



Parish Life and Servant Leadership:
A Series of Eight Articles

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This series by Dan R. Ebener looks at the role of servant leadership in fostering high-performing parishes. The articles were published in *The Catholic Messenger* and are based on the dissertation for his Doctorate in Business Administration from St. Ambrose University, which he received in May 2007.

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Studying parish life and servant leadership

January 24, 2008

“How do you measure the life of a parish?” This question was posed to me by Bishop William Franklin three years ago in a meeting at the Diocese of Davenport. It is a critical question for any parish, especially those looking for signs of growth and improvement. The bishop’s question led to a three-year research project that essentially tried to answer his question. In a series of articles to be published in *The Catholic Messenger*, I will present some of my findings.

The beginning

It was 2004, and the bishop had just organized task forces entitled *Celebrating the Faith*, *Passing on the Faith* and *Living the Faith*. He assigned me to staff the *Living the Faith* Task Force, which was looking at the structuring of parishes for the future of the diocese. Like many dioceses, we were struggling with staffing parishes given the growing shortage of priests. We were looking at many options for closing, consolidating and clustering parishes in the diocese.

The *Living the Faith* Task Force returned a recommendation to the diocese that no parish should be closed due to the shortage of priests. Parishes should only close if they were no longer viable, if they had no life in them. That’s when Bishop Franklin asked me the question that has driven this three-year study: “How do you measure the life of a parish?”

The bishop’s question galvanized the task force to develop a modest self-study that was distributed to all 84 parishes, evaluating themselves on nine areas of ministry: faith formation, family life, social action, liturgy, finance and administration, church life, evangelization, stewardship and vocations.

Following up, the diocese developed a set of 20 operational measures to evaluate each parish and provide feedback on financial statements, demographic data and sacramental records. Together, the self-study and the other measures gathered were called the parish life study.

Meetings with parishes

Meetings were held around the diocese and hundreds of parish leaders turned out to view and discuss the individualized parish reports. Diocesan staff attended each of these deanery (regional) meetings and circulated among the parish leaders to help discern what the reports meant for their parish and to urge the parishes to use the data as a beginning point for parish planning and action. We also suggested that the parish identify other points of data that would be helpful for their parish planning, such as number of youth in the parish and the percentage attending religious education, youth ministry or sacramental preparation.

One of the surprises in this process was the realization that most members of the parish council, finance council and parish staff had never studied this data. In fact, most lay parish leaders did not even know this data existed. Statistics such as Mass counts and sacramental records are collected in parishes across the country each year and sent along

with financial statements to their respective dioceses.

In a business, this data would be used and studied by the owners in assessing business growth and making decisions about the future of the business.

The idea of planning future directions and strategies of an organization without looking at the numbers simply would not make sense in a business context.

What the numbers mean

The data distributed by the Diocese of Davenport in the parish life study was making use of information readily available in every chancery.

The added value on our part was developing a set of ratios based on the numbers we had, such as average contribution per household, average Mass attendance and number of years the parish could operate on its current level of reserves. We also calculated whether those numbers were going up or down in each parish and informed the parishes how they rated on a scale of 1 to 84 with the other parishes in the diocese on each of these points of data.

As important as it was to collect, distribute and study this financial and demographic data, I wondered whether we had really answered Bishop Franklin's question. Were full pews and parking lots on Sunday the best measure of parish life? Was there a correlation between the Sunday collection and the overall performance of a parish? Was high performance something that could be measured by numbers, or was quantitative data merely an indication that something was going right? Surely, parish life was about more than numbers.

While the numbers do count for something in a parish, they are simply indicators. They do not answer the question of whether the parish is meeting its bottom line. Like any not-for-profit organization, parishes are ultimately measured not by money and numbers, but by mission and vision. The accomplishment of the mission and the success of the vision depend on the behaviors of the people who are leaders, managers and members of the parish.

The next article in this series will identify other measures of parish life that we discovered in our search to answer the bishop's question.

