NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Priests learn best practices in parish management

Catholic News Service | Aug. 27, 2009

WASHINGTON
You don't think there are enough hours in the day for laypeople? Try being a parish pastor.

There's all the spiritual and sacramental ministry the position entails, plus the work that goes along with being, quite often, the only priest in a sizable suburban parish with plenty of staff and even more demands.

How does a pastor handle it all? This summer, in an effort to help answer that question, the International Institute for Clergy Formation at Seton Hall University in New Jersey joined with the Washington-based National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management to offer a "best practices" seminar to 28 parish priests -- most of them from New Jersey and Pennsylvania, which constitute Region III of the U.S. bishops' conference, but also from West Virginia, Florida and Louisiana.

The idea to conduct such a seminar had been in the mind of Father Paul Holmes, a Newark, N.J., archdiocesan priest, since 2000, when he taught at the Pontifical North American College in Rome. But different assignments -- and his own "busy-ness" -- kept him from actively pursuing the idea for several years.

Then, he was asked to attend a luncheon with other priests as well as a donor interested in parish management issues.

"I actually showed up at the lunch with a proposal of what I thought the program could look like," Father Holmes told Catholic News Service in an Aug. 19 telephone interview. The donor, he added, "loved what he saw."

After Father Holmes returned from a sabbatical, he and the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management fine-tuned the proposal. One lure for participants was "if they could get themselves here (to the Jersey Shore, where the seminar was conducted), everything else would be free," Father Holmes said.

Sessions were held at the San Alfonso Retreat Center near the shore. All of the priests who attended were first-time pastors or priests who had not yet been named to a pastorate.

Other organizations such as the Chicago-based National Federation of Priests Councils offer priests a number of resources, including programs on leadership development, time management and ways to improve ministry. One focus of the National Pastoral Life Center in New York is sponsoring conferences for pastoral leaders -- new pastors, longtime pastors transitioning to a new assignment and parish life coordinators.

But the New Jersey seminar was specifically designed to strengthen the skills of its participants in finance, administration and personnel management.

"We had someone come in and talk about internal financial controls," Father Holmes told CNS. "I had heard about something called risk management but I wondered about how that applied to a parish. We want to manage

our risks so we don't have to manage our crises. So we had someone come in and talk about risk management to these pastors."

Father Holmes added, "The National Leadership Roundtable has already published standards of excellence, not only for parishes but for dioceses as well," and those were reviewed during the seminar.

"It was utterly captivating," he said. "The men literally could not write fast enough."

Michael Brough, director of planning and programs for the church management round table, gave one of the presentations.

"Some priests do have a good sense of the finances of their parish. There would be other priests who would say when it comes to fundraising they're a bit queasy, they're not used to doing that," he said. "They can certainly talk effectively about the mission of the church, and we encourage them to talk about the ministry and the mission of the community.

"For some others, it might be the management of a large staff. Certainly when it comes to management of our larger parishes, a larger professional lay staff, some priests have not had that experience. Performance evaluations, and setting up some sort of pastoral plan with the pastoral council," Brough said.

Father Holmes also brought in as a speaker a priest who's lived the experience.

"(Father) Jack Wall from Chicago, who had four parishioners ... and now it is this huge, thriving parish which has phenomenal growth. He talked to us about what it's like to have what he calls a mission-driven church," Father Holmes said. "He talked about what it means to have a vision for the mission of the parish, and it was very, very inspiring."

Father Wall, head of the Catholic Church Extension Society since 2007, is former pastor of Chicago's historic Old St. Patrick's Church. During his tenure there, he reached out beyond the geographic boundaries of the parish and saw it grow to include more than 4,000 active members.

One of the priests attending the seminar, Msgr. Christopher Nalty, pastor of Good Shepherd Parish in New Orleans, liked what he heard at the seminar. Msgr. Nalty was a lawyer and an accountant before entering the priesthood.

"I was very much taken with the idea of transparency and being able to present your parishioners the best possible financial scenario," Msgr. Nalty said.

"My understanding was of how businesses should be run with best practices," he added, saying his interest was "very much piqued by the presentation we got."

"I kind of heard it (beforehand) in a negative light, like it was a bunch of business people coming in and telling the church how to run their business," he said. "Instead, I saw it as a framework for a pastor to make the best decisions he could for the financial organization and well-being of his parish."

Msgr. Holmes is establishing a listserv by which the priests who attended the seminar can ask questions from any of the presenters about how to apply the best practices they gleaned.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/20/2013 - 17:35*): http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/priests-learn-best-practices-parish-management