

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.

*Listening to the Spirit:
Bishops and Parish Life Coordinators*

**A Report for the Emerging Models
of Pastoral Leadership Project**



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Mary L. Gautier, Ph.D.
Tricia C. Bruce, Ph.D.
Mary E. Bendyna, RSM, Ph.D.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Major Findings.....	2
Introduction and Methodology	4
Focus Group Research	5
Organization of this Report.....	6
Experience with Parish Life Coordinators	7
General Reactions of Bishops to Parish Life Coordinators	7
Defining the Role of the Parish Life Coordinator.....	9
Selecting a Parish Life Coordinator	11
Parish Life Coordinators’ Pastoral and Education Background	11
Financial Challenges to Bringing in Parish Life Coordinators	14
PLCs and Parish Life	16
Bringing a Parish Life Coordinator into a Parish.....	16
Parishioner Response to Parish Life Coordinators	18
Training and Support for Parish Life Coordinators	20
Evaluation of Parish Life Coordinators	22
Theological Issues with the Role of Parish Life Coordinator	24
Authorization for Ministry	25
Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest	26
Need for Further Theological Development	28

Parish Life Coordinators and Clergy	30
Deacons as Parish Life Coordinators.....	30
Priests and Parish Life Coordinators.....	32
Bishops and Parish Life Coordinators	36
Parish Life Coordinators in the Future	39
The Temporary Nature of Parish Life Coordinators.....	39
Encouraging Vocations.....	41
Planning for the Future	42
Keys to Success.....	46
Appendix: Focus Group Protocol	47

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Executive Summary

In October 2005, the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project at the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University to conduct a series of focus groups with U.S. bishops to explore theological issues related to parish life coordinators (PLCs). The focus groups invited Bishops to reflect on the lived realities of Canon 517.2, which reads as follows:

If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care. c.517.2

In collaboration with the Emerging Models project director, CARA designed a protocol to guide the focus group discussions.

The purpose of these focus groups was to learn from bishops the theological issues related to appointing parish life coordinators. Findings will be used by the Emerging Models project in two symposia of theologians, pastoral leaders, and researchers to discuss best practices for parish life coordinators and sacramental ministers. The results of the study will be published at the conclusion of the project.

The focus group protocol (see Appendix I) was designed to explore the following:

- The theology of ministry that informs the decision to appoint parish life coordinators and the evolution of thought about this area of ministry among bishops
- The selection, formation, support, and evaluation of parish life coordinators as well as advice and recommendations from bishops who have experience with parish life coordinators
- The implications of this model for parish ministry, the connection between a parish community and the bishop, and the process of assessing parish

vitality and how that factors into the decision to appoint parish life coordinators

CARA conducted six focus groups between October 2006 and April 2007 in the following five locations:

- Santa Fe Province, Santa Fe, New Mexico, October 3, 2006
- Milwaukee Province, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 12, 2006
- Region II, New York, New York (two groups), January 29, 2007
- Louisville Province, Louisville, Kentucky, March 1, 2007
- Region VIII, St. Paul, Minnesota, April 25, 2007

Each focus group included between five and 12 bishops from the province or region. All were facilitated by the same CARA researcher, with the exception of New York, where one of the two focus groups was conducted by a second CARA researcher. Focus groups lasted an average of one hour and 15 minutes. Each group was recorded digitally and later transcribed. Each group was invited to include a theologian of their choice, for the purpose of providing clarification where needed. The Emerging Models project also provided a theologian for all but two of the focus groups. This report analyzes the responses of the 45 participating bishops.

Major Findings

- While not all participating bishops have direct experience with parish life coordinators or c.517.2 parishes, nearly all are familiar with the concept. Overall, bishops report a positive assessment of their experience with PLCs. Most, however, identify this as a less-than-ideal solution to the priest shortage, describing PLCs as a temporary measure until priests can be assigned as pastors.
- Many bishops emphasize the importance of having a written job description and clear expectations for parish life coordinators to eliminate confusion around leadership roles. Not all, however, say that their diocese has a comprehensive job description in place.
- In selecting parish life coordinators, bishops typically stress the need for both graduate work and pastoral experience. Women religious were among the first to be selected, largely because of their education and pastoral experience, but they are decreasing in availability. Some bishops express a preference for deacons, reasoning that their theological training, ordination, and ability to take on more sacramental roles make deacons better suited than others to be a PLC. Other bishops consider pastoral experience more important than ordination and some describe problems they have experienced in assigning a deacon as PLC. Bishops also describe the financial challenges for a parish with a parish life coordinator.

- Bishops describe generally positive reactions among parishioners to bringing in a parish life coordinator. Some say that PLCs bring new life to parishes and new perspectives on ministry. A few bishops admit their own surprise at how well-received parish life coordinators are in parishes. There are also tensions, however, including fear among parishioners that a PLC means the parish will soon close and questions regarding the role of lay persons in ministry.
- Parish life coordinators typically go through an initial training period upon entering a parish and have opportunities for ongoing formation. The bishops expressed differing opinions regarding PLC participation in clergy meetings. Many priests have told bishops that they need time to gather as priests. Consequently, some bishops have decided to limit or exclude PLC participation in clergy convocations, retreats, or workshops, finding alternative means of incorporating them into diocesan planning and the more business-oriented aspects of clergy meetings.
- Bishops raise several theological issues that have to do with the role of parish life coordinator. Some express concern that PLCs recognize that their ministry comes from their Baptism. Others describe some theological issues concerning authorization for ministry. Several worry that confusion has emerged around the relationship between the PLC and the canonical pastor and in decisions regarding Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. Some bishops also express concern that Catholics may not be theologically prepared to understand the concept of the parish life coordinator.
- Participating bishops described some tension between PLCs and canonical pastors, along with the potential for blurring lines between the ordained and non-ordained. Conflict may arise over who is responsible for preaching and pastoral care. Bishops say that they must take care to explain to parish life coordinators that their role is interim in nature; PLCs must be prepared for the possibility of being replaced by a priest should one become available.
- In planning for the future, the bishops tend to emphasize the need to continually pray for and encourage vocations. Most recognize that they will likely need to expand their PLC and lay ministry programs in order to compensate for a decreasing number of priests. A few suggest creating more training programs for lay ministry and PLCs such that when a need arises, bishops may select from an already well-formed group ready for parish leadership.
- Keys to success communicated by bishops include maintaining mutual respect, open channels of communication, clear expectations and boundaries, a careful selection process, and a proper understanding of the role of the laity and the clergy.

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Introduction and Methodology

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Focus Group Research

A focus group is a small gathering of about eight to 12 people to talk about a particular topic in some detail. A protocol, not a questionnaire, is used. The purpose of the protocol is to set out major issues and guide the flow of conversation, using a variety of probes as necessary. Unlike survey research, which requires consistency every time an instrument is used, a focus group demands flexibility. Thus, not all the probes or other specific questions on a protocol are necessarily asked in a specific focus group experience. Rather, the protocol serves as a starting point; the experience of each focus group varies considerably depending on the issues and experiences surfaced in a particular group.

Following standard focus group procedures, discussions with bishops were structured but not rigid, allowing participants to create a dynamic that permitted them to discuss what they considered the most important points in each of the major topic areas. While focus groups are excellent tools for this purpose, they cannot measure the frequency or likelihood of certain practices or behaviors, nor do they measure a particular set of characteristics or attitudes in a population.

Organization of this Report

The sections that follow summarize major themes that emerged during the six focus group discussions with U.S. bishops regarding parish life coordinators. Each section contains italicized text from individual focus group participants to illustrate specific instances of common themes. Throughout the report, quotes are identified with a particular focus group location, but the speaker remains anonymous. Since they are reproduced verbatim from the actual discussions (with ellipses in some cases to focus the quoted material on the issue at hand), they have the qualities of ordinary conversation rather than formal, written text. To understand the context of any individual quote or to read it in its entirety, refer to the verbatim transcripts in Appendix II.

The following major discussion topics are summarized in this report: bishops' experience with parish life coordinators, elements related to selecting a parish life coordinator, PLCs and parish life, parish life coordinators and clergy, and parish life coordinators in the future. Several sub-topic areas are reported within each of these broader sections.

Experience with Parish Life Coordinators

Each of the six focus groups began with each participant sharing his own arch/diocesan experience with parish life coordinators. The majority of participating bishops did have some (usually limited) experience with c.517.2 parishes. Only a few bishops had no c.517.2 parishes and even fewer had no experience with PLCs.

General Reactions of Bishops to Parish Life Coordinators

While not all participating bishops had direct experience with PLCs or c.517.2 parishes, nearly all were familiar with the concept. Reactions to the idea were therefore influenced by both experience and perception. Responses to the question regarding experience with PLCs also provides a measure of bishops' overall sensibility toward the idea of parish life coordinators and its potential necessity in dioceses. Generally speaking – particularly in the case of those bishops with direct experience with PLCs – focus group participants give a positive assessment to having parish life coordinators. These comments from participating bishops relay this support:

My general experience is a very positive one. (Louisville Province)

I think where they had been successful – this is at one place anyway – I think they'd just as soon have a parish director always. They're that effective, if you will. (Milwaukee Province)

Well, we've had where sisters have left and lay people have come in. The parish council says "we want another one of those lay people who can say Mass" and they request [to have] a parish director rather than a priest. (Region VIII)

The deacons are very good, very qualified. A couple people now who are pastoral coordinators or whatever, have more business sense. So they've got a lot of experience before they take the job of deacon. And they're very, very cooperative. I mean it doesn't always mean that they're going to be cooperative, but... (Region II – 1)

I would say that, over the years, it has been a very positive experience for us. (Region II – 2)

Our experience has been that it's been a very positive thing. (Santa Fe Province)

I think some of the fears that are present about it are really not realized in most instances, and probably not in any greater proportion than the pain that comes when a priest does not do well in ministry and causes division in a parish. So I think it's an interim solution to a situation where we do not have sufficient priest

pastors. And it has worked, I think, quite well overall. Nothing's perfect. (Santa Fe Province)

Not all bishops agree that bringing in parish life coordinators is a good solution to the shortage of priests. One focus group participant shares this feeling:

I don't think, from what I've heard from other places, that there's a lot of positive outputs from this. That doesn't say that there are or there aren't. They may be. ...Formation of the laity is what's lacking... We're confusing who's ordained, who's not ordained, what the proper roles are. So I would be very cautious in anything we would do until we really have a laity that's educated and understand their life and their major role in the church. (Region II – 1)

Many bishops are generally supportive of the idea but also convey their preference for having priests in these roles. A clear hesitancy emerges to adopt this less-than-ideal solution to the priest shortage. Some bishops indicate that they have no present intention to hire parish life coordinators to manage parishes.