Servant leadership looks at how Jesus would lead

January 31, 2008

In the first article of this series, we looked at Bishop William Franklin's question in 2004 that led to a three-year study on parish life.

In response to a recommendation that no parish be closed due to the shortage of priests but only based on whether the parish was alive, the bishop essentially agreed but asked, "How do you measure the life of a parish?"

The Diocese of Davenport responded by embarking on a Parish Life Study of all 84 parishes. That project evolved into a case study of three high-performing parishes.

Using rigorous methods required for my doctoral dissertation in business administration, two research assistants and I interviewed parish leaders, conducted focus groups and observed behaviors in these three parishes, looking for seven specific behaviors.

Colloquial sayings remind us of the importance of behaviors. We are told: Actions speak louder than words. Practice what you preach. Walk the talk. Live by example. Act yourself into a new way of thinking. Do what you say. Preach the Gospel at all times — if necessary, use words.

Organizational citizenship

The search for behaviors that would be identified with high performance in parish life included a review of research in both religious and business literature. The discovery of organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) was a major break-through. Recent research has demonstrated that OCBs can lead to high performance in any organization. These behaviors are also reflective of the life and message of Jesus as well as the teachings of the church.

OCBs are altruistic behaviors that go above and beyond the call of duty. They can be associated with high levels of trust between leaders and followers, cohesion among the team members and commitment to the organization. Some common OCBs are helping, initiating, participating, self-developing, cheerleading, sportsmanship and housekeeping. The first four of these OCBs became hypotheses for the case study.

Helping was defined as members of the congregation volunteering to provide assistance to each other on various projects. Initiating meant that parishioners did not wait for someone to tell them what needed to be done.

Participating was involvement in various activities or attendance at parish events. Self-developing meant taking personal responsibility for one's growth and development as a member of the parish.

The presence of OCBs in a parish recalls the behaviors of the early Christian believers, about whom Tertullian stated, "See how they love one another ... and are ready even to die for one another."

If today's Christians wish to live out that example and be known in the community for their love, it seems that organizational citizenship provides an excellent framework.

Servant leadership

If the members of high-performing parishes will be acting with OCBs, then what will the leaders be doing? What leader behaviors enhance organizational citizenship? How would Jesus lead? Servant leadership was the answer to these questions.

The term servant leadership was coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 out of a search for the leadership style of Jesus. The paradox of servant leadership is that the leaders serve the people, not the other way around. The notion is counter-intuitive because we expect that leaders dominate while servants are subjugated to the will of the leader. Greenleaf suggests that the best test of servant leadership comes from asking whether the followers are growing as persons, becoming healthier, wiser, freer and more autonomous. In other words, the success of the leader is inextricably bound to the success of the followers.

The traits associated with servant leadership begin with honesty and integrity. Without walking the walk, practicing what is preached, and modeling the integration of behaviors and values, the leader has no credibility. The second trait is humility, which can be exemplified in the leader giving credit to others when things are going well and taking the blame when they are not going well. The third trait is self-confidence, which is necessary if the leader is going to empower others to make decisions and act on their own behalf.

Results

The case study found high levels of servant leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors in all three high-performing parishes. Servant leader behaviors found in the case study include:

- The leader gives credit to others when things are going well.
- The leader takes the blame when things are not going well.
- The leader drops what he or she is doing when others are in need.
- The leader visits with marginalized members of the group.
- The leader helps set up and clean up for meetings.
- The leader is not the focal point of organizational activities.
- The leader attends to the needs of others first.

The results of the case study demonstrated that when leaders become servants and empower followers to exercise leadership, the people will reciprocate with love, kindness and service to the church. In other words, when the leaders lead by serving, the members will be moved to serve as well.

Next week: What makes St. Mary parish in Iowa City a high-performing parish.

St. Mary parish in Iowa City takes team approach

February 7, 2008

St. Mary's in Iowa City is the largest parish in the Diocese of Davenport. Its size is both a strength and a challenge for the parish. On the one hand, there is a lot of talent in the parish. The pastor, Father Ken Kuntz, pointed out that he has a lawyer, a banker, an architect and other professional people he can and does call upon. He points out that having such expertise in the parish frees him up to focus on the pastoral side of ministry.

