

R. Gallagher

A Private Communique in a Kind of Public Way

From: Loren B. Mead

To: Friends, Cohorts, and Assorted Others

Subject: "Myths and Norms in Parish Life: A Guide to Parish Pathology"

Being: A second edition of a "thing" first done in March, 1971; to which contributions have been made by Ken Allen and Ted Blumenstein as well as additions and revisions by the esteemed author (your humble and obedient servant); in the form that had been thought comic, but which has since caused grown men and women to beat breasts, tear hair, and weep publicly, but is not intended, nay verily, to heap burdens on those already over-burdened (and may a pox fall mightily upon any who for a moment doubt the sincerity of the aforesaid author); etc., etc.

(Incidentally, Daniel Ellsberg's example notwithstanding, he who xeroxes this does so at his own soul's peril and a cost of at least six cents a page. Publish it, however, and I'll have my lawyer on you like a shot!)

A. Myths currently in vogue in local religious congregations:

1. People who are silent understand what is going on.
2. Everybody knows what the meeting is for.
3. Everybody knows why you are at their meeting.
4. Everybody knows what the goals of the parish are.
5. Everybody knows everybody around here; introductions aren't necessary.
6. Everybody knows what the Church is for.
7. Meetings start on time.
8. Somebody planned the meeting.
9. It is not hard to have a well run parish. All you have to do is _____ (fill in the blank).
10. Parishes are just like businesses or other organizations.
11. Parishes are not like businesses or other organizations.
12. Young people are the Church of tomorrow.

Implication #1: You don't have to pay much attention to them today.

Implication #2: If they don't keep quiet, listen, and do what they are told, how will they know how to run the Church when they are grown?

13. The old way of doing things is best.
14. The new way of doing things is best.
15. If nobody disagrees, that means everybody agrees.
16. People will do what you tell them to.

Exception #1: If they won't, telling them more loudly helps.

Exception #2: If they still won't, it helps if you get real angry with them.

17. The minister has been trained to run the parish.

18. The vestry can't fire the minister.
19. The vestry won't fire the minister.
20. The new minister will ...

Completion #1: get back all the lost pledges.
Completion #2: bring in all the people who have left.
Completion #3: organize the Sunday School like the one I remember when I was a kid.
Completion #4: get the young people back.

21. Everything would be all right if the minister would ...

Completion #1: quit preaching about social issues.
Completion #2: be more relevant in his preaching.
Completion #3: make more pastoral calls.

22. A 5% raise every two years is adequate for the minister because he is not concerned about temporal matters.
23. The minister knows how you feel.
24. Loud people are the people with power.
25. People who don't speak up much don't particularly care what happens to the parish.
26. The treasurer knows what the financial situation is.
27. The treasurer will tell you what the financial situation is.
28. Vestrymen (even experienced vestrymen) know how to be vestrymen, and know what is expected of them.
29. People who make you feel guilty are holier than you are.
It's okay for

Corrolary #1: People who have "holy" jobs (bishops, ministers, wardens, altar guild members) to be nasty, hostile or speak disparagingly of others, because they are probably right.

B. Norms found in local religious congregations:

1. Keep things vague.

Implication #1: If you don't, you might have to do something.
Implication #2: Somebody must know what's going on around here.

2. Don't admit it if you don't understand what's going on.

(See Implication #2 above)

3. Do not express opinions if they are different from those already expressed.
4. "Loving" means using the word "love" a lot.

Corrolary #1: No need to do anything different if you use the word correctly.
Corrolary #2: If a meeting opens with prayer and/or Scripture readings, it won't matter much how people treat each other.

5. Planning is okay, but don't let it get in the way of what we're going to do.

- Implication #1: Planning and evaluation should be done when we have time left over from making decisions.
Implication #2: Evaluation really isn't necessary for decision-makers. Leave it to somebody else.
Implication #3: Evaluation means gossiping about the past.
Implication #4: Gossiping about the past means evaluation.
Implication #5: Evaluation means finding the S.O.B. who messed up and nailing him to the wall.

6. Having good intentions is more important than getting things done.
7. Inefficiency and sloppiness in church meetings (or actions) is to be expected.
8. Nobody should be accountable to anybody else.

- Corrolary #1: Never have anybody check up on anybody to see if they did what they agreed to do.
Corrolary #2: Never tell people what you expect of them.
Corrolary #3: Never ask what people are asking you to do. And never report what you did.

9. Negative opinions or feelings are bad. Keep them to yourself.
10. Power and control are very, very bad.

- Exception #1: It is okay to exert control through round-about, indirect, or manipulative ways.
Exception #2: It is okay to exert control by withdrawing (money, self, etc.) since that makes others feel guilty and is really much more effective.
Exception #3: It is okay to exert control if you say it's the Holy Spirit and not you that's doing it.

11. It is a sign of weakness to ask for help.

- Corrolary #1: Failures are very, very bad. Hide them.

12. Always agree if somebody in the church asks you to do something, even when you don't want to do it and intend not to do it. It makes them feel better.
13. Information is dangerous. Its circulation should be restricted to those who know enough to use it wisely.
14. Information about controversy is very, very dangerous. Stamp it out.
15. The minister always knows best.
16. The minister never knows best.

A Concluding Note to the Reader (if he/she is still with me): This paper is a kind of conversation. I suspect that some day there will be a third edition, and I'd welcome your own additions or comments about these totally biased observations. Send such comments to me -- Loren B. Mead, PTP, Mount St. Alban, Washington, D. C., 20016.

Your humble etc., etc., etc.