[M]y personal approach to it has never been that it was the ideal situation. (Region VIII)

Some of them that I've seen have been excellent and some have caused a lot of problems. The ones who have been excellent, though, really did have this heart and soul [of the] Church; they were the ones to take the lead in praying for vocations and in promoting vocations to the priesthood. But I would need to see that in someone to whom I would entrust this. (Milwaukee Province)

I think some of us are in a position where we have no choice; we have to go into it. (Region VIII)

[I]t's a major commitment. And many people – lay people certainly – are not willing to do this; it seems very difficult. I think the religious are willing but they're aging quicker than the priests... [T]he issue of leadership should come from the laity and not just top-down, but somewhere there's a meeting point. So really, we don't see in sort of the near future giving parishes to parish life coordinators at this point. (Region II – 1)

The ideal would [be to] have a good priest. But there is a choice between having a local parish life coordinator vis-à-vis a foreign priest, especially one who comes from overseas. Then I would say it might be a toss up. (Santa Fe Province)

Defining the Role of the Parish Life Coordinator

Another area of discussion within focus groups related to the specific role of the parish life coordinator, including expectations, standards, and evaluation. Responses varied as to the level of formality around a parish life coordinator's job description, as suggested by these bishops:

We need to be able to solidify expectations, who's eligible and what needs to happen, and once a person comes in, what exactly are the responsibilities of each – of the priest moderator, sacramental minister, and so on. So that's all delineated here. And we're still in the process of working through this. (Milwaukee Province)

At the beginning, it really was difficult. We just didn't have the experience; we didn't do job descriptions; expectations, that kind of thing; goals, etc. We really should have. (Santa Fe Province)

One of the things that we tried to clarify was to have clear job descriptions in place for everybody who was a parish life coordinator. (Santa Fe Province)

[W]e have a policy in our manual about exactly what the job is – the job description and so forth... And every year there's a contract signed. (Santa Fe Province)

There's a job description; there's a list of responsibilities and delegations; when they're canonically needed. We're in the process of reworking those. (Region VIII)

We did have a parish director handbook. (Milwaukee Province)

Many bishops emphasized the importance of having a clear job description and expectations for parish life coordinators so as to eliminate confusion around leadership roles. A few gave examples of expectations their diocese has laid out for their PLCs:

...to be good administrators; to be knowledgeable about how a parish is actually run; and also that they don't let the parish go into a congregational mindset. Because there's no priest, they may feel that they don't have to be as connected as they were before with the bishop and with the diocese. ...I would expect them to be a person that sets a good example and who is in a good marriage, if they're married, and they also have a good theological base as much as possible. Sometimes they don't. But you have to work at it. (Santa Fe Province)

The parish life coordinator is in charge of the day-to-day operations of the parish, and he or she makes arrangements for the sacramental ministry to take place as well as they can. (Santa Fe Province)

My own personal expectation of it is that when a person would be appointed as a parish director, that they see that they've the same kind of responsibility that a pastor would have. Namely, that he or she has to reflect the mind and heart of the Church. And so the fact of it is that it's an assignment that coming from the bishop for the care of a particular faith community. (Milwaukee Province)

Selecting a Parish Life Coordinator

In selecting a parish life coordinator, bishops spoke of a number of influential factors including the pastoral and educational background of potential candidates, whether there is an underlying preference for deacons, and the financial challenge posed to parishes looking to bring in a PLC. Differences in PLC selection practices also differ between rural and urban environments, and have changed over time with the decreasing availability of women religious.

Parish Life Coordinators' Pastoral and Educational Background

Bishops in the six focus groups also discussed the pastoral and educational background of their parish life coordinators, including the expectations they have when selecting a new PLC. In general, they look for a combination of administrative and pastoral capabilities and, in some cases, an academic degree related to pastoral administration or theology.

Several bishops discussed what they look for in a PLC in terms of pastoral sensitivity and experience.

I'm looking for someone who will be collaborative; who will enable the gifts of the parishioners. It's not a one-person show; who will call forth the baptismal gifts of the community; who will support diocesan initiatives; who understands the relationship between the local community and the diocesan church. Certainly someone who, in their own teaching, will represent the Church's solid – the truths of the Church and doesn't have some agenda or an axe to grind. You can't also ways discern that in an interview, but I will ask them if you disagree with certain teachings of the Church, how will you present that in your teaching or in your guidance. (Louisville Province)

A pastoral heart and generosity in terms of service. And then some experience. It's not just somebody who is coming in cold; it's somebody who has a track record. (Milwaukee Province)

Pastoral experience, education, psychological testing. The same thing we do for seminarians basically. (Region II – 2)

You would obviously look for an administrative capability, but we're pretty blunt in saying that the parish director is not synonymous with business manager. So you shouldn't look for more administrative skills in a potential parish director as you would in a priest pastor. (Milwaukee Province)

We look for someone who can do the day-to-day business of the parish – that all-embracing pastoral business and other kind of business of the parish. (Louisville Province)

The persons serving in these roles generally are very generous. They really love the Church. [They have] various amounts of formation, background, and understanding of the Church’s teaching on sacraments and ecclesiology. (Santa Fe Province)

Some bishops in areas that have been using PLCs for a number of years have developed a pool of potential candidates from among existing parish leadership. A few even help form these leaders by subsidizing their ministry formation. Other bishops, in areas that are not yet using PLCs, recognize the significance of emerging lay leadership in their diocese.

We have a criteria that we have developed that you have to have certain academic and pastoral experience before you can be designated a parish life coordinator. So we are developing a pool of people that initially come to us for the lay ministry formation program or they don’t necessarily have to go to that. (Region II – 2)

We have a list of people we want to suggest for this kind of post, and the kind of additional training they need – each one – for his or her responsibilities. And then we often pay for that. But there were a lot of people that stood out to us right away. We want – we’d love to get this one when he retires. We’ve love to get him. And those of the ones that you select, that’s just wonderful. (Louisville Province)

I think there are many great stories of emerging lay leadership... the weekend of the Rite of Election, and in our diocese we end up having four of them on one weekend, is the opportunity to rub shoulders, not just with the priests, but with emerging lay leadership. And sometimes the most enthusiastic is the smallest parish... And the more remote the parish, often the more involved, which I think was a great gift. So I think that there are touchstones within the life of a bishop in which he pastorally gets connected to not only the priest pastors, but also the lay leadership... [T]here’s a number of days in which we touch base with who you might call the emerging lay leadership. Even though, in our diocese, none of them is in that canon [517.2]. (Louisville Province)

We are planning for emerging lay leadership and for developing lay leadership. And, perhaps, should we ever find ourselves in a position in which we would – the need to appoint someone – and especially if that person were to come from the parish itself, there would be leadership among the laity available. (Louisville Province)

And so one of the questions that we wrestled with is how do we develop a list of potential parish life coordinators who are well-formed, who've got the theological background, perhaps the certification, if that's the right word – something similar to that – but it's not something – we need to develop a group of, for example, deacons, religious or lay people, who are ready for when the diocese will need them. We don't have such a list at the moment. So we're kind of behind the eight ball in terms of, all of a sudden, we face a crisis situation. And, as a diocese, we don't know where to turn to begin the process. The other part of it is preparing our parishes for that reality, because it's coming. (Region VIII)

Beyond pastoral experience, many bishops say that they also value relevant academic degrees. While a graduate degree is a requirement for many PLC positions, several bishops added that extensive pastoral experience can make up for what a candidate may not have achieved through a formal degree.

We require at least a Master's degree in theology or divinity or whatever you want to call it – academically. And there's some criteria that would be met, which doesn't sit well with the deacons, because the deacons say they would like to be considered first as parish directors. (Milwaukee Province)

Part of our requirements is a Master's in religious studies or theology or some aspect of the theological disciplines. (Region VIII)

You have to have a Master's degree in either pastoral theology or pastoral ministry. You would have to have some years of experience in working in a parish as a coordinator or administrator, social service outreach worker, so forth. So it would be a combination of academic and practical experience. (Region II – 2)

We have one woman – religious – who came and didn't have a lot of degrees; she had a lot of experience with religious life and schools and all that, and she didn't last. (Milwaukee Province)

Master's degrees are normative because those are the people who are currently in the positions that we have. And of our eleven deacons this coming year, ten out of the eleven have Master's degrees. So they are very well-trained. But when I say that that's a total requirement, it depends upon the experience of the individual. If the person is 30 years of religious life and 30 years of experience and there is this vast number – has basically a B.A. plus credits, I wouldn't necessarily think that a Master's would be required. (Milwaukee Province)

Some bishops spoke of how well-suited women religious often are for the position, though declining in numbers and availability:

When I arrived in 2001, when every time we applied – we advertised – for pastoral administrators, we’ve had dozens of applications. Today when we apply, we get one or two. And the majority are pastoral administrators who have had women religious and obviously they are getting older and there’s fewer of them to do this kind of work. We’ve had a couple of deacons, but mainly now it seems that lay men and lay women are applying and coming. (Region VIII)

We have an abundance of well-trained capable women who, at the age of 70, are looking at career number five. And would think nothing of it to walk into a parish and begin. And with plenty of experience for it also. And now those are the best matches I have to tell you. I guess because sister has stood in the front of the classroom that it works so well. (Louisville Province)

Financial Challenges to Bringing in Parish Life Coordinators

A significant consideration in bringing in parish life coordinators is the financial constraints of parishes. Smaller parishes and the increasing prevalence of lay PLCs make financial considerations an especially difficult hurdle in appointing parish life coordinators, as several bishops explain.

