

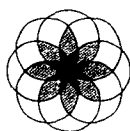
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S T. A N N ' S
ADULT DAY SERVICES
Full of Life

Many parts

Continued from page 1

staff on its cover. Instead, the three churches' parish council chairpersons are listed. Also, "nothing has to go through me to get into the bulletin," the pastor said.

He noted the Diocese of Rochester's directory puts the pastor right where he thinks he should be — last on the list (although he half-jokes that he may be committing a sin of pride here since the Scriptures say "the last shall be first.")

Father Werth pointed out that these editorial practices symbolize the cluster's belief that its staff and pastor are there to serve its lay members — not the other way around.

And those members have enormous freedom to participate in parish life, according to JoAnn DeMott, a member of St. Monica's, who chairs the parish's liturgy committee. Father Werth keeps abreast of what the committee is doing, she said. But the committee makes virtually all of its decisions about special liturgies it plans through the year without running everything by him beforehand.

"It's kind of a neat feeling to know that we're trusted enough to take over things that years ago lay people wouldn't have been trusted to do," she said.

That hands-off approach also informs the pastor's relationship with the cluster staff members. Four shared their views on the cluster's shared leadership in a roundtable interview: Richard McCorry, director of pastoral care; Eileen Dillio, pastoral business manager; Heide Parreño, director of outreach and evangelization; and Mary Ellen Fischer, pastoral minister for St. Augustine's.

They noted that, along with Father Werth and other cluster staff personnel, they rotate carrying a pager that allows anyone to contact cluster staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The staff meets every two weeks, and its members check up on each other regularly to make sure everyone's on the same page pastorally. However, each exercises a wide range of autonomous decision-making power in their separate areas of ministry, they said.

One layperson who transformed her love for the parish into a paid leadership position was Fischer, who has been St. Augustine's part-time pastoral minister since February 1999. A parishioner for 28 years, Fischer's position was designed to fill a staffing gap. Today her duties include setting up for Masses, weddings and funerals; ordering and distributing sacristy supplies; and serving as liaison to the cluster's liturgy and communications committees.

McCorry grew up attending St. Augustine's and remembered when three or four priests at a time staffed the parish. Among his current duties is overseeing volunteers such as members of the Legion of Mary who visit the sick and shut-ins. He added that he's sure in the old days a priest would have handled many of his duties, but the current era is a moment of opportunity for lay people to answer their baptismal call to build up the church.

"I think we are really living Christianity as we should have from the beginning," he said.

Dillio pointed out that she signs all the cluster's checks, and works with each parish's finance committee on their budgets. Father Werth told her he would only sign a check "if you get hit by a truck," she said with a smile. On that note, Parreño pointed out that she's given emergency funding monies to people in need, and that she and other staff members don't have to consult their pastor on such matters.

Parreño, whose duties include visiting the homes of parishioners and encouraging them to volunteer, said that more than 100 parishioners have assumed some type of leadership roles in the cluster. She said that parish members have set up ministries



on their own without having to jump through endless consultative hoops.

Yet, with all this power-sharing, the 19th Ward staff and volunteers acknowledged there's always the danger that one or more persons can make a decision that contradicts church teaching or policy. The staff members noted that they all have extensive real life and/or academic experience, including training through the Diocese of Rochester, which has prepared them for their positions. They also said they avoid the danger of veering too far away from accepted church practice by checking with each other routinely to make sure no one goes out too far ahead of the cluster — or, for that matter, the universal church.

"Even though we're progressive ... there's a certain level of maturity and wisdom," Parreño said. "There is a certain way to be progressive, but we don't want to be in any way against the church."

'Werth'while comments

Father Werth stressed that there's nothing new in the philosophy undergirding the cluster's approach to shared leadership. The church's social teachings call for the practice of subsidiarity, which says that nothing should be done at a higher level that can be done as well or better at a lower level, he noted.

"Do not feel in any stretch of the imagination that any weight of the parish falls on your shoulders," Father Werth advised his fellow priests. "Let the gifted people and staff in your parish fully use their gifts and live out their passion."

The priest said he believes in arranging his life in a manner that allows him to do best the tasks for which he was ordained.

"If celebrating Mass is a drain, something somewhere is out of balance in terms of relationships or workaholicism," he said. He added that funerals and weddings are vitally important moments in the relationship between priests and lay people. Such work should be a priority for any priest, he said, not merely considered a duty in addition to saying Mass regularly.

He said he doesn't have stress, in part, because he doesn't attend every meeting at his parish, nor does he feel he has to represent the cluster at every event. For example, he said, 19th Ward staff members went without him to the diocesan-sponsored Planning Group Leadership Day March 31 at St. Mary's School in Waterloo. The staff members presented a workshop on "Pastoral Planning in Urban Areas in Light of 2025." As Father Werth saw it, his presence wasn't needed since it's more than likely lay people will be administering urban churches when 2025 rolls around.

On a final note, he said, willingly sharing leadership with lay people actually may encourage priestly vocations. If parish work is not endlessly stressful, he said, then more men might find the priestly vocation attractive.

"Who would want to be a priest in today's church if all they hear is how hard it is?" Father Werth asked rhetorically.

DeMott also pointed out that sharing leadership with lay people shows that the church considers one's thoughts and actions "worthwhile," an attitude that can only encourage more people in the pews to rise up and participate in church life.

"It's not just one person leading the show," she said. "It's many people involved ... It's your church."