

Features

Parish services office challenges, nurtures pastoral councils

EDITOR'S NOTE: This week we begin a six-week series looking at various diocesan programs that are funded by the Thanks Giving Appeal. Subsequent articles will also examine the process by which some programs receive funding while others do not, and how budgetary cuts and ceilings have affected a number of diocesan services.

By Lee Strong

Deacon Claude Lester remembers what it was like to be a member of a parish council in the early 1970s.

"We sat around awkwardly staring at each other or at the floor, knowing that Vatican II said we were to build a new Church," the deacon recalled. "But it didn't give us a blueprint of how to become a new Church."

Lester, who among his many duties as director of the Office of Parish Services now helps parishes create and improve their councils, observed that "we've learned an incredible amount in the 20 years since the councils began."

When parishes were first forming councils, the deacon explained, council members looked to such already established groups as the Church or the American Legion for models. Using the structure of those organizations as a guide, the parish councils wrote constitutions and held elections.

"In the early days, we were always asking, 'How are we like everyone else?'" Deacon Lester noted. Now, with more than 20 years of experimentation and growth, "We've begun asking how we are different. We are different because we are Christ-centered. The implication of this is that if we are Christ-centered, if we are different, how we do what we do also needs to be different."

Just as the view of parish councils has changed in the last two decades, so has the office Deacon Lester has directed since 1984.

Beginning in 1973 as the Office of Pastoral Ministry, it grew rapidly until by the mid-1970s it had two full-time staff members, two part-time staff members and a secretary. The pastoral ministry office provided services not only to parishes and parish councils, but also to the Diocesan Pastoral Council and regional conferences.

During reorganization of the pastoral center in the late 1970s, some of the pastoral ministry office's areas of responsibility were shifted to other diocesan offices. By the early 1980s, the renamed Office of Parish Councils had only one part-time staff person, Sister Jean Rodman, SSJ, who had been in charge of parish council development under the old structure.

Under Sister Rodman the parish council office continued to offer services to parishes, but, Deacon Lester explained, because she was only part time, she couldn't offer all the services she wished to.

"For the most part, people would receive a response to their question, but it would more likely be over the phone or in the mail rather than an on-site, personal visit," he noted.

At the recommendation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Ministerial Review Committee, the part-time position was made full-time in response to parishes' growing needs as their parish councils took on more responsibilities and became increasingly aware of their own strengths and deficiencies. Deacon Lester was hired for this full-time job, and he used the fall orientation sessions in 1984 to make people aware of the change. The sessions, held in three locations his first year, attracted more than 200 people. This year, Lester will direct eight sessions, focusing on the theme, "What's a parish council all about?"

Since that first year, requests for services from the office have mushroomed, Deacon Lester said, noting that "people are more and more aware that this office is here to pray with them, to teach skills, helping them to be more effective leaders and helping them to realize their giftedness." Between 100 and 120 parishes each year now ask for some form of assistance or consultation, he reported, and many parishes call on him two or more times.

"The primary focus is still seen to be parish councils, but since we have a full-time person, we went back to an earlier model of involvement," the deacon said.

Deacon Lester conducts the fall orientation sessions for parish council members and spring sessions for potential council candidates — which he calls candid convenings for council candidates — to explain what parish council commitment will involve. When invited, he will observe and evaluate parish council meetings, and provide other consultation and resource services.

In addition, the deacon resurrected the annual diocesan parish council conferences, renaming them leadership days. He conducts annual dialogue sessions in different parts of the diocese to give parish leaders opportunities to ask questions not only about their own roles within the parish, but of activities in the diocese in general. With parish input, he revised the 1975 Parish Ministry Policy Statements, and he recently conducted a series of "Dare to Dream — Free to Serve" retreats to help parish communities assess their needs, initiate program planning and create a mission statement.

Deacon Lester has also been involved in preparing the regional assemblies which this fall will look at alternative forms of leadership in parishes. Last year, he conducted listening sessions to provide input for the Synod on the Laity in Rome.

Such wide-ranging activities necessitate a great deal of traveling by the deacon, who estimates that he spends at least four evenings a week and half of each weekend at parishes or conducting meetings — in addition to his regular office hours at the Pastoral Center.

He acknowledged that it's sometimes tempting to think of having a second staff person.

Instead, however, he formed the Collegial Associates, a group of people who have been trained to assist with consultations and running orientation sessions.

"I created the collegial associates in part to assist me, but in large part to give a good example to a Church that's collegial," Deacon Lester said. The associates, people who are involved in their parishes, also help to provide him with a range of experiences. "They bring a whole level of credibility — maybe not as many facts or direct information, but they have a lot under their belts."

