

Features

Thanks Giving Appeal '88

Personnel office helps handle challenges of parish staffing

By Rob Cullivan

As the heat of the office's fluorescent ceiling lights burns above them, a secretary sits at her desk, patiently listening to the advice of her boss, "Father Newcomer." Father Newcomer has decided that the secretary's filing system needs restructuring. The secretary politely complains that her former boss, "Father Oldtimer," who left only six months ago, never saw any need to restructure anything in her office. She points out to her new pastor that her 20 years of experience more than qualify her to decide how to keep track of the parish's records.

Father Newcomer is not swayed by this argument. He reminds his secretary that Father Oldtimer is no longer in charge, and that if she wants to get along with her new boss, she'll have to remember that.

For the next year, the secretary spends a lot of time in a neighboring parish's confessional, asking for absolution for many an unkind thought directed towards her pastor. Meanwhile, Father Newcomer finds himself increasingly exasperated by his secretary's reluctance to speed up the implementation of his new filing system. Finally, at wit's end, he is compelled to call the department of personnel services of the diocesan Division of Personnel, Staffing and Development. On the other end of the line, he hears the soothing voice of the department's director, Mary Kessler.

Kessler suggests that she meet separately with the pastor and his secretary so that she can hear both sides of the story. At each meeting, the director will try to determine what each person is willing to give up in order to improve their working relationship. Father Newcomer thanks Kessler for her time, and hangs up, relieved that his desire to be a charitable Christian is no longer threatened by the temptation his secretary's intransigence affords.

After meeting with the involved parties, Kessler will ask them to meet together to work out their differences. "In most cases, the employer and employee want to solve the problem," she observes. "(But) I have run into cases where one must leave."

In such a case, the employee is the one who must go, but that doesn't mean he or she is simply shoved out the door. Kessler often suggests

an increase in severance pay for the worker and, if possible, tries to place the employee with another parish in which he or she can work successfully.

Resolving conflicts between pastors and their staffs is just one of four major services Kessler provides. She also helps parishes recruit and train their employees, provides parishes with information regarding such employee-related issues as immigration law and wage scales, and helps parishes formulate employee policies.

Kessler has headed the department since July, 1985, when services previously offered by the Religious Education, Youth Ministry and Pastoral Assistance departments were consolidated. Since then, she has served as a one-woman resource center for the diocese's personnel needs.

Helping parishes recruit new staff members keeps Kessler busy at the beginning of each year. In February and March of each year, pastors give Kessler requests for employees. She then screens potential employees referred to her by parishes or recruited through ads in local and national newspapers. Eventually, she compiles a list of candidates and sends it to parishes by mid-April. By the end of June, most parishes will have hired any needed staff and, Kessler notes, many of those hired will have previously worked elsewhere in the diocese. "This year, only two or three people hired out of 37 were from outside (the diocese)," she said.

Kessler doesn't end her contact with the new staff members once they're hired. She regularly visits parishes to assist in staff development. One method she employs is calling the staff members together to discuss their goals in light of the parish's mission statement. Kessler also notes that parish staff members often need emotional support. "People in ministerial positions are so susceptible to burn-out," she said. "Listening is their life. They need someone to talk to."

Parish workers also need recognition from their peers, something that they have often lacked, Kessler says. She said she wants to end this pattern by implementing a system of performance evaluation in parishes. Last year, she asked pastors and their employees to evaluate

their co-workers' efforts. "We got a great response," she points out. The data gathered includes how each job has changed over the year.

Kessler also encourages pastors to set up formal personnel systems. In the past, she recalls, parishes have tended to operate loosely, styling themselves after the structure of a family. Standard treatment of employee issues now helps parishes avoid legal problems in the future. For example, parishes can avoid being accused of wrongful firing of an employee if they record disciplinary problems. "There have been times we haven't completely documented disciplinary actions pastors have taken," Kessler remarks, noting that this failure has led to disputes when firings have occurred.

Being consistent is the key to directing a staff, Kessler asserts. To that end, she regularly sends pastors supervisor manuals containing advice on how to work with employees. She also issues a yearly employee compensation package listing suggested wage scales and benefits, which are based on a market survey of local and national not-for-profit organizations.

Not all the diocese's recommendations apply to each parish, she acknowledges. Rural parishes, for example, don't always have the financial base that other parishes might enjoy. Such benefits as mileage compensation, for example, may be impractical for rural parishes. Variations like this have been among the reasons the diocese commissioned a revision of its own policy manual, which was last revised in 1981.

Currently, a committee made up of representatives from the various groups of employees throughout the diocese is working to create a policy manual that reflects the parishes' varied experience in staff development. The manual, which is scheduled for release by July 1, 1989, will advise parishes on proper working conditions, termination and grievance procedures, employee compensation and benefits.

"Policy manuals are the scar tissues of an organization," Kessler remarks, noting that policies arise in response to past experiences. Some of those scars are borne by the diocese's laity, whose needs have been sometimes over-

looked when parishes formed their benefits packages. One example of such an oversight is the week of paid retreat time the diocese offers its employees. Unmarried clergy and religious find it easy to schedule such a retreat, but scheduling is not so simple for employees with families. In response, Kessler suggests, "We could find local retreats that are part of the work day."

Another inconsistency in diocesan policy is the number of paid holidays employees receive. Kessler wants to standardize the number of holidays assigned to employees throughout the diocese, and then allow individual parishes to decide what holidays their staff will take.

Other needs have surfaced in Kessler's discussions around the diocese. "We need to put some real efforts into programs to address needs of lay ministers," she remarks, suggesting that a lay minister be encouraged to take a few years to discern his or her true vocation before being assigned to a parish. "We want to make sure they're answering a call rather than taking a job."

Kessler also observes that parish ministers need to be trained to help them determine when someone in need of professional help should be referred to an appropriate counselor or agency. The helping nature of the parish ministry can lead a well-intentioned minister to forego this process, she said.

Indeed, good intentions are not enough, according to Kessler. Her slogan, after several years in this line of work is: "Know your limits." But if you don't, you can give her office a call. She just might have some guidelines available.

Correction

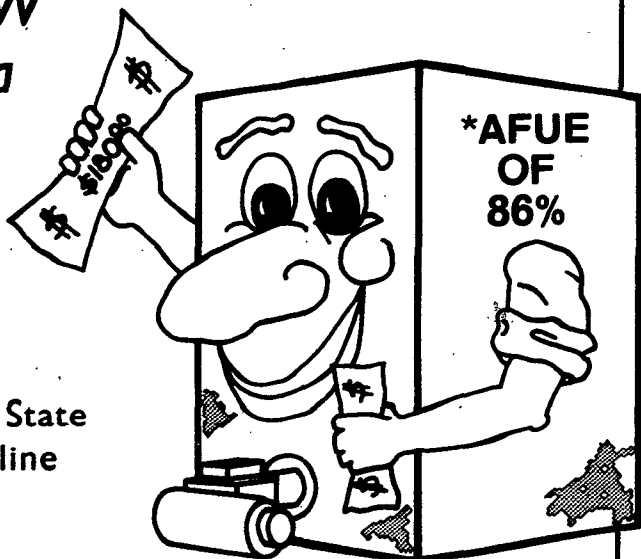
In the article "Visitation program helps parishes plan future ministries" by Rob Cullivan (C-J October 6), Father Donald McCarthy, pastor of Christ the King Parish in Rochester, was incorrectly identified as Father Charles McCarthy. We regret the error.

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