

There will, of course, be parameters for our activity, set by the parish or by the nature of the task (a Bible study, a First Eucharist celebration, a sister-community relation-

ship with a local mosque...), and you will have some ideas of how to go about it. But you want to make sure, at the outset, that they know that this is *their* community and that you, as a staff member, are there to facilitate their full, conscious, and active participation.

So will the volunteer group do exactly what you would have done, in the same way you would have done it? Probably not. Will all aspects of the project be executed as skillfully as if you had done the tasks yourself? Maybe not. But the group may come up with better ideas and methods. More importantly, they'll really own the project, and they'll accomplish far more than you could have done on your own as a staff person.

PRAYER » *Loving God, thank you for these fine people, and for letting our lives intersect. Help me to bring out the best in them. Help me to be sensitive to the emerging dynamics of the group. Help me to get out of their way while still lending them my experience and guidance as needed.*

Accumulate a Cadre of Utility Players

This will probably take you at least a year after you arrive in a parish. You don't want to make the mistake of asking the same small group of people to do everything—that's a recipe for burned-out volunteers and stale or cliquish ministries. But you do need a short list of committed volunteers, mature, well-balanced, and reliable, with a fair amount of available time and a generosity of spirit.

These are the people you can call upon in a crunch when you need a volunteer on short notice or just can't seem to fill a role on some project. Nurture and mentor this cadre, and make sure they get to know each other. When they're on-site and working together, help them enjoy each other's company—there's room for playfulness and sociability in even the most serious of tasks. Find out what they most like doing, and make a point of slotting them into suitable roles. Watch for moments of introspection and reflection; these tend to occur naturally, as a team works on a project. One of your supportive gifts to your team is to be ready to turn these moments into "theology on the hoof," which is, in general, a better model for adult formation than trying to get people into classroom settings, though people need those opportunities too. In the moment, during your work together, you provide input and context and nudge people into developing, articulating, and implementing their own theological insights. Some people call this a "praxis" approach to theology. It has a deep history in the base ecclesial communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base*) that emerged in Central and South America in the latter half of the twentieth century, but you don't need a scholarly grasp of that chapter of Church history in order to implement it in your own parish.

PRAYER » *O God, bless these people. [Here, name them. If you have time, spend a moment praying specifically for each one.] Thank you for the delight of their presence in my life, for the gift of our covenant commitment to each other and to our [parish/school/diocese...].*

How to Deal with "Difficult" Volunteers

We've all encountered them. Sometimes they come forward and volunteer on their own. Sometimes we recruit them without knowing them well enough to realize what they are like. And every parish has a few people whom the entire staff recognizes as problematic volunteers. But they have made the parish the center of their lives, so the staff tries to figure out ways to accommodate them.

In dealing with difficult volunteers, we find ourselves trying to respond to conflicting imperatives. We have a responsibility to see that ministries are carried out well, for the sake of the whole community. We want all our volunteers to have a good experience while volunteering, and difficult volunteers can make things unpleasant for other volunteers. But those difficult volunteers are also members of our faith community, so we are concerned for their well-being and want to mentor them into fruitful participation in the life of the community. Church community is not an exclusive country club for useful, helpful, successful human beings who always see eye-to-eye.

Dealing with difficult volunteers can be one of the most exasperating aspects of ministry. But there are tactics and interior dispositions that can help.

Get to know your volunteers. Encourage your volunteer leaders to do the same with their teams. It is not a waste of time to chat with volunteers. Show up at funerals, keep track of family triumphs and tragedies, and remember significant events in their lives. If people feel a personal connection, it is far more likely that there can be a happy outcome when you have to address problems. It

also helps if you have made a habit of praying for your volunteers—among other things, this keeps *you* more open to God's grace in dealing with them and more humble in your responses to their human failings.

There are two major categories of difficult volunteers.

1. Volunteers with Serious Mental Illness

Churches can be magnets for seriously disturbed persons, who are often lonely and excluded from other social settings. If a volunteer's behavior and communications are so off-the-charts that it seems likely that she or he suffers from significant mental illness, we need to assess whether this person might pose a risk of doing serious harm to self or to others.

If that is the case, then we have little choice but to bar this person from volunteering. It may even become necessary to involve law enforcement or the courts. We should also do what we can to encourage and assist the person to obtain medical help.

But if a person with serious mental illness is not a danger to himself or herself or to others, parish staff may be able to identify duties that are compatible with the person's limitations. Taxing as it can be to work with such persons, we recognize that they are ill, with a diminished or nonexistent moral responsibility for their bad behavior, and that a church might be one of the few places where the human community is willing to make room for them. Inclusion can even be healing.