Our greatest problem in the little small places is money. There just isn’t the money there to have the kind of staff that they should have in order to grow. (Louisville Province)

I’m having trouble placing priests into parishes as associate pastors. And the excuse is we can’t afford it; we’ve got so many lay people hired; sorry. The last couple that I actually put into a parish situation, the diocese picked up the tab. And that’s a little hard. (Milwaukee Province)

There’s isn’t money for these people that’s hired, which is causing a lot of consternation among the women religious especially. Sisters’ salaries are higher than the priests at this point, in our region. They can’t be hired. There’s no money there. So then we’re looking for ways they want to serve in parishes; I’m working with them. (Region II – 1)

A number of our rural parishes are so small that they could not afford to hire a person who wants to make a livelihood by being a parish life coordinator. One individual parish in our diocese could not hire anybody, any more than they could hire one priest. They have to be willing to have two or three places in order to get a salary if they want to, unless they wanted to do something part-time. Just animate the community as best they could. (Region II – 1)

[I]n this new pastoral life administrator person, that was another big tension. Financial. We're burdened now with two salaries. How can you do this to us? (Santa Fe Province)

They can afford to either pay the parish life coordinator or the priest, but they can't afford both. And, in some cases, we've had a community that isn't even able to pay a mileage rate for a priest or even a deacon to travel to those places. (Santa Fe Province)

[T]hey're going to have to get a fairly decent salary in order to be able to do that. Is that then part of our complication? That you've experienced – that you would like to have parish coordinators, but they can't afford them – parishes can't afford them. Maybe because they're too small. And if they're larger parishes, would you necessarily look to the priests to be able to fill that before you would fill it for smaller parishes? (Region VIII)

I think part of the problem was that there were so many sisters there before that the sisters had health insurance and retirement and all those sorts of things with their communities. The more lay people we get in, and we didn't have the coverage, they had go out and get their own. (Region VIII)

PLCs and Parish Life

Bishops also described particular challenges and experiences related to how parish life coordinators are integrated into parish life, received by parishioners, and provided with training and ongoing support. They discussed how parish life coordinators are evaluated in their ministry.

Bringing a Parish Life Coordinator into a Parish

Another area of discussion among the bishops was the process of appointing and bringing a parish life coordinator into a parish that has not had one before. Bishops commonly describe some apprehension on the part of parishioners, but a gradual process of preparation and adjustment usually helps to ease this.

When there's an opening, it begins with the parish. Our Vicar General assists the parish in doing some self-study. We advertise then through the diocese because ultimately it is an assignment; it's a hire by the diocese and it's an assignment by the bishop. So they'll come down with a few candidates and ultimately the parish and its search committee and pastoral council usually – some of our parishes are so small that the whole parish meets and they have a town hall meeting rather than a senate-type parish council. So they'll make a choice and then I finally interview the person. And certainly I'm looking for someone ideally that has pastoral experience, of course. (Louisville Province)

In those parishes the transitions were announced well in advance; the people understood why the person was leaving; and they were all a part of the transition and selecting even the replacement. (Louisville Province)

And then when the openings come, our vicar for clergy and the chancellor meets with the parish and tells them they're getting a parish life director and then we have some education about what that means. There's always some apprehension, but less so now than there was initially because there's so many models that you realize that life can go on and it doesn't mean that the end of your togetherness is a faith community. (Region II – 2)

If it's a parish life director, there is an interviewing process. And the parish council does have the opportunity to – well, they have the opportunity to meet with the candidate or candidates and to give their recommendation. They don't have the final say, because ultimately the parish life director is appointed by the bishop. But there is more of a collaborative model with the parish life director than there is with one of pastors. (Region II – 2)

Another thing that helps is a parish visit by the bishop, preferably before the change takes place, but some time around the time the transition has taken place.

And so you do an evaluation of where the parish is: all of the stats and all kinds of things. They do that to reassure them they're going to have the sacraments and the bishop is going to pay more careful attention to them. (Santa Fe Province)

I could see the advantage of having parish retreats for the whole parish. Go through an exercise that would allow them to understand the parish of Vatican II – the contemporary parish. All the theology that's connected with it. I have an idea that people are still thinking of the parish back there when it was stressing devotions and the Latin, etc. And where the priests did everything for everybody. And maybe if they did an exercise of trends and challenges. ...Go through that kind of exercise and they will be led to understand the parish of Vatican II. Because it is different, especially with the participation of the laity: with the strong emphasis of the participation of the laity on the life of the Church. (Santa Fe Province)

A few bishops highlighted differences between bringing a parish life coordinator into a rural parish and bringing one into an urban parish. While many PLCs are currently in rural parishes, they are beginning to be assigned to urban parishes as well. This has led to new considerations in helping parishes transition from a resident priest pastor to a PLC, while also increasing a positive perception of parish life coordinators.

Initially, in fact, until fairly recently, most of these parish life coordinators were in the rural areas of the diocese. And I think that, in the general perception, especially among the presbyterate and women religious in the diocese, it was 'well, this is only for small places, but it's not for large places.' But more recently, some of the larger parishes now in our dioceses have parish life coordinators. And so I think that, in itself, has kind of upgraded the esteem in which the parish life coordinators, because they're just not for the so-called tiny parishes. But some of our city and suburban parishes have them as well. (Region II – 2)

We have pastoral administrators in the inner city and suburban parishes. The only place we haven't had a pastoral administration is in what I would call our posh suburban parishes. And, as I think about it here, it surprises me I haven't been challenged on that. I sort of challenge myself about it, to be honest with you. If we're really serious about that, some of these extraordinarily gifted pastoral leaders ought to be in some of those parishes, too. (Region II – 2)

The other tension we have is that it is in some ways easy to get sacramental ministers in urban settings. It's terribly difficult to get it in the remote regions which is where it's difficult to get a pastor. And so we're torn – where do find a place for the pastoral life coordinator, because it's easier in a city, but the needs are much greater in the rural areas. (Santa Fe Province)

Parishioner Response to Parish Life Coordinators

Bishops described generally positive reactions among parishioners to bringing in a parish life coordinator. Some describe PLCs bringing new life to parishes and new perspectives on ministry. A few admit surprise at how well-received parish life coordinators are in parishes. There are also tensions, however, including fear of closure and new questions regarding the role of lay persons in ministry.

I've got one in two black parishes now, where he will be administrator and a white priest is the sacramental moderator. This has been so successful with the black community. Having one of their own as the leader has given a vitality to them that I never thought would be possible, because they're mostly poor urban black parishes. (Louisville Province)

Both parishes were afraid they were going to close and we weren't going to send anybody, which is typical I think. So they were happy to get someone. (Louisville Province)

But the people in the parish will say 'why don't you ordain them?' So it raises the issue of women priests. And then others will say 'How come they cannot do as much as deacons?' (Milwaukee Province)

Our people, with rare exceptions, have been remarkably receptive of such individuals. I think, especially when it's a first time for a pastoral administrator, there's always a certain element in the parish that's concerned, naturally. What's this going to be like? And it won't be the same. And it really isn't. But more often than not, when the time comes for the pastoral administrator to move on, they're very sad about that. (Region II – 2)

I think our people have a new perspective on the ministry of the Church and who offers that minister or makes it available to them on a day-to-day basis. I think it's upped people's appreciation of ordained ministry, because they're aware that the ministry to be ordained is not available to them in quite the same way as it was in earlier years. (Region II – 2)

I think initially the thought was if you've got a parish life director, it was the first step toward closing. Now they see that that's not the case. (Region II – 2)

I think that any time they were not going to get an ordained priest as a pastor, which I think, still remains the ideal, there is some disappointment. And initially, there was some feeling of being maybe a second-class parish because you didn't have a resident pastor. But I think through the years, with the experience that we've had, people see how they're being served and still have the priest for the Eucharist at certainly on weekends and often during the week. That has taken that edge off, if you will. (Region II – 2)

They have also been well served sacramentally, so they have felt that their sacramental life has continued and Sister has done much of the other ministry so well in the parish that they have nothing but strong support for her. (Santa Fe Province)

The people respond well, as long as they have their Sunday priest. (Santa Fe Province)

[I]n both instances, and it's based on both the formation and the people who are the parish life coordinators, it's been most successful and well-received by the people. (Region VIII)

Our experience of a lay person – lay woman – being a parish life coordinator is based on the fact that that woman was on the parish staff previously when there had been a resident pastor. So there were many years in which she was very involved in the life, to the ministry, and religious education in the parish, and the people of the parish knew her; they knew the quantity of her work and her ministry. And I think that made a very important possibility for her being received in the parish as parish life coordinator. (Region VIII)

A few bishops describe instances where some parishioners continue to resist the change in leadership structure, or where the PLC is ultimately not a successful fit with the parish:

[One deacon/PLC] relished the idea of being in a parish all the time and saw himself as being capable of administering the life of parish. And that's where the difficulty has occurred, because he does a lot of what some of the three or four of the families had done previously. And that's created some resentment on their part toward him. (Louisville Province)

The other current pastoral life coordinator we have is new. She's been there now – this is her second year. The first year was terribly difficult. It's a smaller, more rural community. People were very angry that they weren't getting a priest. It was nothing against her, but they felt this was something that they really felt slighted. I'd say after a year and a half that feeling is changing to some extent. (Santa Fe Province)

We tried once to have a married couple both involved in running the parish. It did not work out. It was okay for the man, but the people would not accept the woman as a minister rather than as somebody – kind of a housekeeper. She wanted to minister but they wanted her to cut the grass, etc. Many examples like that. So they finally called it quits. It just didn't work out. (Region VIII)

Tensions also arise among parishioners who feel slighted that their parish must be the one without a pastor, bringing their frequent requests for a regular priest to the bishop. There is also occasional resentment among active lay parish ministers that their work is now being taken over by someone else.

A very small group in the parish continue to ask for a priest. They want their own priest. (Santa Fe Province)

There are regular complaints that ‘this has to happen to us;’ ‘Why didn’t you include us in that transition time?’ (Louisville Province)

All five of them at one time or another in the past 40 years, asked me for a priest. ‘When can we get a priest?’ And it’s not reasonable in a couple of the places. Some of the places are growing and we’d consider it, but we have Mass in all the places. (Louisville Province)

Training and Support for Parish Life Coordinators

Several bishops mention challenges in providing adequate training and ongoing support for their parish life coordinators. Most describe a relatively short initial training period along with occasional opportunities for continued formation.

