

Conference tells administrators it's their time to shine

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 27, 2009

On Monday, March 30, I delivered a keynote address at the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators convocation, held this year in Oak Brook, Ill. The association brings together human-resource officers for dioceses, religious orders and other groups within the Catholic church.

I hung around the edges of the conference for a while, and doing so offered an object lesson in the two different levels at which the Catholic church is struggling to respond to the current economic crisis. On the one hand, the church acts as a voice of conscience, applying its social teaching to broad public-policy debates; on the other hand, the church is also itself a large financial enterprise obliged to make hard choices about how to cope with declining resources and mounting costs.

The group assembled in Oak Brook represented the church's frontline in responding to this second set of challenges.

Inevitably, some of the realities they face will not be pleasant. I sat in one session, for example, where Maureen Murphy, senior counsel for the Chicago archdiocese, was doling out advice about how to handle termination procedures. One tip: Never put the reasons for firing someone in a termination letter. Given the emotional pressures of the moment, she said, such a letter will often be hasty and not fully considered. If the employee later challenges the firing and the employer offers reasons that weren't in the letter, it can complicate things.

Murphy stressed that as a matter of justice, anyone being let go obviously deserves an explanation of the reasons why, which ought to be presented in a personal meeting. In an ideal world, she said, those conversations should also have come earlier in the game, so that when the end comes it's no surprise.

Other practical bits of counsel:

- Don't let parish employees put in overtime disguised as unpaid "volunteer" work. If they work more than 40 hours, they ought to be paid. In any event, Murphy said, lawyers like to take up overtime disputes, because if they prevail they can claim not just back pay for the client but also attorney's fees.
- Don't use e-mail as a way of avoiding dealing with personnel problems on a face-to-face basis. "People say things in e-mails that they wouldn't in person," Murphy observed, "and sometimes that means civility is lost."

There were also flashes of gallows humor. One human-resources director told the story of a pastor who called the office to say that a parish employee had offered to resign, and the pastor wanted to know if he should accept. The director said yes, under the logic that if things deteriorate to the point where someone volunteers to quit, it's usually wise to accept. That prompted the pastor to ask: "Does it make any difference if the guy is crying?" Grim chuckles rippled through the room, suggesting that this was a scenario with which human-resources people are all too familiar. Alas, the crisis undoubtedly means that such scenes may become even more common, as parishes, dioceses and other entities face pressure to cut payroll costs.

I also sat in on a session led by human-resources directors for the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary and the Adrian Dominicans, which was devoted to how to handle the personnel implications of a merger between religious congregations. Though the session featured a lot of nuts-and-bolts specifics, the basic advice seemed to be to take time to listen and to be sure everyone's on board, rather than to indulge an administrator's instinctive desire to "get things done."

In her keynote Tuesday morning, Carol Fowler, director of personnel services for the Chicago archdiocese, invited her colleagues to take a "glass half full" perspective on the crisis.

"This is our time," Fowler told the audience, arguing that the church's bean counters and human-resources experts aren't just support staff anymore, but critically important leaders in helping the church utilize its resources more effectively, so that its core goals and values aren't compromised.

Fowler insisted that the church's administrative professionals think of themselves as ministers, not just managers. She pointed to the tone set by Cardinal Francis George in Chicago, who, she said, regularly asks during budget meetings, "How does everything in your budget help people come closer to Jesus Christ?"

Fowler called upon the church's human-resources officers to become more "strategic," not simply reacting to problems as they arise, but anticipating challenges and devising responses before the dam bursts. Specifically, she recommended:

- Developing better methods for assessing performance, in order to encourage good work and to address deficiencies before they fester. (Fowler ruefully said that personnel assessment is something the church doesn't do very well. When a pastor calls to say that a parish employee has to go, Fowler said, she asks him to send along the personnel file. Often enough, she said, the file contains one of two things: nothing at all, or glowing evaluations that provide little basis for termination. "We have to get better," she said.)
- Projecting gaps and needs in staffing, in order to devise effective recruitment and retention strategies. In a time of crisis, she said, "making sure the right people are in the right jobs" is essential.
- Planning for transitions in leadership in key areas.

In terms of where to invest limited resources these days, Fowler observed that the first line item in a budget to be cut during times of crisis is often funding for leadership training and development "which, she noted, can sound a bit like "fluff." In reality, she said, "it should be exactly the opposite," because moments of crisis are precisely when good leadership instincts are at a premium.

Fowler's bottom line seemed to be that the church needs its human-resources people "and, more broadly, its financial and administrative professionals" to step up. Those who answer the call, she suggested, have a golden opportunity to lead. As part of that picture, Fowler added, they can help ensure that the social justice that the church preaches to the outside world is actually practiced in its own house.

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