For example, homeless people were sleeping on the porch of the parish center. While he did not want to evict them, Fr. Kuntz was concerned about fire safety because of cigarette butts found on the porch. So he called upon a parishioner with expertise in property management issues and they laid down a new floor with a fire retardant in the tiles.

Participation and initiative

On the other hand, it is easy for people to get lost in the crowd in a large parish. Organizational theory suggests that as organizations get bigger, they have to figure out ways of also becoming smaller. At St. Mary's, that means the use of commissions. Large numbers of parishioners participate in a broad array of formal activities organized by commissions at St. Mary's.

On the day that the research team visited St. Mary's, the activity in the parish was overflowing. Each Mass celebrated the sacrament of the sick with the parishioners. Legions of volunteers were busy with a flu shot clinic, a homeless shelter project and faith formation programs. As the pastoral associate, Sister Agnes Giblin, BVM, said, "This morning, you could walk through and find five commissions with events."

A neighborhood outreach project is one example of how the parish is becoming smaller — by creating manageable units of 10-12 families per neighborhood. According to one parishioner, each small group is led by a volunteer who makes sure that someone knocks on the door three to four times a year and says, "Hey, how's everything going?"

For more than 20 years, St. Mary's has tithed 5 percent of its parish income to address the needs of the poor. Local, national and international projects of charity and justice are funded through a grant-making process that is a lay-led activity of the peace and justice commission.

At St. Mary's, the commissions are led primarily through the initiative of lay people. Parish council members express confidence that they can take initiative on certain ideas without worrying about interference from the pastor or other leaders of the parish.

"They know what we are doing," one parish council member stated, "but it's our thing."

Recognition, empowerment

St. Mary's has a systematic way of thanking people for their involvement in the parish. For example, the parish staff often circulates thank-you cards that are to be signed by staff and sent to parishioners. A 92-year old woman who helps out every Monday

morning by cleaning all of the pews in the church is one recipient of the thank-you cards. She is described as a “quiet, un-assuming woman ... who never complains, just goes about her work.”

Fr. Kuntz recognizes the gifts and talents of his parishioners.

“I am very impressed with the shared wisdom of the people,” he said. I don’t have to wake up in the middle of the night wondering, ‘How am I going to solve this problem?’ I have a lot of help from a lot of people.” He and Sr. Agnes demonstrate humility by giving credit to others for the success of the parish.

“I find that many times, I don’t have the best answer,” Fr. Kuntz said. “I find that by asking the people, by going back and forth with our ideas, it is just a co-mingling of ideas and wisdom of the whole group.”

Empowerment of the leaders at St. Mary’s is illustrated with this quote from the pastor, “We don’t tell people what to do. We’re inviting them to participate.”

The youth minister, Patti McTaggart, stated, “We do everything in our power to make sure that a.) They are invited and b.) They are trained.”

Every year, St. Mary’s holds Invitation Sunday, when new members are recruited for parish commissions. Fr. Kuntz estimated that about 15-20 lay people emerge as new members of the commissions as a result of this annual invitation.

Teams approach

The proficient use of commissions is a sign of teamwork. As one parish council member stated, “It’s just a team, and I really think that St. Mary’s has that team together, through all these commissions.”

It would be easy for a person to get lost in a parish of this size, but St. Mary’s seems to have mastered the art of organizing parish ministry through the use of commissions. People have a common sense of mission implied by the word “commission.”

The leaders of these commissions take their lay leadership seriously, calling upon new parishioners to join in the ministry, organizing the fine details of upcoming programs, communicating that to the rest of the parish, recruiting new members to join the commission and rotating leadership on the commissions.

Teamwork was the distinguishing quality at St. Mary’s, Iowa City. In the next two weeks, we will look at the dynamics of a medium-sized parish in Solon and a small parish in Bloomfield.