You can’t train them enough. We’ve been lucky that we’ve gotten scholarships for the National Pastoral Life Center Workshops on administering parishes. (Santa Fe Province)

Part of the problem is we haven’t had good training for our pastoral life coordinators. (Santa Fe Province)

There would be an expectation similar to that of a pastor that they would do a retreat, and that’s part of their compensation, and that they would do a certain number of days of continuing formation. (Milwaukee Province)

One of ours recently went to a CPE. Encounter. That whole thing... But we haven’t had anything formally. (Milwaukee Province)

The one who does our lay ministry formation program, she meets with them and the head of the planning office three or four times a year just to serve as a sounding board to for the to help them with the issue they’re facing. (Region II – 2)

[W]hen we started it, we had a training program. Two weeks training for those who were considering the possibility of being a parish life coordinator. (Santa Fe Province)

The basic formation process is still there and still accepting people. What we've kind of put the brakes on is sending them on for a Master's degree unless we see someplace where they can really be hired. If we're going to pay for it, we'd like to have our investment pay off. (Region II – 1)

I'm looking at a parish director as almost the sub-set of lay ecclesial ministry. And that's the focus: to make sure you've got a real, solidly trained and formed body there, from which you can draw some parish directors. (Milwaukee Province)

[W]e do not have any Catholic colleges or universities, all of ours have come from outside. And so the learning curve is kind of high. We're a very rural diocese and many people come from the bigger cities and everything, and so it takes a bit of an adjustment to understand the people and to get into the small town and that sort of thing. (Region VIII)

One area of ongoing support and formation that has led to some conflict is PLC participation in clergy meetings. Bishops differ in their opinion as to whether or not parish life coordinators should participate in clergy meetings. Most maintain that at least a portion of these meetings should be open only to priests, so as to preserve the unity of the presbyterate. Priests have expressed their hesitancy to invite PLCs when they already have limited time together themselves. Consequently, some bishops have decided to exclude PLCs entirely from clergy workshops, finding alternative means of incorporating them into diocesan planning and the more business-oriented aspects of parish life.

Our coordinators come to the deanery meetings, but not to the priest days, like our ongoing formation, our convocations. (Louisville Province)

They attend our deanery meetings. But when we have clergy workshops or convocation, it is just our priests or priests and deacons. But they do receive – we have no distinction – we have a monthly news notes that goes out electronically and a few copies are mailed out. And any correspondence, the parish life coordinators would be included in. (Louisville Province)

I think for a few years we had some coming to our biannual meetings of the priests. And there was some reluctance on the part of priests because they wanted to talk about things and feel free to talk about certain things and certain issues. (Region VIII)

This month is the first time that we've invited [PLCs] to a clergy gathering and continuing education. First time. We'll see what happens. (Milwaukee Province)

In my diocese, they come to everything. We only have two clergy meetings during the year they don't come to. One is the presbytery day, and the other is the retreat – priest retreat. But everything else, they come to. (Region VIII)

They don't have to come to clergy meetings. (Region VIII)

I invite them to some of our clergy gatherings like we have a three-day convocation. And they're invited at least to the final day so that they can be a part of the pastoral issues that we're talking about. (Region VIII)

All of the parish life coordinators come when we have a meeting of the priests, particularly pastors, because they're, in effect, doing the work of a pastor, even though they're not technically and canonically a pastor. So that they are connected. (Santa Fe Province)

Evaluation of Parish Life Coordinators

A number of bishops said that they do not do a formal, scheduled evaluation of their parish life coordinators. Others describe some type of PLC evaluation, varying in its formality and regularity. Examples are included below.

There is an evaluation that's done by the parish priest of the parish life coordinator. And the parish life coordinator evaluates the parish priest. (Louisville Province)

There are certain things handed out to a select number – five or ten people in the parish. And those are sent into the vicar general. So there is an annual review of performance I guess you might say. But long before you get those results, you've probably heard that something is amiss. So usually there are no surprises. They're always usually very positive because you are well aware when there are places that need oil applied. (Louisville Province)

We would evaluate a parish life coordinator like we do a pastor. In other words, is the parish prospering? Is it thriving? Are they doing evangelization? Is anything going on? If nothing's going on, then the parish is falling apart. (Louisville Province)

You get an overload of information from a variety of the people: the staff or coordinator and other people. Where we're probably the weakest is to evaluate the staffing of those parishes. And a lot of that has to do with finance. (Louisville Province)

We have an annual evaluation that a member of the priest personnel board does with the parish life coordinator. And that report then comes to me. (Region VIII)

We had a self-evaluation tool in – four years ago, now – that we used in all of the parishes. (Region VIII)

Our parish directors would be under the same expectation of accountability that pastors would be. So there would be a ten-month evaluation when they've been there ten months where the vicar for clergy would sit down with the parish council, the trustees, and the parish director to evaluate the first ten months. Then there would be another one because they are six year terms, so there would be another one after three to see how it's going. (Milwaukee Province)

And perhaps we neglect clarity at the beginning on, whether we call it evaluation [or not], on the manner in which one completes his or her service. And I know we're going to be dealing with that with our deacons – just because someone lives within a community, it doesn't mean they will occupy the same position within that community. So I do think that's a very important topic. Not just for – really for all lay ecclesial ministers. And so any help that can be given or best practice models would probably be of great assistance. Deacons are an obvious place where that is. Where they're living within the parish in which they serve. (Louisville Province)

We have a very thorough evaluation of the intern. We have a year of internship. And after that, and they haven't been appointed yet, we have a very thorough – they just went through that yesterday – calling the interims in to meet with the priest personnel board. And they spent a good time going over these evaluations. They have about three or four evaluations. And the evaluation itself is four pages long. Very thorough, I think. The difficulty has been then after they have been appointed, no evaluation takes place unless there's some trouble. (Region VIII)

Theological Issues with the Role of Parish Life Coordinator

Many bishops brought up some key theological issues concerning the role of parish life coordinator that still need to be resolved. They described the unusual nature of the position and how important it is to call forth the right person because the PLC has the same kind of pastoral responsibility for the parish that a pastor would have.

I mean they're there because there is no priest. Now, they can't do the sacraments, obviously, but pastoring is certainly broader than sacraments. You have the whole religious education – formation – piece; you have the whole care of the sick; being with those who are mourning. I mean all of the corporal works of mercy which are part of the pastoring in the parish. All of that. And sometimes pastoral life coordinators, like our new pastoral life coordinator, I think she didn't really – she saw her role as simply running the office. And, I think, more and more we're trying to say, you know, "there's nobody else doing these other things; you've got to be doing them." (Santa Fe Province)

Do you just have a person who can bring a parish together? Who can give a sense of cohesion and identity? Do you have somebody that can run a meeting and encourage leadership and service? Do you have somebody that can represent the Church well? Do you have somebody with a pastoral sensitivity when it comes to the sick and to people in need? You would obviously look for an administrative capability, but we're pretty blunt in saying that the parish director is not synonymous with business manager. (Milwaukee Province)

But my own personal expectation of it is that when a person would be appointed as a parish director, that they see that they've got the same kind of responsibility that a pastor would have. Namely, that he or she has to reflect the mind and heart of the Church. And so the fact of it is that it's an assignment that coming from the bishop for the care of a particular faith community. And that, in my own mind, that's probably the major issue. (Milwaukee Province)

Some have not seen the priest moderator as the one who directs the pastoral care. They direct the pastoral care. Well, if you read the canon, the priest moderator appointed is the one who directs the pastoral care of the parish, according to the canon. But they see themselves as appointed to direct the pastoral care of the parish. Well, a lay person cannot have an office that entails full care of souls. So the canons, as we read it now, says that it's a directive to the bishop to appoint a priest. That's what the canon is. It's not a directive to the bishop in the first cause to appoint a parish life coordinator. It's the canon that directs the bishop to appoint a priest who is to direct the pastoral care of a parish. He then, because there's a lack of priests, appoints a parish life coordinator who shares in that task; cooperates in the task of the priest directing the pastoral care. (Region VIII)

Other bishops mentioned how important it is to develop a clear understanding in the parish life coordinator that their ministry is rooted in the theology of Baptism. Some are concerned that the role could evolve into a new clericalism or potentially blur the relationship between ordained and non-ordained.

I keep saying your value doesn't come from your desire to dress up in an alb and stand next to the priest at the altar and preaching. Your value doesn't come from approximating the sacrament of Holy Orders. It comes from your baptism; it comes from your confirmation; it comes from the Holy Eucharist; it comes from your call in service. So don't denigrate that valuable identity and role by feeling that you have to dress up like a priest and play priest. That's where the problem will come in. If a parish director feels that he or she has to be a mini-priest. It's a new clericalism. (Milwaukee Province)

Especially rooting their ministry in the theology of Baptism. We're very strong on that. They need to know that from their baptismal commitment, that they're now doing what they're doing and their response to it. (Santa Fe Province)

We're confusing who's ordained, who's not ordained, what the proper roles are. So I would be very cautious in anything we would do until we really have a laity that's educated and understand their life and their major role in the Church. Don't forget they're 99% of the Church. And I don't think we've addressed that enough. And then, I think, [this] would come more naturally. So, I think, that's more of a priority in my mind than picking any particular person and say you're a quasi-pastor. That's what the issue is. (Region II – 1)

Authorization for Ministry

Another theological issue that a number of bishops raised concerned the question of authorization for ministry.

We think theologically there is some concern among some bishops with this model. And the concern is – what was voiced in the document there – that of all the lay ecclesial ministries, the parish life coordinator is unique in the sense that it really only exists because of the shortage of priests. Whereas, lay ecclesial ministry in fact does flow out of our role, but it's not just the theology of baptism; but it's also the authorization of the Church that this person is now entrusted with a portion of a pastoring of people. And that authorization is critical, because no one can simply say "I want to be a lay ecclesial minister" or "I am a lay ecclesial minister." But this role is unique in the sense that really only exists because of the shortage of priests. (Santa Fe Province).

