

Our Parishes

— When a role carries too much

Tony Macelli

Reflections for pastors, coordinators, and volunteers in local communities

This article is written for you if you are a parish priest, group leader, coordinators or volunteer in church and community groups. It's for you if you who want to understand how roles in ministry and service can affect personal identity, emotional wellbeing, and community health

The intention is to help you to reflect on the subtle ways that roles can become entangled with a person's sense of worth or belonging. The insights and practical suggestions are intended to support healthy transitions, clear communication, and a culture where people are valued beyond their tasks - whether you are familiar with psychological concepts or not.

After the main article (see page 5) are sets of reflective questions that volunteers, priests, group leaders or coordinators, and friends or partners of volunteers might find useful for greater awareness of oneself and one's own attitudes. Values, behaviour and emotional investments will benefit from such enhanced self-awareness. And groups and parishes will benefit, too.

This article draws on research in attachment theory, organisational psychology, leadership studies, and pastoral theology, particularly in relation to role identity, emotional regulation, and community dynamics.

You will be relieved to know that in spite of well-known role-related interpersonal difficulties experienced in parishes, most roles in churches and community groups begin in a healthy place. Someone offers time and skill. A need is met. Trust grows. The work matters, and the person matters too.

Yet there is a familiar pattern, rarely spoken about openly, in which a role begins to carry more emotional weight than it was designed to hold. What started as service slowly becomes a source of steadiness, recognition, or inner bal-

ance. Often this shift happens quietly, without intention, and without anyone doing anything wrong.

The difficulty usually comes into view only later – when a role changes, is questioned, criticised, evaluated, shared, or comes to an end. At that point, the emotional response can surprise everyone involved, including the person themselves.

These dynamics are often easier to recognise in lived moments than in abstract descriptions.



When appreciation and role quietly merge

When a role has quietly become a carrier of worth or belonging, even a small change can feel like personal diminishment, even when appreciation is sincerely expressed.

When appreciation and role quietly merge

(picture on previous page)

Maria has coordinated the parish food rota for eight years. She knows the cupboards, the suppliers, the quiet emergencies. People thank her often. She rarely misses a week.

At a meeting, the parish priest expresses gratitude, then mentions that the role will now be shared with another volunteer. Maria smiles and nods. Nothing more is said.

That evening, she feels unexpectedly hollow. It is not anger exactly. It is a sense of having been gently moved to the edge of something she once inhabited fully. She cannot quite tell whether she is grieving the role, or something older and harder to name.

Why this happens

Psychology and organisational research describe this as role-identity fusion: the gradual blending of what we do with who we are. In faith and volunteer contexts, this is especially understandable. Service is meaningful. Commitment is praised. Reliability is often rewarded with trust and visibility.

For some people, especially those whose earlier experiences included instability, invisibility, or conditional acceptance, a role can become a quiet anchor. It offers shape, place, and recognition. Over time, the nervous system may come to rely on it more than anyone intends.

This does not indicate selfishness or spiritual immaturity. It reflects ordinary human needs meeting generous opportunities.

When a role is questioned or evaluated.

For some people, evaluation of a role is experienced as evaluation of the self. In these moments, feedback can activate fear of rejection rather than reflection on practice.



When a role is questioned or evaluated

During a routine review, Paul is told that some aspects of his pastoral home visiting could be handled differently. The feedback is measured and respectful.

Paul listens carefully and says thank you. Later, he finds himself replaying the conversation again and again. He wonders whether he has disappointed God, the priest, or the people he visits. He considers stepping back altogether,



unsure whether he is wanted.

What troubles him most is not the suggestion itself, but the feeling that something essential about him has been weighed and found lacking.

A necessary distinction

Healthy communities depend on feedback, evaluation, and shared discernment. Without them, roles stagnate and people burn out. The

difficulty arises when critique of a task is absorbed as judgement of the person.

This is why clarity matters. When roles are allowed to carry personal worth by default, every evaluation becomes emotionally charged. Leaders may find themselves walking on eggshells, and volunteers may experience ordinary review as threat.

The aim is not to eliminate feedback, but to

prevent it from carrying more weight than it should.

When leaders soothe distress by restoring roles

After the announcement of shared responsibilities, several parishioners approach the priest. “She’s very upset,” one says. “Perhaps this isn’t the right time.”

The priest feels torn. He had hoped the

change would support the wider group. That evening, he drafts a message suggesting the arrangement could be delayed. As he presses send, he feels relief.

What he does not yet see is that the relief comes from easing emotional pressure in the moment, not from strengthening the community’s long-term health.

Leadership without rescue

This moment is one of the most difficult for pastors and coordinators. Compassion pulls in one direction, responsibility in another.

What helps least, though it may feel kind, is restoring a role simply to settle distress. This teaches the nervous system – and the community – that emotional equilibrium depends on status remaining unchanged. The next transition then becomes harder still.

Calm presence, clarity, and dignity are more stabilising than reversal. Leaders do not need to resolve distress in order to respect the person experiencing it.

