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A Participatory Residential Model
Addressing the Needs of Retired Priests

James J. Magee, DSW

ABSTRACT. Diocesan clergy bring several impediments to successful retirement that arise from the celibate, pyramidal, and task focused structure of their lifestyle. This is also the first generation of priests to retire from their parishes because of age. To assist them, many dioceses are providing group residences. Involvement of the retirees in designing and carrying out a participatory model for management of the residence can minimize the impediments to life satisfaction. Involvement promotes experiences in community building, advocacy on behalf of group needs, and candid exchanges about meaning and purpose that the residents want their retirement to provide.

Parish priests who have retired from their ministry in the Roman Catholic Church during the past two decades have borne three common issues into their retirement. The first issue concerns the unprecedented character of their mandatory retirement. These retirees are the first generation of priests required to retire from full-time ministry in their parishes when they reached, at the latest, seventy-five years of age. When the present retirees entered the priesthood, priests remained at their position until they were incapacitated or died.

The second issue arises from their celibate lifestyle. Because they do not marry, Roman priests enter upon their retirement without the primary relationships and informal caregivers that family life pro-
vides. Moreover, by the time they retire, death has often claimed their siblings and many of their clerical confidants.

The third issue is the emotionally isolated lifestyle that the hierarchical diocesan structure promotes. Canon law designates the bishop as the authority in his diocese. Appointed by the bishop, pastors are delegated, in turn, as the authorities responsible for the operation of their parishes. There are few constraints upon the pastors’ styles of leadership, however authoritarian, in interacting with the priests who assist them. These vertical relationships often maintain an ongoing social distance among the participants. Adding to this isolation, current personnel shortages have precipitated an increasing number of parishes staffed by only a single priest.

This hierarchical model tends to focus excessively upon task achievement, at the risk of slighting gratifying peer relationships. The emphasis upon superior-subordinate interaction heightens attention to carrying out these tasks, often without acknowledging the personal needs that the parties bring to them. For priests who identify themselves in terms of their pastoral responsibilities, retirement poses the risk that the loss of these responsibilities may diminish, as well, their self-acceptance as persons of worth.

Bishops generally provide for their retired clergy through pensions, major medical insurance coverage, and group residences in which the retirees can live until they require long-term nursing care. It is customary in these residences for each retiree to pay a modest rent for a two room suite with bath, with housekeeping services and meals provided. This article proposes that a participatory model for the management of these residences can promote an emotionally supportive, caring environment in which the retirees can originate a variety of schemes beneficial to the diocese and congruent with their own needs. This model integrates principles of effective management and group process in addressing the retirees’ needs in a hospitable setting that can ease the abruptness of their retirement and the hazard of social isolation.

**MANAGING THE RETIREMENT RESIDENCE**

A bishop ordinarily appoints a younger priest to direct the retirement residence. This arrangement enables retirees to live there without having to assume any administrative responsibilities. The
participatory model, however, modifies this pyramidal structure to involve the retirees in policy-making for the residences, to the extent that each man wishes to be involved.

Since the largest residences have not exceeded thirty-six priests, this model proposes that the director meet at least monthly with the entire membership. The men may use these meetings to air grievances, offer recommendations, plan communal activities, and elect task forces to collect data about specific matters and to present their findings, and even proposals, within a definite time. In one diocese, the residents even nominated one of their own number to succeed the director who was assuming another assignment. The bishop concurred with the choice, and the new director has approached his position as a continuation of his lifelong ministry.

In addition to meetings of the whole house, the model recommends that there be a steering committee, elected by the residents for a specified term. The steering committee will be the ordinary, ongoing liaison with the director. It, too, can solicit the participation of residents on small task forces that meet about specific questions and then disband. The task forces provide opportunities for retirees to participate at the level of involvement they prefer and in regard to topics that matter to them.

**MUTUAL CARING:**
**DESIGNING THEIR OWN RETIREMENT**

Sharing a common residence creates opportunities for involving retirees in matters pertinent to the residence and to their continuing identity as priests. The men have a stake in achieving consensus about issues "of the house" that affect them all. Moreover, as they engage one another in a problem-solving collegiality, the retirees are able to "move," as Argyris puts it,

- from a narrow to a wider range of alternatives.
- from demands on one ability to demands on many abilities.
- from tasks requiring dependence to tasks that permit independence and directiveness.
- from tasks that provide for a subordinate position to tasks that provide for an equal or superordinate position.¹
These tasks are likely to include proposals for their own parking spaces and spaces for guests, for privacy in pursuing their own schedules, for menu choices, for removing architectural barriers, for adding emergency lights and buzzers in each bedroom and lavatory, if these were not originally installed, and for policies about noise levels and keeping pets.

After the men have more experience as residents, they are likely to raise questions that they had previously regarded as only tangential to their needs. What should be the criteria for determining that a resident needs to move to a long-term care facility? What will be the process for determining these criteria? How can they effectively minister to colleagues who are transferred to long-term care facilities and, in doing so, work through their own resistance to the prospect that this transfer may well happen to themselves some day? How can interested retirees offer lessons gleaned from their ongoing experience as a resource that the diocese can use in the pre-retirement planning of younger priests? Their easy access to, or membership on, the steering committee and various task forces can enhance the processing of these questions and the men’s gratification with the answers.

The give-and-take exchanges that proceed among the residents can also be the context in which they test out potential confidant relationships and draw upon one another’s strengths in designing an expanded role for themselves as retirees. In several dioceses, for instance, retirees have proposed the status of “Senior Priests” in which retirees contract to be the celebrant at a variety of parish liturgical functions, to be moderator of specified parish organizations, or to be consultants to diocesan offices. Some retirees may be interested in training for alternative ministries, such as pastoral counseling or hospital chaplaincy. Others may prefer to minister through writing homilies or articles for religious magazines and newspapers. In each case, the fellowship of colleagues who share their interests or with whom they can explore the issues they are addressing is an emotionally sustaining resource.

These experiences can become effective arenas for integrating personal and communal needs. For, interaction among members of policy-making groups involves the participants in the following kinds of bonding behavior that especially address the needs of older priests:
Having members focus on defining group goals that satisfy the needs and utilize the important abilities of the individual members.

Generating norms that reward the individuality of each member, that show respect and concern for the members’ ideas and feelings, that facilitate and maintain a sense of trust.

Sharing leadership so that each member is leading the group when his skills are the most pertinent to the achievement of the group goals.

CONCLUSION

Diocesan clergy bring several impediments to successful retirement that arise from the celibate, pyramidal, and task focused structure of their lifestyle. This is also the first generation of priests to retire from their parishes because of age. To assist them, many dioceses are providing group residences. Involvement of the retirees in designing and carrying out a participatory model for management of the residence can minimize the impediments to life satisfaction. Involvement promotes experiences in community building, advocacy on behalf of group needs, and candid exchanges about meaning and purpose that the residents want their retirement to provide.

A participatory model facilitates the ability of the retirees to monitor the operation of the residence, to evaluate the steering committee, task forces, and liaison with the diocese, and to propose recommendations for the common good. Retirees can offer their feedback on site, individually or collectively, at any time during the planning or implementation of a proposal. They are determining the meaning of “retired priest,” and testing a process that ongoing generations of retired priests can use to augment and modify that meaning.

NOTES