I think the question ... is the question of the authorization of lay ecclesial ministries. Co-workers in the Vineyard talks about authorizing lay ecclesial ministers. And I think there's some ambiguity there that is both probably hopeful

and problematic in that Lumen Gentium says very clearly that all the baptized share in the three-fold munera of word, worship, and service. But then it says that those whose who are ordained share in a particular way, and that the difference is not in degree, but in essence... And so the whole question of when we authorize – and these people receive a letter of appointment from me, so it's a canonical appointment. So I am authorizing them to work and to speak in the name of the Church. Very clearly I am doing that. But my question been, what does that mean vis-à-vis the ordained? And is it the same authority that they share. To what extent is it the same? To what extent is it different? That, to me, is a very important question that I think the church has not wrestled with yet. (Region VIII)

I think it ties into Bishop [Name]'s question about what happens when a bishop authorizes – for example, we were saying before this priest moderator is the one who has the powers and the faculties of a pastor. So it's the pastor who has the right to be [head of] the parish pastoral council. It's the pastor who has the right – and that would be the priest moderator. The priest moderator would convene the finance council. The priest moderator would have to do the delegations for marriage, not this lay person or this religious. Only a priest can represent the parish juridically. You get into some of the selling of property and so on, but are lay people doing this? Are these parish life coordinator people doing this without delegation or are they being delegated to do things they really can't do? They can't be authorized to do... And what happens, not only juridically, but civilly, when you start to have these people representing the parish, supposedly authorized, but canonically not authorized. So all that has to be sorted out, without a doubt. (Region VIII)

Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest

One of the challenges bishops discussed in their struggle to define the role of the PLC relates to Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. Several spoke of their hesitancy to authorize these celebrations at PLC parishes, and most are trying to avoid it. A few express fears that Catholics will lose their appreciation and understanding of the Mass if the use of these celebrations expands.

We don't have any places in our diocese where Mass is not regularly offered on the weekends. Priests from the neighboring parish come where the sisters or the lay people are doing it. But there is some pressure, which we have withstood, that some people want us to approve Sunday services without a priest. And that we haven't done it. We have no intentions of doing it. (Region II – 1)

If you left that out – if you failed to give, at least, Holy Communion when they gather, how long before the community begins to sort of fade in its appreciation of it? (Santa Fe Province)

Part of it is that the emphasis on the Eucharist not only as banquet but also as sacrifice in making present the paschal mystery. That part has been diminished in the minds of many of the faithful. I think that especially has a great danger of being diminished if there's not Mass celebrated. So, I think if you have celebration – you have some kind of communion service in the absence of a priest, it's a great danger. (Santa Fe Province)

I'm very reluctant to begin this practice, because I just think it's eating away at the heart of our theology of who we are. (Region VIII)

We have a couple of situations where it's remote and on the Indian reservation where there aren't enough priests to go every Sunday, and yet those people want to gather. And the problem with the Native communities is that they don't want to go – they won't go outside of their area, especially if it's a white parish that's next to them. And so they want to have some gathering on Sunday to keep them involved. So maybe two times out of the month they will be able to have a priest on Sunday; the other times, they meet for Sunday celebration. (Region VIII)

We don't have Sunday celebrations without a priest. I have explored with a couple of parishes way out in western dioceses that if we would not be able to supply a priest every Sunday, would they be willing to have Mass, say, every two weeks or once a month, to which each and every parish said no way. If that's the way it's going to be, close us down. Because they want the Eucharist. (Region VIII)

I would be afraid to give permission for a Sunday gathering without a priest, because I'm afraid priests would just invoke them any time they want. So, if they need to do it, they'll do it in an emergency. But to give a blanket provision that it could happen, you're opening a Pandora's box, which you will be sorry to open. (Region VIII)

The priests would like me to approve Sunday services without a priest so that they can go on vacation or go on a sabbatical or whatever. And we don't have a need for that now. I mean I'd rather have them, very honestly, say go to the next parish to Mass than to approve something like that. (Region II – 1)

Moreover, many bishops expressed their concern that Catholics do not or will not be able to distinguish between Mass and a celebration without a priest. Several alluded to a concern about potential blurring of the understanding of Eucharist. It is within the context of this discussion that a number of bishops expressed deeper uncertainty regarding the theological consequences of having parish life coordinators.

I think that there is the danger that people will lose the sense that Eucharist really is the source and summit, of what is the Church. And I think that in the minds of a lot people, already people don't see the distinction. They comment, 'Sister's

Mass is a lot shorter, we like her Mass instead of yours.’ I mean it already says something that people who don’t have a clear sense of – that Eucharist is more than just receiving communion; it’s a celebration of the liturgy. (Milwaukee Province)

The parish council says “we want another one of those lay people who can say Mass” and they request [to have] a parish director rather than a priest. (Region VIII)

I think, when you get the real problems is that you’re doing non-Eucharistic liturgy. I mean Eucharistic liturgies that are not the Mass. And people say ‘well, I like Sister’s Mass better than Father’s Mass.’ And you get those kind of things going on. And you say ‘what are we doing here?’ So I think I would be real cautious moving in that direction and to obviously research. (Region II – 1)

My experience is that the overwhelming majority of people know the difference between Mass and a celebration that’s not Mass. But they find it important for the sake of the community to gather every Sunday nonetheless. And it has overall increased their appreciation for Mass. (Santa Fe Province)

We don’t have in the diocese a Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest, except in emergency situations. But our people – they’re not theologically prepared to see the distinction, because in even those exceptional cases, I can go visit that parish later on after the pastor’s well again or whatever situation had developed, and they’ll come up to me and say: “Oh, Bishop, we got along fine. As a matter of fact, we kind of like the Mass that Sister celebrated.” So theologically, they’re not ready for it. (Region VIII)

You’re as familiar as we are with all the current theological debate about whether you should have simply a service in the word and prayer without the Eucharist, because there’s the danger in people’s mind, equating a communion service with the celebration of Eucharist. (Milwaukee Province)

Need for Further Theological Development

Some bishops expressed a need for further theological development concerning the canon and its implementation. They worry that the canon is being implemented without sufficient theological reflection.

As this has evolved, I think it’s a canon looking for a theology. You know, it’s new to the Code. There was not a 1917 canon like this. But I think until we meld the theology that’s coming out of Rome, starting with Pastores Dabo Vobis in 1992 and straight on through, with that solid theology about Holy Orders, the place of the pastor, the theology of pastoral care of a parish that’s there – it’s there – until we meld that with the good thinking and theology of baptism and

what happens and ordering baptismal ministries – until that really comes together in a way that it hasn't yet, we're going to be a bit stymied. You're going to have statements like "it's up to each bishop to decide what's lay ministry." Well, the Church will decide what's lay ministry and what's ordained ministry, to a degree. Bishops certainly will have certain tasks that he's going to say lay people are going to do, but, in a sense, the bishop is not free to tell the Church that 5:17.2 is lay ecclesial ministry as it's called in Co-Workers on page 11. So, we're going to run into those things until we really sit down and hear, well, the theology both coming out of Rome on Holy Orders and the good theology that's being developed on baptismal priesthood. (Region VIII)

[I]n our case, the canon was here and our practice went this way. The canon, rather than forming experience, experience has interpreted the canon. And so, in a sense, the horses are out of the barn now, and we need to look at what our experience has been and to evaluate it. But, I would say, for those who have not had experience in this, it is very important that we do the kind of analysis that Father [Name] is talking about, because otherwise there's not enough direction in the Code. And, I think, his point was well taken. We have a theology – we have a canon, but we don't have a theology to go with the canon. And so, it's going to be very confusing if we don't get the two together. (Region VIII)

Parish Life Coordinators and Clergy

The relationship between parish life coordinators and clergy was a significant theme of the focus group discussions. Because this is a newly defined ecclesial position that did not exist before the 1983 revision of canon law, bishops and canonists are not always in agreement on the interpretation of the canon, particularly as it affects ecclesial relationships. Bishops discussed the canon at length and expressed differing opinions as to whether the canon stipulates a preference for deacons in the role. They also expressed stories of conflict and confusion regarding the responsibilities of and relationship between the canonical pastor and the parish life coordinator. Some bishops spoke of their own lack of clarity regarding their particular canonical relationship with parish life coordinators. This section outlines several of these considerations related to the area of PLCs and clergy.

Deacons as Parish Life Coordinators

The majority of bishops who mentioned a preference in their search for PLCs said that they prefer choosing a deacon for the PLC role. Many reason that the theological training, ordination, and ability to take on more sacramental roles make deacons better suited than others to be a parish life coordinator.

From my own sense of things, a permanent deacon is certainly able to respond to situations that a lay person could not respond to, i.e., marriage, baptisms, and things of that nature. So my first – and I have said this publicly to the permanent deacons and to the diocesan staff – that my first level of response, should we ever find ourselves in need of someone to minister almost full-time for the parish other than priest would be somebody from the permanent diaconate group. (Louisville Province)

Sometimes, I think, there's a distinct advantage to have someone with the sacrament of Holy Orders as parish director. The deacons might not have Master's in theology. So we'd obviously look for a fellow that would have a certain amount of theological sophistication and the ability to preach and everything. (Milwaukee Province)

I would say, de jure, in the praxis of the [Diocese] there is not a preference for a deacon; I would say de facto there is. So if the board would say, "Here are the three people that applied" and one of them is a deacon, my inclination would be to take the deacon. (Milwaukee Province)

My preference would be, basically because of legislation and law, the deacons tie in better by orders to the law. There's a sense of relationship to the governance immediately that comes from orders, that his pledge of obedience to serve not

only a level of contractual obedience, but his level in terms of even his vocation to serve the diocese. (Milwaukee Province)

Let's face it. With the theory that we bishops like to go on as the less conflict the better, if you have a deacon, you avoid the conflict of preaching, baptism, marriage, all of that. Because the deacon can do it. So you don't have to answer the letters. (Milwaukee Province)

I prefer ordained deacons. (Region II – 1)

Obviously, because it's an ordained person. For me, that's basically it. (Region II – 1)

We have taken the position that, everything being equal, we would appoint the deacon. But if the deacon is a candidate along with a lay person or a religious, and the lay person or religious has much more pastoral experience or, in an interview, demonstrates that they would be better at being the pastor of the parish, then we would not give them that preference. Now, if everything was equal, then we probably would appoint the deacon, but our experience is that usually there is clear evidence that one or another is better. (Region II – 2)

The pool of religious women is shrinking and the pool of deacons is expanding. So, naturally, it was going to be probably more deacons in the future available than sisters. (Santa Fe Province)

Permanent deacons have had training; they've had the theology. They're among the better formed people around. (Santa Fe Province)

They have the theological background. (Santa Fe Province)

They have the sacramental charism. And there's the sacramental bond between priests and the bishop that, you know, the unity of the ministry that they're naturals. Obviously if one has to have a parish life coordinator, they're naturals. (Santa Fe Province)

They can wear an alb and stole. (Santa Fe Province)

Not all bishops place the highest priority on ordination status in selecting PLCs, however. Some bishops consider pastoral experience more important than ordination. Others describe problems they have experienced in assigning a deacon as PLC.