Greater collegiality is, in fact, a direction that parish councils are taking, and a direction in which Lester encourages them to move. "Vatican II called the universal Church to be more responsible for their future and to be more collegial," he said. "It forced us to look at the laity's role in more than the 'Pray, Pay and Obey' mode. It really enriched our understanding of baptism and the sense of call."

At this year's leadership day (to be held October 15 at Cardinal Mooney High School), the deacon will use the symbol of a circle to explain how a parish council should work. "The circle is a powerful image," Deacon Lester explained. "It's not a self-sufficient model. We are extending hands to one another, saying, 'I need you.' We are not complete without each other, and a circle falls apart when one person withdraws."

Deacon Lester employs small group techniques at the fall orientation sessions to emphasize the need for closeness and working together on parish councils. These sessions include discussions of the need for planning, good agendas, follow through and nurturing relationships with other council members.

Deacon Lester also begins each session with prayer, a practice he says needs to receive greater emphasis at parish council meetings.

"One of the things that I do each year is to create a prayer for the initial time that I gather with any group," the deacon said. "After the prayer, he noted, people seem to "have a sense of being in unity with other people, a sense of being relaxed, a sense of relationship, a sense of a common journey."

"People are really yearning for that in their individual lives," he continued. "It comes back to that difference (between parish councils and other groups). We are Christ-centered."

Anita Brayman of St. Mary's, Geneseo, who attended the orientation session held at her parish on September 19, said the opening prayer was one of the features of the session that struck her.

"I was impressed with the amount of time and preparation that went into the opening prayer," Brayman said. "I was impressed with the amount of time given for people to center themselves on what they are about."

Bob Meyer, also of St. Mary's, Geneseo, likewise praised the emphasis on prayer at the session. "I think it is very important," he said. "I think it gives direction to the activities of the council and the kinds of things we do."

Although he has been on the parish council

for four years — and is currently president — Meyer found the session helpful. "The nice thing about it was how he related incidents which gave us insights about some of the things we had to do," he said.

The orientation sessions also provide contact with council members from other parishes, noted Rich Colosi of St. Mary's in Canandaigua, who attended a session at his parish on September 20. "I felt that people were there because they wanted to help the parish, and they were there to find out ways to help the parish."

The discussion also helped reinforce some of Colosi's own ideas about parish councils. "We are to be the ear of the parish to bring back what people are saying," he noted. Sometimes what people are saying about the parish is negative. "Maybe we (on the councils) can find ways to make it positive," he suggested.

"One of my goals is to try to get more people to take ownership of the parish, and to find ways to get people together to work towards a common goal," Colosi said. The first-year council member observed that the orientation session helped him think about these issues more.

Deacon Lester noted that at the orientation sessions — and through consultations, retreats and in-service programs — he has seen the image of the council change from "Father's little group" to that of a body seeking out and encouraging people to use their gifts. This shift is leading some parishes to change how parish council membership and leadership in other parish groups is chosen.

"More and more parishes are saying we need an alternative model instead of electing people," he said. Because elections are essentially popularity contests, well-qualified and committed people who have lost are hurt and tend not to risk being hurt again, he explained.

A new model that many parishes are looking at is one of discernment, a tool that allows people to decide how they can best serve the community, Deacon Lester said. Those who feel drawn to parish council membership submit their names, and the council is chosen in some way that doesn't hurt the losers, such as putting all the names in a hat and drawing out the required number of members.

Parishes are also beginning to re-examine their council constitutions, to look at the size of their councils, to reassess how council meetings are run and decisions are made. More and more, parishes are calling on the Office of Parish Ministry to help with these self-examinations.

"There's a wonderful openness on the part of people to be challenged by change," Deacon Lester observed. "I must say I consistently thank people for giving me (to their parishes) because they do give me hope for the future of the Church. Even when they're in crisis, a totally dysfunctional group, their willingness to be people of faith and to recognize when they're in need and to seek help is a wonderful challenge."

Information session offered on Natural Family Planning

Natural Family Planning of Rochester has scheduled a free information session explaining the Sympto-Thermal Method to couples attempting to achieve pregnancy for Friday, Oct. 14, at Rochester General Hospital.

Natural Family Planning teachers will show slides and explain the method, which enables couples to chart the mucus and cervix signs as an accurate way to identify the best time in a woman's cycle to achieve a pregnancy. According to Justin A. Tubiolo, executive director of Natural Family Planning of Rochester, "the guess-work of rhythm is gone."

"It (the Rhythm Method) has given way to the modern natural methods of family planning, the Ovulation Method and the Sympto-Thermal Method, which are based on sound scientific principles and do not depend on regular cycles. It is the most comprehensive and effective natural method, because users chart all of the observable fertility symptoms," he said.

Natural Family Planning Education of Rochester is a non-profit agency serving the Diocese of Rochester with offices at St. Mary's Hospital.

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