A community approach in Solon parish

February 14, 2008

A member of St. Mary's, Solon, describes her parish as a "very open community," one that is welcoming of new members.

"We are blessed as a parish with a lot of people coming in. And the good part is that people seem to welcome the new people in. We are not a group of cliques, keeping other people out. It's a very open community."

Participation and initiative

The religious education coordinator, Julie Agne, describes many of the activities of the parish as "lay led." Parish council members describe how they take information presented at parish council meetings and share it with their own commissions. The building of the new parish hall and sanctuary, the religious education program and the various faith formation activities taking place in the parish hall are indications of lay leaders taking initiative.

The religious education program in Solon is exceptionally active for a parish of 516 families. Every Thursday night, the parish hall is filled with hundreds of children guided by about 35 volunteer teachers. Another 30-40 adults attend adult education classes and 65-75 youth gather on the other end of town.

The evening begins with about 300 children gathering in the main auditorium of the parish hall. Sitting on the floor, the children watch a PowerPoint presentation set to sing-along music about Jesus. They join in singing as the words scroll across a large screen and the music is piped in through the new sound system. The children add hand signals for most of the verses. Within minutes, virtually all children in the auditorium are singing at the top of their lungs and doing hand signals to the music.

After a few songs, the music ends and the adults lead the children in reciting Catholic prayers such as the "Hail Mary." Then the children eagerly go to their classrooms, where at least three adults are team teaching in each room.

Meanwhile, about 25 toddlers are being cared for in the Toddler Room, a corner room of the parish hall organized by another set of six to eight volunteers. The Toddler Room is a story in itself. Father David Wilkening, the pastor, originally did not agree with parish lay leaders who suggested setting aside one room in the new parish hall for toddlers. Now the pastor considers that room one of the parish's greatest success stories. Observing the energy in that room, one can understand why.

The Toddler Room seems to provide an excellent formational program for the toddlers as it is well-equipped and well-staffed to care for kids of that age. It also provides an opportunity for the toddlers' parents to be free to participate in adult faith formation or to serve as religious education teachers for the parish.

Service and empowerment

Fr. Wilkening is praised by a parishioner as a humble man who “walks his talk,” by another for practicing stewardship, by another as a person who is willing to admit his mistakes and be open to the ideas of others even when it doesn’t fit his personal needs and interests, and by yet another as a person who always waits for others at parish functions to go through the food line first.

Agne describes the pastor at community potlucks this way, “He’s the last one to eat. It’s a servant thing.” As another member of the parish puts it, the pastor “is a servant from head to toe right through his entire system.”

Fr. Wilkening routinely gives credit for parish success to lay people. The pastor admits his mistakes openly and apologizes to members of the parish when he “needles them” too hard. One member of the parish stated that the pastor is “extremely adept at giving people the power of feeling like they own things and they are involved.” Another member says that when people recognize how hard the pastor works, it “makes you feel like if he needs a hand, you will help him out.”

The pastor describes his leadership approach to empowerment as “contact and consider.” This means that he contacts members of the parish and asks them to consider taking on a certain project or position of leadership for the parish. Then he contacts them again at a later time if necessary. He attends parish meetings and goes to ministry trainings with his parishioners in order to increase lay participation in those meetings and trainings. He states that he is “willing to do whatever needs to be done for the good of the community.”

The community approach

St. Mary’s, Solon has a deep sense of community. The people greet each other warmly, reach out to embrace each other, speak joyfully about seeing each other, call each other’s children by name and seem genuinely happy to be involved in the parish.

The parish leaders are building a sense of community and that was the most distinguishing factor for St. Mary’s, Solon. Next week, we will look at the family approach to parish life in Bloomfield.

Bloomfield takes a family life approach to parish life

February 21, 2008

With about 43 families, St. Mary Magdalen's of Bloomfield is one of the smallest parishes in the Diocese of Davenport.

It is the only Catholic parish in Davis County, which is one of only two counties in the diocese that is without a resident priest. The religious Sister who serves as pastoral associate lives in the parish rectory. The church itself is a former supper club. From the outside, St. Mary Magdalen looks more like a ranch house than a church.