Although I agree in theory that deacons might seem to have the juridical preference, in fact, we hardly ever look at that. We're looking for somebody who's going to be just really good pastorally with those people. And when you get down to an ordination, there can be no guarantee of that at all. So what I

really want is somebody who's going to be amenable: they love whoever gets the job. (Louisville Province)

We've rather argued that deacons aren't trained to be pastors. Our pastoral administrators are. They might have the same course content, but the some of the experiential requirements and pastoral experience are not the same. We've also emphasized the deacons as sort of icons of service. And being with people on the edge where otherwise forgotten. We do have some deacons as pastoral administrators, but it's not the norm for us. We haven't been challenged on that either by the deacon community who seem content with this as long as they're particularly qualified and are eligible. But we don't have any push that it should always be a deacon. And I haven't had any push from anyplace outside the diocese to put it that way. (Region II – 2)

Obviously there are some things that a deacon can do, as in baptisms, etc. Not that the parish life coordinator couldn't do some of those things, such as a wake service, for example. But I guess I feel blessed to have the people that I do. I totally agree that it depends so much on who it is and not what they're able to do. (Region VIII)

...it might very well be impractical to have permanent deacons assigned to more rural areas of the diocese. But, in the case of a place like [Diocese], if there was a need to do something, I might tend to do some coordination of inner city parishes and put them under the care of a permanent deacon and then have a priest in the rural area. (Louisville Province)

I think it's so important to have the right personality and to have an understanding of what the Church expects; to have an understanding and respect for the priesthood; and what that priest is able to do, which no one else can do. And that's just part of our faith. And to respect that. And for that priest, to have that kind of a personality which would respect the gifts of others. (Region VIII)

Priests and Parish Life Coordinators

Bishops participating in the focus groups raised several issues related to the relationship between priests and parish life coordinators and how PLCs see themselves in their leadership role. Some bishops mentioned tensions relating to the relationship between PLCs and the sacramental minister. Bishops also spoke of the desire they see among some parish life coordinators to take on roles reserved for clergy. There are also occasional conflicts between the PLC, especially those who are deacons, and the canonical pastor regarding who should preach or manage the parish.

The following comments reflect these tensions, as well as the assessment that many priests and PLCs are able to collaborate quite well.

One time, years ago, that we had...a male lay person who was in charge of a parish... As soon as there was a priest, he was pushed out. And that was very hurtful. Now...when there's a parish life coordinator, they're given terms. ... Whether there's a priest that comes along or not, they will finish out their term. (Santa Fe Province)

I've found that most of our parish life coordinators don't feel badly when they're bumped, because a priest has become available. (Santa Fe Province)

When the sacramental minister comes in to celebrate, sometimes that priest may not be particularly mature or sensitive and tries to rearrange the furniture every time he comes to say Mass and the parish life coordinator fights her authority of being kind of shoved aside. So I think it's important that the parish life coordinator is well-trained, understands what they're supposed to do, and that the priest not interfere unduly in the work that's there. (Santa Fe Province)

If you're a sacramental minister and you're only present maybe on the weekends possibly, that dynamic – is that the same? And if it's not the same, how does that affect the whole life of the parish? (Region II – 2)

We've had occasions, I'm thinking up in [Place] when there's been a clash with the sacramental minister. But the sacramental minister – the priest – was correct. All right, he came in and followed another and found out that his predecessor was allowing the parish director to preach, for instance. So when he felt obliged to say “well, I'm sorry. I really can't go along with that.” (Milwaukee Province)

The relationship between the life coordinators and the sacramental ministers and the canonical pastors have all been quite positive. We've not had any tensions – jealousies. They have worked quite cooperatively together. (Santa Fe Province)

Priests, of course, do handstands when they become sacramental ministers. So they said that shouldn't be an exceptional title. That's what we were ordained for. But, when you're a pastor, you're so burdened with the administrative [tasks]. So, they seem to relish the idea of being a sacramental minister. (Milwaukee Province)

That's the secret with parish life coordinators – good communication, mutual understanding between the parish life coordinator and the canonical pastor and the sacramental minister. (Santa Fe Province)

Several bishops relayed their uncertainty (and that of parish leaders) regarding the role of the canonical pastor as specified by canon law. This has led to difficulties in delegating leadership roles and parish responsibility.

One of the difficulties we have is when a canonical pastor thought he was indeed the pastor of the parish...this pastor misunderstood what his role was. He thought he was pastoring both of these parishes and the pastoral life coordinator was there to assist him. I was trying to explain to him that, no, she is the parish life coordinator. She's responsible for the pastoral life of the parish, for the administrative functioning of the parish, except for the sacramental life, which is going to happen through the sacramental minister. So that can get confused, I think, depending on the preparation of the canonical pastor. (Santa Fe Province)

The priest – there's some debate there – he should be referred to as a canonical pastor, but the one endowed with the powers and faculties of a pastor is still the directive in the moderating role so that, theoretically, I think, the waters are muddied when its beyond that first appointment and directed and entrusted. And the waters are muddied canonically if there's an ongoing relationship between the parish life coordinator and the bishop. (Milwaukee Province)

There's a clear ecclesial resistance, especially when there hasn't been an experience with that reality. (Region II – 2)

It clearly indicates in here that the priest is appointed by the bishop as the canonical pastor of a parish. So it does delineate that. So, I think, if there are misunderstandings, they are part of what's an emerging ministry of the Church. But, I think, right now after 20 years, we need to be able to solidify expectations, who's eligible and what needs to happen, and once a person comes in, what exactly are the responsibilities of each – of the priest moderator, sacramental minister, and so on. (Milwaukee Province)

There had been job descriptions before, which were well done; they just hadn't been updated for a while. And then the thing that was not really as clear was the canonical pastor. (Santa Fe Province)

I think that one of the difficulties that I've experienced in the last 20 years of doing this, is if the canonical pastor tiptoes into the area of responsibility of the PLC, that the parish life coordinator should be running the parish. And we've had a case or two where the canonical pastor exerts more influence on the day-to-day activities than Sister wants. It shouldn't. In other words, the fault is that the priest is too – pushing into things that he should just let the parish life coordinator do. (Santa Fe Province)

I don't find any kind of conflict or imposition of the priest into the daily affairs of the parish, which I think they're happy to leave to the pastoral administrator. But sometimes a priest will come in for the liturgy and it will be so planned and it's not according to his best principles or his habits or his tastes. (Region II – 2)

The tension that we have seen in the situation where there is a permanent deacon who is parish life coordinator and then the priest who comes to do the sacraments

comes in. The two deacons that we have that are running parishes are very good preachers.... And the people appreciate their preaching. But the priest doesn't want to let go of the preaching. And he wants to do all the preaching at all the Masses. (Santa Fe Province)

Moreover, a few bishops described how new parish models and lack of clarity about them has the potential to blur the lines between the ordained and the non-ordained.

Then one of the tensions that I think we're still working through in some parts of the Church is this – what I see as the blurring of the distinction of the ordained and the non-ordained. And, I think, there are a lot of people who will argue and say well, Vatican II says X, Y, and Z, and my response is you'd better go back and read what Vatican II says. Because your interpretation of what you say Lumen Gentium says and what it actually said are two different things. (Milwaukee Province)

You often see a blurring of the roles. Then when you present the mind of the Church to say “Well, it is the role of the ordained person to preach or that it is the role of the ordained person to celebrate Eucharist, which is the principal prayer of the Church,” I think that's where you start to see the tension and [they] say, “Well, aren't we good enough to do this as well?” (Milwaukee Province)

In one focus group that included bishops who have had many years of experience with the model, the bishops contemplated how the role of the priest is indeed changing as a result of the emergence of PLCs:

I wonder how priests understand their ministry vis-à-vis the rise of this other ministry – parish life coordinators? (Region II – 2)

When you talk to members of our presbyterate, they have the concern about becoming circuit riders rather than have an identity with a particular community. ...Also, bonded-ness with the community is something that they're concerned about. (Region II – 2)

How do we train the clergy for the future? Because if you're not training directly for a solely kind of pastoral role of being “the pastor,” there are other things. But the priests ought to be trained where it's a leader. I mean it's no question that a priest has got a major leadership role. And, to a large extent, I really believe that is his inspirational, motivational ability to bring people along; persuade; to preach well; to teach well; to inspire people generously to give of themselves. So, I think there's so many – we're not going to see a major turnaround in the ranks of seminarians in a sense. The reality is I do think we ought to be concentrating today on how we're training the ones for the world they're going to enter. (Region II – 2)

Bishops and Parish Life Coordinators

Another topic of discussion was the relationship between parish life coordinators and bishops. Most bishops describe having periodic meetings with priests and PLCs, although some admit that having these meetings more often would be better. A few describe struggles to define the canonical relationship between themselves and PLCs, since it differs from their relationship with priests.

