

# COLUMNISTS

## What is a parish's mission?

I had a fairly invigorating luncheon conversation the other day that covered a whole host of topics. One was the role of parish leaders and staff. Part of what we discussed was the way we should understand the mission and ministry of those who are leaders of our parish communities.

As the lunch conversation unfolded, two different opinions about this issue emerged. One faction maintained that since a parish's primary mission has to do with serving the members, that is the primary role of the staff and leadership. What parishioners primarily need are sacraments and spiritual formation. Thus, parish leadership should focus especially on offering meaningful liturgies, access to baptismal and other sacramental preparation programs, religious education for every generation, comfort in times of trouble, sickness or death.

Parish staff members should also be able to offer guidance about church policies and rules concerning getting married, dealing with troubled marriages, duties toward the terminally ill, alcoholism and addictions, wayward children, and other of life's difficulties. Along these same lines, priests, deacons and lay ministers and other leaders should be available, willing and able to help parishioners who are "in a jam" about any number of life's difficulties and who seek assistance from the church.

Countering this model was a second scheme that maintained that the parish's primary mission has to do with serving the world. In this scheme parish



the  
moral  
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

staff members should be spending their primary energies on facilitating the development of a community that serves society and the world around it. In this scheme, sacraments, our devotional life and spiritual formation are themselves geared toward strengthening and focusing Catholic believers to carry on the mission of Jesus in the world. All church programs, whether liturgical, educational or pastoral, are geared toward releasing God's power in the lives of members so that they can reach out in positive ways to help bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Many times, this involves believers in healing activities intended to relieve suffering, alienation and isolation.

According to this second vision, parish staff and volunteer efforts are directed toward mobilizing the energies of the parish to be a force for good in the world. Thus, whether counseling, educating, praying or celebrating, all activities are directed at the larger mission parishes are called to perform on behalf of the realization of the kingdom.

In the course of this lunch conversation, I began to wonder about the dif-

ferences between the two models, and about some of the implications in each of them. I started to think about a few of my own assumptions about church ministry and how these have changed over the past few years. For example, I used to think that those called to carry out the church's mission and conduct its ministry were primarily parish staff members. I presumed for a long time that priests, deacons and lay ministers were to serve the rest of us by providing opportunities to encounter the "means of grace" in our sacramental and worship lives. The "parish officials" were to focus on our needs, minister to us in times of trouble, make sure we're educated in faith, and generally make parish life interesting and vital for us.

More recently, however, I have come to think of the whole parish as being charged with the mission of the church. I have come to think of all parishioners as ministers of the Gospel, called to serve one another and others. I have even come to picture the role of the church leaders, whether paid staff or volunteer, as somewhat along the lines of a coach: They provide us, "the team," with access to whatever we need to fulfill our mission. A whole host of small and bigger shifts accompany this move from one image of parish life to the other.

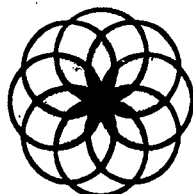
If I used to think of ministry and mission as the duty of "professional church ministers," I now think of it as the role of all parishioners. If I used to think of myself as "recipient" of the church's ministry, I now think of myself as "provider" of it. If I used to think of my

devotional and prayer life as a means of securing grace for my personal sanctity, I now think of my personal sanctity as part of God's action on behalf of the kingdom on earth. Personal intimacy with God is also part of a much bigger picture of God coming in friendship to all of us, which happens through one another.

If I used to think of church ministers as primarily the people who offer comfort as we face the hardships of life, I now see even ministry to parishioners who have suffered a loss, or those who sick or need help, as part of the wider call to all of us, not just church professionals, to assist members in their own call to church mission and ministry. Even the consolation offered to one another is not an end in itself, but a means of helping to form a community directed toward God's mission on earth. In whatever ways we foster community and sanctification among ourselves, we are ultimately striving to be a holy people called to image the kingdom and be its ambassadors on earth.

In the conversation mentioned above, I was clearly in the "second camp." After a great deal of thinking and talking about the issue of what adequate service from our parishes means, I am ready now to move beyond asking "Am I getting the services I need?" to asking instead, "Am I being encouraged, trained and empowered to take up my part in fulfilling the mission of this parish on behalf of God's kingdom on earth?"

♦ ♦ ♦  
Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.



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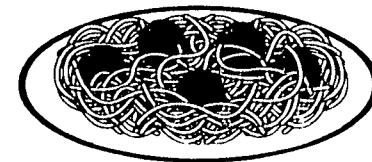
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