Once upon a time…. This is the way fairy tales begin. It also is the way our history as parishes begins when we think of what the life of parishes looked like 50 years ago, or longer, or maybe a little more recently. In 1964, more than 2,000 bishops were attending the largest gathering of the Catholic hierarchy: the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII convened them to address the changes that were happening in the world that affected the life of the church right down to the local level, to parishes. One of sixteen documents they wrote focused on the role of the lay faithful. Along with other council documents, this text would open up a new way in which priests see lay people, the ways lay people see themselves, and the ways we all see each other.

The council’s teaching on the Mass would open up new liturgical ministries to the laity, such as lectors and extraordinary ministers of communion. But the church fathers intended much more than inviting lay folks into the sanctuary. They realized then that for the church to carry out its mission to bring Christ to the world and the world to Christ, lay people needed to grasp that their baptismal vocation involves gifts that are given for the good of the church. Out of Vatican II came a clarion call for baptized Catholics to get more involved in the day to day life of the church, and to bring gospel values and church teaching into their homes and into the marketplace. The basis of this reinvigorated sense of lay participation in the church is our belief that Christian initiation—baptism, eucharist and confirmation—bestows on all of us a new identity. The anointing at baptism expresses this identity: “as Christ was anointed priest, prophet and king, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.” All belong to the Body of Christ; every member is important.

Just as we believe that every human being has meaning and value and a place in God’s plan for the world, so too do we believe that by virtue of baptism every Catholic has meaning and value and a place in the church. I assume you have heard this before. More urgently, I ask you to think seriously about what it means in our parishes right now. Once upon a time… as I myself can remember, priests and bishops dominated the life of the parish. They “said” Mass—and they did just about everything that had to be done at Mass: prepared the altar, read the readings and gave communion. They “confected” the sacraments. When I was a young priest people would just show up one day for baptism and I baptized their child. Of course lay people had a role: they not only funded all the activities of the church, they also ran clubs and socials and did work around the church. Secretaries filled out mass cards and scheduled masses. Priests probably outnumbered lay employees. But then we all became aware that more would be needed from the laity. They had more to give than money; they had skills and ideas that could help our church faces an internal and external world that was rapidly changing. I think many lay people welcomed this new sense of their identity and involvement in parish life. Where would either of our parishes be today without both lay leadership in councils and committees and lay professional roles as directors of religious education, liturgy coordinators, pastoral associates, business managers and full time parish secretaries? And don’t forget the invaluable ministry of deacons, who are not lay men but clergy.

As our parishes move toward greater and closer collaboration, it becomes more obvious every day that with fewer priests in our midst, we need the gifts of lay people, professionals and volunteers. Every day I rely on such people who generously and competently work with me to attend to the many spiritual needs of people, and to the many administrative needs of a parish. I write to you to ask you to be conscious of and grateful for the tremendous work our lay people do. You need to accept them and appreciate how they can serve you and the many people who call on the phone or ring the doorbell looking for help. You know how our priests are being stretched to cover the demands of priestly ministry. I ask your prayers and support for us. But my message is also this. Let our good lay people help you too. Work with them. Trust them. Support them. Pray for them. I cannot thank them enough for what they do. And let them care for you and work with you as they do with me for the good of our parishes. And let us all see how critically
important it is to communicate well with each other. Don’t be afraid to ask our staff to help or to speak to our council and committee members. Most of all, please don’t hesitate to step forward and ask: “how can I help you? What can I do?” I promise to do my best to value your gift and your time as a fellow disciple of the Lord, a brother or sister in Christ. We priests love and want to serve you. But with fewer of us, we need you to help us do the job together. “Once upon a time” needs to be the start of this new story of our parishes, a new time in church history where clergy and laity discover how much we need – and value – each other as co-workers in the church.

God Bless,
Fr. John