Bishops commonly respond that they have fairly regular meetings with PLCs:

We had some periodic meetings to handle both the parish priests and the parish life coordinators to see how it was going and what do we need to fine tune. ... We have a coordinator who's a liaison with the diocese. ... One of their quarterly meetings in the fall is an overnight meeting. And I'd go with them and spend overnight. They have social time and then the whole day. And they can get everything out on the table that they're experiencing. (Louisville Province)

I meet with them quarterly. I meet with all of them – five of them come in to meet quarterly. They listen to me; I listen to them; and they listen to each other. That works well. (Louisville Province)

I do meet with them once a year – those who are pastoral associates. I meet with them once a year so that we have a relationship; talk about common concerns and then listen to their – envisioning their future. The immediate relationship is to the pastor who comes into service – the parish that they're responsible for. And with the deacons, I meet regularly with the deacons. (Milwaukee Province)

In our diocese, we have a minister who is in contact with them every other month, on a formal basis. And then I meet with them as a group twice a year. (Milwaukee Province)

Boy we get along fine. And I deeply appreciate them. Something tells me they would probably feel that I should keep in better touch with them. (Milwaukee Province)

Many bishops reported that their relationships with parish life coordinators are not all that different from their relationships with priests who are pastors:

I don't see a difference in my own diocese personally with my relationship to the five parishes who have pastoral coordinators and those who have priests. All five coordinators are very cooperative. So they invite me and I feel free to go there. So I don't see any great difference between the two. (Louisville Province)

[W]e are exercising due diligence when it comes to identifying and hiring someone to serve in the capacity of a parish coordinator, then a bishop's

relationship to that individual in that parish would be no different than a bishop's relationship to a priest in the parish. I don't see that there could be – or should be – a difference. I think the relationship should be identical just by the very nature of the bishop's relationship to every parish. (Louisville Province)

I deal with the pastoral administrators as much as I deal with the pastors. They have direct access to me if there's a problem; they come to me. (Region VIII)

I'd also like to say, too, that the pastoral administrators have evolved into being some of the most important people to me. I feel their support right from the get go; they've really been great. (Region VIII)

I don't know that there's any difference either in the parish life coordinators and their relationship to me or to the diocese or chancery and in any of the other parishes. But I think that also speaks to the importance of having the right person as parish life coordinator. And me, as bishop, having confidence in their abilities to do that job. (Region VIII)

The connections are that the bishop – the diocese – provides training situations; the bishop provides a kind of central agency. I'm talking about the office – that kind who tries to organize the thing; the bishop provides some resources for what's going on the parish; the bishop's connected through, those of us who are vicars – auxiliaries – who bishop the parishes regularly and see what's going on. However, I think the other side of the picture is we are getting more and more congregational so that the connection with the diocese gets to be more and more attenuated. So I think that's a reality. (Region II – 1)

A few bishops conveyed their uncertainty regarding the canonical and sacramental relationship they should have with their parish life coordinators and how it differs from the relationship they share with priests:

I think there is a canonical relationship between parish life coordinators and the bishop. That's what Canon 517.2 says. I think what there is not is the same sacramental relationship as there is between the deacon and the bishop and the priest and the bishop. And I think that's why, historically, you had deacons doing administration all the way back in the 3rd and 4th century, at least, in the Church, and why many of us bishops probably feel a little bit more ready to have a deacon serving in the position in addition to the fact that they're usually better trained than other people who are. (Santa Fe Province)

There certainly needs to be a close relationship to a pastoral life coordinator, because he or she is serving in the function of a pastor of a parish without a resident priest. So I think it's important. But where they fit in into the clerical gatherings is still a confusion for us. (Santa Fe Province)

In our diocese, part of the relationship with the bishop depends on the thinking of the parish life coordinator. We've had maybe five or six over the eight years. Some have seen themselves as directly answerable to the bishop, and that the bishop would be their superior. So a part of it would be how they see that; how they see their relationship to what we call the priest moderator. Some have not seen the priest moderator as the one who directs the pastoral care. (Region VIII)

Parish Life Coordinators in the Future

In contemplating the future for their dioceses, bishops discussed the way that PLCs may factor into their planning process. Nearly all described the PLC solution as a temporary, less-than-ideal solution to a shortage of priests. Many emphasized the continued need to pray for vocations. Finally, bishops offered a number of suggestions as potential keys to success when dioceses face a new or expanding necessity for c.517.2 parishes.

The Temporary Nature of Parish Life Coordinators

Most participating bishops describe c.517.2 parishes and the need for parish life coordinators as being only temporary – a stopgap measure until a priest can be assigned to the parish as pastor.

The major problem that I saw in [Diocese] was that the parish directors became, in their own mind, equivalently irremovable pastors. ...This is an extraordinary, temporary (we hope) ministry. (Milwaukee Province)

I see it as a stop gap measure, but it's the best we can do given the situation and we invoke Canon 517 in order to meet the spiritual needs of the people that are there that are hungering for the Church and for the graces and the sacraments. (Santa Fe Province)

We're very much of the point of view that this is temporary; that the normal pastor is the priest. Because the normal life of the parish comes from the Eucharist. In the exceptional situations, I think, the most common – sacramental – is the deacon to be in that position. But there's a canonical provision. So there is canonical relationship – 517 – that provides for this in this situation until we have enough priests to fill that position. (Santa Fe Province)

One fear that I had was that a parish would feel as though it were a second-hand parish if that person were to stay there too long. So I made it very clear that this was a temporary situation and that there'd be a term of office, and then that person would move on and a priest would come in. (Region VIII)

It's a, we hope, a temporary solution based on Canon 517. But if you don't have a priest for a community, you've got to do something to provide ministry and leadership to that community. And I don't think a bishop could neglect utilizing a person like the parish life coordinator. And my experience has been very positive, given the shortage of priests. To put in a parish life coordinator has enabled that community to continue to exist and to have the sacraments. I haven't seen as many negative things coming from it as I have positive things. So I would

encourage a bishop to utilize the Canon that the Catholic Church has given to him in which we had been talking about this morning. (Santa Fe Province)

This temporary approach, however, can conflict with the expectations of PLCs themselves, putting bishops in the potentially awkward position of balancing the job security and effectiveness of a parish life coordinator with the ultimate goal of having a priest as pastor in every parish.

Suppose in ten years from now or 15 years from now, we had the ability to put an ordained presbyter in every parish. And, yet, then you've developed this model of alternative staffing. How would you balance that? I mean it would seem to me ungrateful and unappreciative. You just said "Well, fine. Now, we've got enough ordained priests to cover, so now you're going to be downgraded." (Region II – 2)

Part of what I'll say is that this is an extraordinary temporary ministry and, you know, you need to be the person whose circumstances of life permit this kind of flexibility, because I don't know how God will provide, but I'm always looking for – it's not easy to find – but I'm always looking for priests who might be looking for ministry. (Milwaukee Province)

... when we replaced the administrator with the resident priest again. There is some problematic with – we're responsible for job placement of the individual as PLA and how do you work all of that through, because there can be a tension there and their expectation is now that the diocese would provide another assignment for that for that individual or could we work it out or whatever. So it's not real clear as to what, you know, their future would be. We never made any promises, but there are kind of unwritten expectations or whatever. (Region VIII)

One bishop shares that as a result of the temporary nature of the PLC solution and potential for conflict, they now give all parish life coordinators a title of “interim”:

We have two prongs that says that ministry – one, we call the PLA and the other we call ITLA – Interim Parish Life Administrator. And the Interim Parish Life Administrator is intended just in the appointment cycle when we are trying to move in a pastor. Eventually if there's a space of time, usually from six months to a year before that pastor will be appointed permanently, but it's kind of always in development. And so that confuses the issue because on one side we have the PLAs and then they don't understand the distinction between the Interim Parish Life Administrator, who's just there to kind of hold everything together until the pastor comes. So we have decided basically to go with IPLAs hereafter, as even the PLAs have been replaced by priests. ...And also not to be beholden to the

PLA in terms of job placement and everything, they use the term IPLA. (Region VIII)

Encouraging Vocations

In considering future leadership in diocesan parishes, several bishops spoke of the continued need to focus on vocations. This dedication is also used by some bishops in response to parishioners who are upset that their parish does not have a resident priest. Although preparing for a future that takes into account a limited supply of priests, most bishops nonetheless retain optimism that parish needs will continue to be met. Some describe their future planning as connected primarily to vocation promotion.

I wouldn't anticipate my planning into the future to plan for the absence of priests. That could happen, but I wouldn't deliberately plan it that way. (Louisville Province)

I believe very strongly that God is still calling to the priesthood and so many have not had the opportunity to listen. But, again, looking at that realistically, it was easier to call to the priesthood in [Diocese] because of the numbers, and certainly easier to call in a larger metropolitan see than it would be in a smaller see. (Region VIII)

Our plan focuses on increasing vocations so that we have priests for every parish. We just finished the Synod and that never even came up in the discussions. It was a large discussion of priests and preparing for a priest; priestly vocations. (Louisville Province)

I think that was based on the involvement of the people from these parishes who, while they're happy with the parish life coordinators and they're certainly fulfilling their needs, again, they'd like a priest. (Louisville Province)

I'm going to continue to do that – continue to promote vocations. And whatever I do in this regard will be done in that context. (Milwaukee Province)

Let me just say I'm coming from a position where people, they ask me "give us a priest." And my immediate response briefly is "give me their sons, and I'll give you a priest." And from my point of view, there's no substitute for priests, as such, because he has orders, and he has a commission, and it's all part of the Church. (Region II – 1)

Well, I think we've talked for an hour about this and not mentioned priestly vocations. We need to promote vocations to priesthood and to work hard to make that the top priority in the diocese, because that's ultimately – who are we looking for? We're looking for people who will be able to celebrate the Eucharist – to do the work that a priest does. (Santa Fe Province)

Our plans are primarily to promote vocations so that the parishes will have pastors. (Santa Fe Province)

Planning for the Future

Although they emphasize increasing vocations, most bishops participating in the focus groups also admitted that, given the number of priest retirements and ordinations in their diocese, the supply simply does not match the need. As such, some bishops are preparing to further develop their PLC ministry, other bishops are bringing in priests from other countries, and still others are exploring new ways to meet the growing needs of Catholics in the diocese.

I see the parish directors as very much a part of lay ecclesial ministry, and especially with regard to the Co-Workers document. And I think that they are part of the plans for where the diocese is headed...If you take a look at the numbers of our priests that are going to be retiring, and while we've been very fortunate to have a pretty significant increase in those coming in for ordination, the numbers are still not going to be anywhere near where they need to be. So it is a matter of looking into a crystal ball for the future. (Milwaukee Province)

I think we're looking down the pike. We're anxious. I'm bad on numbers. I know my age and my weight; all the rest are... Right now I have five priests and four parishes. That many, at least, of three, maybe more than that – I think I only have about 13 priests; I have only the one parish. So, like I said, it's the crunch. The squeeze gets tighter. The need. That's why, like I said, we're experimenting with what I described earlier. It's inevitable. Inevitable where we are. No doubt about that. (Milwaukee Province)

We have presently 42 active priests for 78 parishes. And so the 15 pastoral administrators that we have are crucial if our people are going to have the kind of pastoral care that they need. (Region VIII)

Well, I have said that if there was a need, I won't hesitate to move in that direction. I don't hope that there'd be a need. But if there was a need, I'd move in that direction with enthusiasm and with care. (Milwaukee Province)

Several bishops have addressed the problem of too few new ordinations by looking overseas for priests who are willing to serve in parishes in the United States. Some bishops consider this a long-term solution, while others see it as an alternative stop-gap measure they can use.

