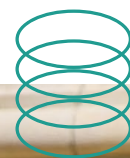


The Ultimate Catholic Church Merger Checklist



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Navigating a Parish Merger

If your diocese has decided that your parish will be merging with another parish, or even multiple parishes, in your region, you aren't alone. This trend has become far too common across the United States, though the word "merge" isn't always used. For example, in the Archdiocese of Seattle, parishes that have combined resources are called "Parish Families." Other terms used in different regions are Parish Communities, Clusters, Pastorates, or Worship Sites. In some cases, merged churches decide to create a whole new Catholic identity and choose a new parish name altogether.

No matter how your community approaches a church merger, challenges are likely to arise along the way. Use this guide to help you prepare for the process, navigate potential obstacles, and make your parish merger as smooth and successful as possible.

Catholic Parish Staff: Culture, Roles & HR Questions to Resolve When Merging Parishes

Your parish staff and ministry leaders will be the first to be affected by the news of a parish merger, so it's common for staff to feel apprehensive and even experience grief during this period. The goal is to help everyone come together as one so they can guide their individual congregations toward becoming one united parish.

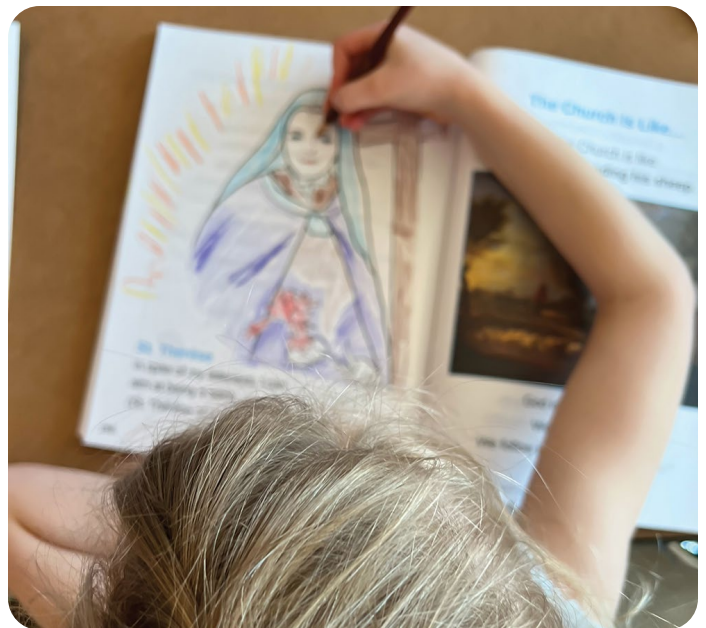
Questions to ask:

- **Who is leading what after the merger?** Clarify which priest, deacon, staff member, and ministry leaders will hold each role in the merged parish.
- **Which staff roles will be combined, retained, or phased out?** Parish mergers are often pursued as a way to use staff and resources more efficiently. Consider duplicated positions, changed hours, revised reporting lines, and whether some roles become parish-wide rather than site-specific.
- **How will staff responsibilities change across multiple worship sites?** In Catholic mergers, one church may become the main parish while others continue as secondary worship sites. This will often affect sacristy coverage, office hours, bulletin production (scroll down to the next section for tips on merging bulletins), facilities oversight, hospitality, and ministry scheduling.
- **How will the pastor and staff communicate decisions?** In the USCCB document, "Best Practices for Shared Parishes," the importance of transparent decision-making, strong listening, and clear communication through multiple channels is important. Consider your parish's bulletin, website, social media, and pulpit announcements as all important avenues of communication.