Celebrating persons beyond roles

Christian communities speak often of unconditional dignity of the person. Yet in practice, dignity can become quietly conditional on usefulness, reliability, or visibility.

Roles can express a person’s gifts, but they cannot confer their worth. That worth precedes every assignment and outlasts every role.

Communities that regularly celebrate people apart from what they do – naming faithfulness, presence, kindness, perseverance – reduce



When leaders soothe distress by restoring roles

Restoring or protecting a role in order to reduce distress often soothes the present moment while reinforcing the belief that the role is necessary for emotional stability.

the emotional load placed on roles. When belonging is not primarily mediated through responsibility, service becomes freer and less fragile.

This kind of culture cannot be created only through careful role management. It grows through repeated, explicit practices of recognition that are not tied to function.



Celebrating persons beyond roles

When roles are clearly time-bound and transitions are normalised from the outset, endings can involve sadness without becoming identity crises.

When endings are named early and held well

When Anna accepts responsibility for coordinating the study group, she is told it will likely last three years. Each year, the transition is mentioned briefly and without drama.

As the final year approaches, Anna feels sadness but not shock. Others are invited into preparation. When the role ends, she continues

attending the group, now simply as a member.

“I miss it,” she says later, “but I don’t feel as though I’ve disappeared.”

Shared responsibility and collective maturity

One of the most effective ways to prevent the fusion of roles with identities is to reduce the sense that a task belongs to one person alone.

Where practical, shared or rotating responsibility allows roles to be held more lightly. Time-bound rosters, co-leadership, and group-discerned assignments distribute both responsibility and recognition. They also encourage communities to develop conflict-resolution practices, rather than relying on authority alone.

Direct assignment by clergy or group leaders may sometimes be necessary. Yet when it becomes the default, it can unintentionally reinforce dependency, patronising assumptions, and the sense that roles are fixed or owned.

Shared leadership, when supported and well-held, promotes both individual and collective maturation.

Letting roles end well

Roles do not only need to begin well. They also need to end well. In many communities, far more attention is given to appointment than to completion, as if a role simply fades away once it is no longer named.

Yet endings matter. They are moments when meaning is consolidated or quietly undone.

When roles end abruptly, without preparation or acknowledgement, people are left to make sense of the change on their own. For those whose sense of belonging or worth has become entwined with responsibility, this can feel like dismissal rather than transition. Even when no harm is intended, the nervous system often registers loss before reason has time to intervene.

Letting roles end well involves several simple but easily neglected practices:

- naming the ending early, even if it lies some distance ahead
- acknowledging the contribution without exaggeration or sentimentality
- distinguishing clearly between gratitude for the person and evaluation of the role
- allowing space for mixed emotions, including sadness or relief
- keeping the person relationally connected after the role has ended

These practices do not weaken leadership. They strengthen it. Research on role exit and organisational change consistently shows that clarity and containment reduce resentment, acting-out, and long-term disengagement (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

From a pastoral perspective, endings handled with care honour the truth that service is a chapter in a person's life, not the measure of their place in the community. When this is done well, people are more willing to offer themselves again in new ways, rather than withdrawing quietly after an experience of loss.

Holding roles lightly, taking people seriously

Roles matter. They organise life, enable service, and allow gifts to be used. But they are not designed to hold a person's sense of worth, belonging, or identity.

Communities flourish when roles are held with care but not clutched, and when people are valued more deeply than any assignment they happen to carry.

Roles come and go.

Dignity does not.

Learning to honour one without confusing it for the other is one of the quiet disciplines that allows communities – and the people within them – to endure.

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TOWARDS

REALISTIC

SELF-AWARENESS

Here are some questions that invite quiet personal reflection.

PASTORS

For Pastors: parish priests, religious monks, friars, and nuns in charge of a parish, or active in a parish. These questions are offered in respectful recognition of the great weight carried but such persons, who are sometimes lonely, and who often have little opportunity to freely discuss their own styles with others. Such styles of using authority, leadership, and communication are of course quite crucial for a Christian community.

Questions about roles and authority:

How do I usually decide who holds which roles, and how transparent is that process?

Do I tend to explain the reasoning behind decisions, or assume that authority makes explanation unnecessary?

When roles change, am I more focused on efficiency or on how the change will be experienced?

PARISH VOLUNTEERS

Questions about emotional dynamics:

How do I usually respond when someone reacts strongly to a decision I have made?

Am I able to remain present with discomfort, or do I feel pressure to resolve it quickly?

In moments of tension, do I notice fear, fatigue, or irritation in myself, and how might these shape my responses?

Questions about trust and group life:

To what extent do I trust the parish community to share responsibility where this is practical?

Are there structures here that support collective discernment, or does most responsibility rest with me by default?

When conflict arises, do I tend to locate the problem mainly in individuals, or also in patterns and structures?

How much do I know about volunteers' needs?

How much do I know, and trust, about various forms of shared leadership in parish and groups?