I've gone overseas to Africa and to Poland and have fared very well with international priests. But I don't know what the ultimate answer is going to be. I think certainly we're going to have to train lay people. (Region II – 1)

And I think some bishops find it [parish life coordinator] not an appealing role, because it does have all these down sides that we've talked about, and are going more toward the bringing in of foreign priests from other countries or the pastor pastoring two parishes. (Santa Fe Province)

I think in this area, and I suppose for all the greater metropolitan dioceses – the idea or phenomena of the international priests is a big thing, because they're always priests coming to study. We have 100 extern priests who work in the diocese. (Region II – 1)

And I want to get two more guys from [Place] just like two or three we've already got. And they've got 600, 700, 800 priests in that diocese. It's the size of the Diocese of [Place]. I mean they've got an incredible number of priests. And, you know, classes of 100. It's unbelievable. And they're good; they're excellent. And their English is good and their talents are incredible. I mean musical and [good] with the kids. So we're a missionary country – the United States. And they are not a missionary country anymore. [Africa] is not a mission anymore – Africa is partly missionary. We're fully missionary. (Region II – 1)

Other bishops indicate that bringing in international priests for ministry may alleviate the immediate problem of too few priests but can result in other problems for the diocese.

We get the occasional priest from Mexico and they have a hard time and the people have a hard time with them. It's not the ideal solution. And then there's the language problem. So getting foreign priests can be a problem. And then, when they come here, they bring their baggage. Why did they want to come to this country? And why did the bishops let them go? Surely they need them where they're at. (Santa Fe Province)

We ... [have] an international priest who's both language and cultural formation are not – where he could work as a pastor at a parish. So the question we face is could we have an international priest there and have a deacon as a parish life coordinator who could do the preaching and who could do the marriage prep and things like that. But the parishes that we're looking at – again viability-wise – can't afford them. (Region VIII)

We have international priests. And I have always dealt with the bishops. In other words, I recruit priests through the bishop. All the bishops in Poland; I have a nice relationship with them. But I want to know who's coming. And I want to know how long they've been ordained. I don't want any "wandering minstrels." And so it's all very carefully spelled out. We have a policy sheet and expectations and so on. (Region II – 1)

My situation is a bit different from maybe the [other bishops], because my presbyterate has chosen not to invite foreign priests; they'd rather do it this way and to work harder in bringing in new vocations. But it's going to take time. We've had trouble – a lot of trouble – with foreign priests and I don't see them backing off for the time being until they get so stretched so thin and we had no choice... (Santa Fe Province)

A number of bishops describe other creative ways that they are planning for the future in their dioceses, some of which include parish life coordinators and others that do not.

We spent a year looking at how we're going to configure our parishes for the future and to align them. And out of 165 [current] parishes, we're going to have [eventually only] eight priests. So we're going to rely heavily on deacons and lay ministry in order to maintain the reconfiguration and re-coordination. We don't see in any of those where it's going to be lay coordinator of that [community]. But it will be a pastor coordinating with other lay ministers in order to provide a ministry to these ecclesial communities. (Milwaukee Province)

But that evolution will continue and it will take new directions, I think. It would be a shame to lose the pastoral skills and faith and dedication. Some of them are quite extraordinary... my experience says that the more the people are asked to create these new realities, the better off you are; the more ownership there is of them... I don't think there can be one way to do this. There can be guides and norms and the bishop needs to establish certain parameters. But after that, the more the people say "here's what we'll do with 1.65 priests we're going to have five years from now." (Region II – 2)

We've gone to a new paradigm called "area faith community," where we're pulling – instead of clustering two or three parishes, we bring together six or seven in what we call an area faith community. We expect that the pastoral leaders – pastoral administrators and priests and deacons – they all work together as a team. (Region VIII)

...you don't have a single paradigm of how you do this...it may be having multiple models of how you do it with pastoral life coordinators at this place, double pastor... But what strikes me is the fellows who are pastors of two parishes invariably say it doesn't work. They say "I can't do the job." In other words, they feel they're doing two places poorly rather than one place well, because they just don't have the time to get really involved... And my concern is you can get into an ecclesiology that says "we will never assign any other than the priest and we will take anything that comes down the pike to do that." That's a danger, I think, in terms of the practical assignment policy of the diocese. (Region II – 2)

One idea bishops suggest in facing the increasing need for parish leadership is to recruit, develop, and train a group of parish life coordinators and lay ecclesial ministers who will be ready to take on parish leadership roles when asked.

[W]e need to develop a group of, for example, deacons, religious or lay people, who are ready for when the diocese will need them. We don't have such a list at the moment. So we're kind of behind the eight ball in terms of, all of a sudden, we face a crisis situation. And, as a diocese, we don't know where to turn to begin the process. The other part of it is preparing our parishes for that reality, because it's coming. (Region VIII)

...if we have one opening and three people, we think we've got a list. But within two months, if we go back to that list of people, they've already been hired somewhere else because there's such a demand today for these people. (Region VIII)

It would be the formation, the theological training of future lay ministers, not necessarily parish directors. Although, once again, I would not foresee in the near future not having them. So it's more that I'm looking at a parish director as almost the sub-set of lay ecclesial ministry. And that's the focus: to make sure you've got a real, solidly trained and formed body there, from which you can draw some parish directors. (Milwaukee Province)

I could say, because we don't have any right now, there's a certain tension in that one never knows the future. The founding bishop of our diocese half jokingly used to say: "If you plan for a priest shortage, it will happen." And he actually had set a tone that I entered into and enjoyed so that we got, thus as we have, at this point sufficient priests. And good priests who are involved. So that we are not planning in a deliberate manner for that eventuality. We are planning for emerging lay leadership and for developing lay leadership. And, perhaps, should we ever find ourselves in a position in which we would – the need to appoint someone – and especially if that person were to come from the parish itself, there would be leadership among the laity available. (Louisville Province)

We just had our first ever, very successful, ...Diocesan Appeal. And now we're going to start a program where we hope we can form and educate our own pastoral administrators – at least people who would be qualified. (Region VIII)

Keys to Success

At the conclusion of each focus groups, bishops were invited to reflect on their experience and what advice they might have for other diocesan leaders looking to implement PLCs. From these discussions, the following are among several keys to success that the bishops emphasized.

The key, of course, is mutual respect and the ability to collaborate between the priest who's there for sacramental and pastoral ministry and is, in fact, is the canonical pastor, and his respect and collaboration with the parish life coordinator. (Louisville Province)

Trust the spirit at work in these ecclesial ministers, whether they're ordained deacons or whether professed religious. And to keep very clear channels of communication with them and let them know that they're valued. And that you support that, not simply out of necessity. ... I think that the opportunity to know that they are valued, to spend time with them, to have some staff that might be their immediate point of contact, but also to know that, as every priest knows, that he can come – she can come – directly to the bishop with concerns. (Louisville Province)

Make clear expectations that the parish life coordinator knows what the expectations are of the bishop in their role and the bishop knows what expectations the parish life coordinator has of the bishop and of the canonical pastor and the sacramental minister. That's very important. (Louisville Province)

On this last point about advice to bishops: pick happy, well-adjusted candidates. And then trust them. I think the trust atmosphere is about 80 percent of it. (Louisville Province)

To be clear from the beginning...there's a proper job description and a proper set of boundaries... To really make sure that the people who become parish directors are seeing this as service within the Church and as not as a back door to priesthood. (Milwaukee Province)

I think there's two understandings that are critical for the success of the parish life coordinator. One is understanding the role of the laity; and one is understanding the role of the clergy. (Santa Fe Province)

Appendix I: Focus Group Protocol

Theological Issues Related to Parish Life Coordinators
Focus Group Protocol

Introductions and Brief Description of the Project **5 minutes**

**1) What has been your experience with parish life coordinators?
How has your thinking about parish life coordinators developed over time?** **10 minutes**

*What have you learned from your experience with parish life coordinators?

*What trends do you see developing in this ministry?

**2) What do you expect of those who take on the role of parish life coordinator?
How do you promote the leadership and formation necessary for parish life coordinators?** **15 minutes**

What is the authority of the PLC? What leadership are they expected to provide to the community?

*Is there a preference for deacons for this ministry? Should diaconal ministry include the expectation for leadership in a community?

**3) What standards are important to establish for parish life coordinators?
What practices or experiences are required of those who lead parishes?** **15 minutes**

What are the expectations of parish life coordinators in regard to preaching?

*How are parish life coordinators evaluated in their ministry? Sacramental ministers?

* What is the connection between the parish community and the bishop?

* How is this link sustained when the parish has a parish life coordinator?

4) How are the pastoral needs of the community met when there is a non-resident pastor and a parish life coordinator/ a non-resident pastor and no parish life coordinator? **15 minutes**

What is the impact of having a parish life coordinator on the sacramental life of the community?

*What is the relationship between pastoral leadership and Eucharistic leadership?

How does the community respond to having one person (the parish life coordinator) as its convener and another (the sacramental minister) as its presider?

*What is the risk, if any, of blurring the distinction between Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest and a Eucharist celebrated by a priest?

*How does your diocese assess parish viability? What measure of parish life is the most important when deciding on the employment, retention, and dismissal of a parish life coordinator?

How do you make the decision to use a PLC versus close a parish?

*What are the implications for the traditional understanding of the relationship between ordination and pastoral leadership?

- 5) What should a bishop do when establishing lay administration in a parish without a resident pastor? What should he avoid? What advice do you have to share with other bishops from your experience of parish life coordinators?**
10 minutes

In your experience, what has worked well? What has not worked well? What would you do differently?

*What distance still remains between your vision as a bishop and the practice you observe in parishes entrusted to laity?

If you could offer just one piece of advice to other bishops that are considering implementing parish life coordinators, what would that be?