The pastor of St. Mary Magdalen, Father John Spiegel, is also pastor of St. Patrick's in Ottumwa. He drives the 25 miles to Bloomfield once a week for Sunday evening Mass. One member of the parish suggested that if someone in the parish needed a priest during an ice storm, Fr. Spiegel would likely strap on his boots and walk 25 miles to get there.

Helping and initiative

The focus group and interviews held in Bloomfield for this project offered several stories suitable for a Hollywood script, but the most heart-warming was that of Helen and Earl, a couple who had been stalwart members of St. Mary Magdalen's for many years. When parish renovation was completed a few years ago, Helen decided the parish needed a new set of spring flowers to add some color to the gardens in front of the church.

After Mass, she announced that she and Earl would be planting tulip bulbs in front of the church at 8 a.m. the following Saturday. She asked parishioners to donate tulip bulbs that she and Earl would plant. Earl says he "figured we would get 100 or 150" bulbs to plant. The pastoral associate at the time, Sister Ruth Ellen Doane, SP, tells the story that virtually everyone in the parish showed up the next week with tulip bulbs. As Earl tells it, "Everybody brought tulip bulbs. We planted 'em. I dug a hole for every one of 'em ... 587 to be exact."

But Helen did not live to see the tulips blossom in the spring. She was hospitalized in Des Moines when the tulips appeared back home and died without getting to see them bloom. However, several members of the parish drove the two hours to Des Moines to visit Helen and they decorated her hospital room with enlarged photos of the tulip blossoms.

After Helen died, another member of the parish built a flower bed around the tulips and the parish dedicated the flower garden to Helen. Someone built a new wooden sign in front of the church. The flowers became the topic of conversation in the small town of Bloomfield. Passers-by stop to admire the flower bed and sign. Sr. Ruth Ellen said that strangers would come up to her on the street and say, "Wow, your tulips are really nice."

A neighboring church built a new flower bed and sign modeled after St. Mary Magdalen's, to which Fr. Spiegel quips, "We have a design infringement suit pending."

Another poignant story involves an older parishioner named Frank whose job was to go outside to ring the church bell, which operates manually. About 5-10 minutes before

Mass, Frank would tap the shoulders of some children to join him. According to Sr. Ruth Ellen, “When Frank died, Clay, who was in third grade, came in and said, ‘I’ll take over ringing the bell before Mass’ . . . That’s the kind of thing that happens around here.”

Clay takes his bell-ringing job so seriously that he calls for substitutes when he is going out of town. According to his father, the responsibility for the bell gives his son a way to share in a sense of ownership that is pervasive in this small parish.

The family approach

In a word, St. Mary Magdalen’s is about family. The word “family” was used repeatedly by leaders and members in describing the parish dynamics in Bloomfield. The people treat each other as an extended family. They care deeply about each other. They treat the parish buildings and church grounds as if they were their own homes. The bulletin board inside the front door of the church, with all the photos and art work of the children of the parish, is reminiscent of the artwork that decorates a grandmother’s refrigerator.

When a small repair needs to be made around the church, it is unlikely that the issue would end up on the agenda of a committee meeting. It might not even be brought to the attention of the pastor or the pastoral associate.

Someone at St. Mary Magdalen’s is more likely to pull a toolbox out of his pick-up trucks and make the needed repairs.

The recognizing, serving and empowering behaviors of the pastor and pastoral associate enhance this family dynamic. The people respond by helping each other and taking the initiative. Families take the initiative when someone needs help. Family members don’t wait for someone to tell them to help. They simply help each other. Family is a distinguishing factor that helps explain what is happening at St. Mary Magdalen’s, Bloomfield.

Next week, we will present the overall results of this case study and we will look particularly at how the three parish models — the teams, community and family approach — can be explained by size of parish.