- **How will you handle staff emotions, morale, and resistance to change?** Change is difficult. Clergy, staff, and even lay ministry leaders often struggle to give up history, control, and their future expectations. It's not uncommon to experience emotional swings between excitement, fear, hope, and even resentment during a merger. Often, a diocese will already have a plan to address these challenges.
- **How will you honor the legacy of each former parish while building one team?** If the plan is to dissolve one or more church communities into a brand new one, the Diocese of Buffalo's "Guide for Parish Mergers and Closures" outlines some great procedures. For example, it explicitly recommends communicating the legacy of the merging parish(s) while also building a partnership with the receiving parish.
- **Does the staff reflect the whole merged parish?** USCCB guidance repeatedly emphasizes the importance of making sure that a merged parish's staff, finance councils, and pastoral councils represent the merged community — especially when multiple cultural or linguistic communities are involved.
- **Do staff need intercultural or bilingual training?** Ongoing formation and training for leaders of the newly merged parish are essential to ensure they can properly communicate and work across cultural boundaries. Be sure to set aside a dedicated budget to support trainings, workshops, and in-services.
- **How will pastoral and finance councils be rebuilt?** A merged parish is not supposed to simply limp along with the original parish's old structures in place. For example, the Diocese of Erie suggests in its document, "Implementation Guide for Merged Parishes," that a merged parish's finance and pastoral councils should be reconstituted so they represent both the enlarged parish and the pre-merger communities.
- **Who will be on the transition team, and do they represent all former parishes?** Each parish merger guide consulted for this article stressed cross-representation and transparent recommendation-making so that each community feels heard during the transition. Often, your diocese already has a plan in place for this, but it's still worth considering at the local level.

- **What HR steps must happen for employees?** Buffalo's merger guide gets very practical here: health insurance continuation, final wage reporting, unemployment information, benefits communication, retirement-plan details, and maintaining a complete personnel list for the new pastor or bookkeeper must all be part of the HR plan. Don't forget — personnel records might need to be transferred, too!
- **How will ministry leaders evaluate which ministries will continue as-is, merge, or come to an end?** Current ministries, especially liturgical ministries, should be evaluated and new ministries considered. As ministries are among the core heartbeat of a church community, don't wait until the last minute to start considering these.



- **What happens if the parish also has a school?** If a merger affects a parochial or regional school, most dioceses guide parishes toward separate school-closing or school-merger procedures. This would include transferring employee personnel files and coordinating with the offices of Catholic schools.
- **How will staff help parishioners move from "my old parish" to joining in shared ownership of the new one?** When it comes to parish staff, leadership, and even participation, the USCCB describes healthy integration as helping people move from being stuck in a "host/guest dynamic" to feeling like they have a real place at the table.

Tips for Nurturing Catholic Parish Members and Ministries During a Church Merger

Taking care to nurture and guide church members who are experiencing a merger is just as important as ensuring that the leadership of the merged parishes is equally supported. Here are some key steps to consider to help congregations successfully navigate a parish merger.

- **Lead with prayer, listening, and visible pastoral care.** Remember, parishioners need more than just the ability to understand the logistics of their parish merger. They also need to feel seen, welcomed, cared for, and accompanied spiritually as they process grief, uncertainty, and change.
- **Make hospitality intentional, not assumed.** The USCCB emphasizes fostering a sense of belonging for both longtime members of a parish going through a merger and new members. Train and encourage your parish greeters to be sensitive to both groups. Create shared gatherings, clear signage, and use language that helps everyone feel like they have a place in the new parish.
- **Preserve meaningful traditions while building a new community.** A healthy merger should honor the history, devotions, charism, and memories of each former parish while also working to help members embrace a shared future.
- **Evaluate ministries carefully instead of automatically cutting or simply duplicating them.** Catholic merger guides frequently recommend reviewing existing ministries, especially liturgical and parish-life ministries, to determine which should continue, combine, or be reimaged for the stronger merged parish. Invite ministry leaders and stakeholders into this discussion.
- **Invite broad representation in ministry leadership.** Parishioners from all merging communities should see themselves reflected in the new parish's councils, committees, and ministry teams so the merged parish feels shared, not dominated, by one former church culture over another.
- **Keep communicating the mission behind the merger.** One way to successfully guide parish members into their new parish culture is to communicate honestly and repeatedly about why the merger is happening and how it can strengthen ministry, stewardship, and long-term parish life for everyone involved. To truly reinforce the new mission, consider weaving this type of communication into everything from your parish bulletin and website, to homilies and announcements at Mass and other parish events for at least a year or more.

Sources

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). "Best Practices for Shared Parishes"
- The Diocese of Buffalo, NY. "Guide for Parish Mergers and Closures"
- The Diocese of Erie, PA. "Implementation Guide for Merged Parishes"