Questions about support:

Who helps me reflect honestly on my leadership, and do I listen without needing to defend myself?

Where do I bring my own loneliness, tiredness, or discouragement?

What would it mean for me to be better supported, so that I do not have to hold everything tightly?

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GROUP LEADERS, COORDINATORS

(including teachers, catechists, ministry leaders)
These questions focus on how leadership shapes group culture, often unintentionally.

Questions about structure:

Are roles here clearly time-bound, or do they become permanent by default?

How are transitions handled – early and openly, or late and under pressure?

Do roles belong to individuals, or to the group as a whole?

Questions about emotional climate:

How do I usually respond when someone reacts strongly to change?

Do I tend to rescue, appease, avoid, or stay present?

What behaviours are quietly rewarded in this group – steadiness, escalation, loyalty, compliance?

Questions about maturity:

Does this group help people grow in confidence and freedom, or in dependence?

How are disagreements handled, and what support exists when conflict arises?

Are people encouraged to step forward and step back with equal dignity?

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These questions are offered to support freedom, awareness and maturity in service, not withdrawal from it.

Questions about motivation and experience:

What first drew me to this role, and what keeps me in it now?

How do I usually feel when my role is shared, reviewed, or changed?

If I imagine stepping back from this role, what emotions arise? Why?

Questions about identity and boundaries:

Does this role carry some of my sense of worth or belonging?

Am I able to rest, say no, or ask for change without guilt?

How do I respond internally to feedback or critique?

Questions about community life:

Do I experience being valued here apart from what I do?

How do I speak about leaders and decisions when I feel disappointed or hurt?

When tensions arise, do I tend to withdraw, escalate, or seek understanding?

Questions for growth:

What might it look like to hold this role more lightly without caring less?

Are there supports outside this role that help me stay grounded?

If this role were to end well, what would I hope remains in my life and faith?

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FRIENDS, SPOUSES of VOLUNTEERS

These questions are for those who are close to someone struggling around new roles or loss or change of roles,

Questions about support:

Am I offering presence, or am I being drawn into reassurance loops?

Do I validate feelings without confirming distorted beliefs?

Can I stay connected without taking responsibility for fixing things?

Questions about boundaries:

Am I becoming the main emotional regulator for this person?

Do I feel pressure to take sides or fuel grievance?

Can I encourage broader support without withdrawing care?

Questions about honesty:

Am I able to speak gently when I notice patterns that may be unhelpful?

Do I model steadiness and perspective, or mirror distress?

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Selected references

The notes clarify how each reference supports the themes of role identity, transition, and community health in the context of church and volunteer work.

Ashforth, B. E. (2001). Role transitions in organizational life. Explores how people move between roles, highlighting the emotional and identity challenges during transitions—useful for understanding how people experience changes in church roles.

Bowlby, J. (1988). A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development. Introduces attachment theory, which helps explain why people may seek stability and belonging through their roles in church communities.

Heifetz, R., & Linsky, M. (2002). Leadership on the line. Focuses on adaptive leadership, offering guidance for pastors and coordinators facing difficult transitions and emotional responses in their communities.

Hiltner, S. (1958). Preface to pastoral theology. Foundational text for pastoral care, emphasizing the relationship between theology and practical ministry—helpful for reflecting on the spiritual dimensions of role identity.

Hiltner, S. (1961). The ministry of pastoral care. Explores the practice of pastoral care, including how roles shape relationships and community life.

Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. Shows how people use stories to make sense of role changes, which is

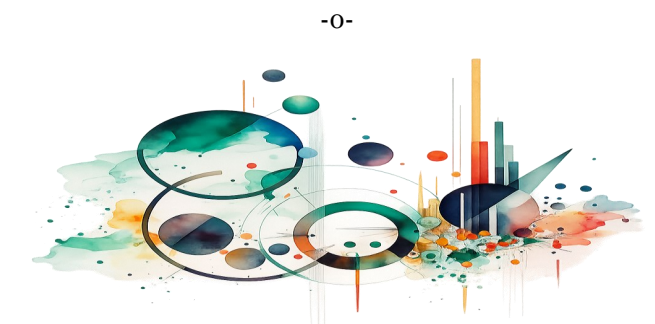
helpful for understanding how volunteers and leaders process transitions in faith communities.

Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. Identifies the psychological needs (safety, meaningfulness, resources) that help people engage fully in their roles—relevant for supporting volunteers and staff.

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2016). Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change. Expands attachment theory to adult relationships, explaining how early life experiences affect role attachment in groups and churches.

Petriglieri, G. (2011). Under threat: Responses to and the consequences of threats to individuals' identities. Examines how threats to identity provoke strong emotional reactions—useful for understanding reactions to role changes or criticism.

Purves, A. (2004). Reconstructing pastoral theology: A Christological foundation. Provides a theological framework for pastoral care, connecting Christian identity to the experience of roles in community.



Contact:

chat, comment, ask, suggest, correct:
imagnetony@gmail.com