Fostering servant leadership in others

February 28, 2008

The unique contribution of this study to the national discussion about parish leadership is its focus on the behaviors of leaders and parishioners. The findings suggest that if leaders become servants and act with kindness, involve people in decision-making, call forth the gifts and talents of their members and express their appreciation, the people will respond by helping, initiating, participating and seeking self-development.

This study suggests a model of parish life based on business theories that also is consistent with the message and example of Jesus. When James and John were lobbying for a leadership role among the disciples, Jesus stated, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lorded over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.” (Matthew 20: 25-27.)

The key line here is, “not so with you.” Jesus is suggesting an approach to leadership that is quite different from the command and control methods used by the Roman Empire.

This teaching of Jesus became the basis for the essays by Robert Greenleaf, who coined the term “servant leadership.” The essence of Greenleaf’s message was that leaders — and especially religious leaders — should practice servanthood within their leadership. The servant leader is foremost a servant, someone who cares for others. According to Greenleaf, the role of the leader is not to dominate or to coerce but to call others forth into leadership.

The case study of three high-performing parishes in the Diocese of Davenport revealed considerable evidence of all three servant leader behaviors — serving, empowering and recognizing — and all four discipleship behaviors — helping, initiating, participating and self-developing.

Some differences among the parishes seemed to be due to parish size. The smallest parish excelled in the areas of helping and initiating while the two larger parishes excelled in the areas of participation and empowerment.

St. Mary Magdalen in Bloomfield is so small that its only formal group is the parish council, which acts as a committee of the whole on business pertaining to any area of ministry. The parish has no other formal committees, commissions or councils. Instead, the parish acts more like a family. The church itself is treated with the care and attention of a family home. The bulletin board inside the front door of the church looks like the front of a grandparent’s refrigerator with pictures, photographs, news clippings and children’s art work.

One story that exemplifies the difference in parish size involves a parishioner finding a broken door in the church. In a large parish, that person might tell a maintenance worker, who might write out a work order, then get it approved before repairing the door.

In Bloomfield, this parishioner went to the back of his pick-up truck, grabbed his tool box and fixed the door. This simple example illustrates the differences in leading a parish based on size. If the Bloomfield pastor had admonished this parishioner for not going through some formal process that involved getting the pastor's approval to repair the door, the initiative of that parishioner would have been dampened.

The fewer formal groups in a small parish seem to be associated with fewer formal rules, policies and procedures. With fewer structural obstacles, the members of the parish seemed very willing to take initiative and get things done. It was not necessary to wait for a leader or anyone else to ask parishioners to do things such as welcoming newcomers, organizing socials, fixing up the church or offering a "Why Catholic?" program. As a number of people in Bloomfield stated, "We just do it."

On the other hand, members and leaders of the larger parishes talked about the importance of the formal processes and committee structures. The formal structures are necessary avenues for organizing activities in a way that maximizes participation and involves hundreds of people in the various ministries of the parish.

Parish leaders at St. Mary's in Iowa City and Solon are focused on developing community and making efficient use of teams to create the myriad of formal opportunities for participation in those parishes.

As suggested by organizational theorists, as the size of an organization increases, it becomes more formalized, bureaucratized and institutionalized. A solution to the challenges of size is the decentralization of the parish, which helps explain why St. Mary's in Iowa City and Solon are so proficient in the use of councils, commissions and committees. The leaders of these commissions also take initiative, but in ways that look much different from Bloomfield. They invite people to attend various parish events, organize the fine details of upcoming programs, communicate that to the rest of the parish and recruit new people to join their commissions.

Regardless of parish size, a certain amount of self-confidence is required on the part of the leader to allow parishioners the freedom to take initiative. Many leaders want to control each and every aspect of the parish and that is where they get into trouble. Servant leadership, on the other hand, focuses on the health, growth and development of the parishioners and the parish. That involves building capacity in others to take initiative instead of controlling the activities of the parish.

Next week, we will look at six other characteristics found in these three parishes, including managerial proficiency, an external focus, trust, spirituality, daily prayer and high levels of performance in nine areas of ministry.

Five characteristics of high-performing parishes

March 6, 2008

Three high-performing parishes in the Diocese of Davenport demonstrate not only servant leadership and organizational citizenship, but five other characteristics:

- 1.) A high degree of managerial proficiency
- 2.) An external focus
- 3.) The integrity of the leader
- 4.) Spiritual “rootedness”
- 5.) High levels of performance in nine areas of ministry including evangelization, stewardship and vocations.

Managerial proficiency

The pastors in these three parishes — Father Ken Kuntz at St. Mary’s in Iowa City; Father David Wilkening at St. Mary’s in Solon; and Father John Spiegel at St. Mary Magdalen in Bloomfield — seem to have managerial capabilities that are necessary in administering the business side of the parish.

They also show a willingness to call upon the managerial gifts and talents of their parishioners and the confidence to delegate some of these responsibilities to lay people. This is particularly true of Fr. Spiegel, who lives 25 miles away from his parish in Bloomfield and has to trust others for the day-to-day operations of the parish.

The extensive use of commissions and committees in Iowa City and Solon requires technical, managerial and organizing skills on the part of staff and volunteers. As the largest parish in the diocese, St. Mary’s in Iowa City uses Excel spread sheets to maintain lists of parishioners involved in various commissions. But, as Sister Agnes Giblin, BVM, points out, the leaders make sure they get to know as many people as possible on a personal basis.

Fr. Kuntz suggested that he has a lawyer, a banker, an architect and other professionals he can call upon to volunteer in the parish. As a result, he is able to concentrate more fully on pastoral and sacramental ministry.

External focus

These three high-performing parishes are not only inwardly directed but also outwardly focused. While the direction comes from within, the focus of parish activities also went outside of the parish. All three parishes are involved in the secular community by performing works of charity, justice and evangelization.

For example, in Bloomfield, the parish collaborates with other congregations in social programs such as the Lord’s Cupboard, a food pantry; Moms in Touch, which prays for public schools; the Foods Resource Bank, which raises money for overseas relief; and I Care, which buys Christmas gifts for needy children.

Parishioners pointed out that belonging to a parish as small as St. Mary Magdalen's — 43 families — means they have to be willing to work with other parishes to make an impact on the community.

The three parishes demonstrated servanthood in the church and practiced it outside the church by serving their local communities. The external focus of these parishes gave the members and leaders a greater sense of purpose and meaning to their faith.

Integrity

The pastors in these three parishes are comfortable giving credit to others for the success of the parish, while parishioners and staff members are likely to credit the pastors. These pastors do not seek the limelight. Parishioners speak of high levels of enthusiasm, support and trust in their leaders. In Solon, one parishioner said this about the pastor, Fr. Wilkening: "He just walks his talk. He is so humble. People really appreciate the example he sets."

These pastors act with a sense of humility, which was one of the key characteristics identified in Robert Greenleaf's essays on servant leadership. Humility is a virtue promoted by Jesus, who stated, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14: 7-11).

Spiritual rootedness

All three pastors spoke highly of the role that daily prayer plays in their busy lives. Prayer takes the focus away from the person who is praying and places the emphasis on the needs of others. Thus it becomes the catalyst for servant behaviors. Fr. Wilkening spoke of how his prayer life sometimes enlightens him to make an apology when he needs to be more gentle or when he has pushed someone too hard.

When asked why their parishes were performing so well, the first inclination of the leaders and parishioners was to give full credit to God.

When asked how the parish in Solon got 300 children involved in religious education, Julie Agne said, "It's Christ that invites them... and we welcome them in his name."

When asked to explain the success of his parish, Fr. Kuntz responded, "It seems to be the work of the Holy Spirit."

When asked to explain the almost instant success of a capital campaign in Bloomfield, Sister Ruth Ellen Doane, SP, stated, "Maybe, I think probably, it was God working."

Nine areas of ministry

In each of these three high-performing parishes, specific examples of ministry in vocations, stewardship and evangelization were shared as important aspects of parish life.

One recommendation coming out of this study is for parishes in the diocese to place more emphasis on vocations, evangelization and stewardship as three additional areas of ministry for the performance and evaluation of parish life.

Next week, we will conclude this series by looking at other recommendations emerging from this study on servant leadership.

Conclusion, recommendations: How would Jesus lead?

March 13, 2008

The bishop's question that inspired this study — how to measure the life of a parish — was asked within the context of a diocesan staff meeting discussing the possible closure of parishes.

Dioceses across the country are trying to discern how to make these decisions and how to help parishes make the transitions when they become necessary. However, more attention needs to be devoted to developing the strategies, plans and ideas for improving parish life in all parishes.

Leaders who would like to improve their parish life from good to great are making plans to enhance the spiritual, human and physical capacities of their parishes. These parishes are inviting, recruiting, developing and training members of their parishes to be qualified leaders for ministry and providing them with support.

The role of the pastor

Trends in the life of the church are creating more opportunities for lay initiative, participation, leadership and management while continuing to require significant leadership and management responsibilities for pastors.

It is certainly important that pastors know enough basics about financial management, property management and administrative duties to understand and to supervise the business affairs of the church. However, as the priest shortage deepens, it will also become more critical for priests and pastors to devote their time and energy to sacramental ministries.

Generally speaking, priests are attracted to ministry because of an interest in working with people, not working at a computer or doing paperwork. They are motivated by mission, not money. To connect more of their daily work to that mission, pastors can open up more opportunities for lay ministry and fully utilize the gifts and talents of their parishioners to assist them in duties such as bookkeeping, building maintenance and general office work.

As suggested by the pastors in this study, delegating administrative tasks to lay people can allow them to devote more time and energy to liturgy, faith formation and pastoral responsibilities.

Servant leadership

This study has touched a subject that needs further attention in seminaries, clergy seminars and lay ministry formation programs. If the leadership approach in a parish reflects a command and control style of leadership, then lay participation and initiative will largely be stifled. The servant leadership approach will enhance lay involvement.

As suggested by *Lumen Gentium*, the level of energy and enthusiasm of the laity can depend on the leadership style of the pastor. This study finds that the Catholic faithful will respond with enthusiasm as they are empowered to take ownership of their parishes. Catholic congregations alive with lay participation can make a meaningful contribution to local communities and to society as well.

Servant leader training

In his book on the subject, Robert Greenleaf advised that training in servant leadership should be practitioner-oriented. He stated, “One does not ‘learn’ to be a leader the way one learns about most things that are taught in college. Like anything else that is acquired, one will do better with a mentor or a coach.”

Servant leadership begins with a natural inclination to serve rather than to be served. It involves a dedication to a philosophy of service to others and an approach that considers the needs and interests of others first.

Training in servant leadership involves a process of action and reflection, beginning with reflection on Scripture and a consideration of how Jesus led. It should include discussing these concepts in small groups, listening to others as they struggle with the same questions, reading some of the leadership concepts prescribed by Jesus and articulated by Greenleaf and then going out and practicing some of the leadership behaviors such as recognizing, serving and empowering others.

How would Jesus lead? This study demonstrates that servant leadership is not only the essence of the philosophy of Jesus, but that it works. Jesus does not fit the typical profile of most famous leaders. He never wrote a book, held positional power, led an army or taught in a school.

He was not the CEO of a large company and did not make large amounts of profit. He was born into poverty and died without any worldly possessions. He was not successful in most ways that today’s society measures success.

Yet if we measure leadership by numbers of followers, Jesus has to be counted among the most effective leaders of all time. After he was crucified, he left behind a few hundred followers. A few years later, the number of disciples had grown into the thousands. Within five generations, it swelled to reach into the millions and today, 2000 years later, he has more than one billion followers with millions of new followers joining him every year.

If we wish to become leaders of a church that is full of life and energy and is making a difference in the lives of people and communities, what better model of leadership to study than that of Jesus? The findings of this study suggest that parish performance can best be improved by integrating the teachings of Jesus into the leadership practices of the congregation.