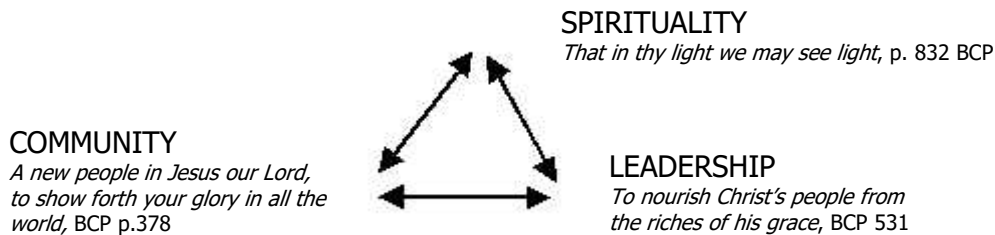


OVERSIGHT OF PARISH LIFE AND DEVELOPMENT



Oversight is what knits things together in harmony and beauty. Oversight is expressed in the three threads of spirituality, community, and leadership. Oversight provides strength and connection for the fabric of Christian life. They offer richness and depth in worship, doctrine and action.

Oversight is also a process of reflection and action, a discernment process. It is the process of:

- a. Reflection on the state of the parish, especially on the parish's productivity in its primary task of renewing people in their baptismal identity and purpose and sending them into their daily life; and
- b. Action that creates the conditions from which the primary task is accomplished.

So, oversight involves the creation of a learning organization; an organization with the capacity to learn from its experience. This is very different from the type of oversight that acts as though the task is simply to create a vision or a plan. It's relatively easy to get parish leaders to share their hopes and desires for the parish's future. It's much more difficult to get them in a disciplined process of looking at their common experience, assessing it and discerning God's presence in it, and stating what they are learning about the parish, themselves, their context, and the presence of God. It is out of such learning that a Christian community faithfully sets direction for its life and ministry.

Spirituality – The task is to shape a healthy corporate spirituality.

This includes:

- Enabling a pattern and climate that focuses the parish on Christ; that encourages people to discover the claim Christ has on them; and that helps people to trust and rest in God;
- Inviting the parish to contemplation, surrender and transcendence.
- Using models for understanding the parish's spirituality and skills for guiding the parish to a healthier spiritual life.
- Building competent common participation in the Eucharist and Office and providing ways of exploring forms of personal devotions that respect the unique character of each soul.
- Nurturing an adult parish climate in which people accept responsibility for their own spiritual life as part of the Body of Christ.
- Providing various levels of spiritual guidance that accept people where they are while inviting them into a fuller life. It is especially important to offer this for people of apostolic faith and practice. That group is often neglected in a parish in favor of serving the larger numbers of sacramental Christians. But it is the nurturing of the more mature in the parish that will help create the needed climate and set loose the energy that grounds the parish in its truest life.

Community – The task is to shape a transforming community; a parish in which lives are made new.

That includes:

- Enabling an awareness that the parish is a local expression of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church; that it is the Body of Christ; that it has a mission given by God
- Focusing the parish and each group in the parish on the mission of the Church.
- That through baptism we are incorporated into that Body and mission and in the Eucharist are transformed into instruments of the Holy Unity.
- Enabling a way of parish life in which people may be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ.
- Being a caring community - bearing each other's burdens and celebrating each other's joys.
- Clearly presenting the Church's expectations and standards

In some parishes there is confusion over social activities. The conversation often strikes me as a debate between the overly rigorist and the "keep them happy" poles. The one tends toward a position in which all activities in the parish are expected to have a purity of intention and effect. Everything gets measured by a narrow understanding of the formation task. The other pole seems to assume that because a number of people enjoy social activities it is obviously something to do. Here's my own take on the issue.

I like wasting time with people, hanging out, being with others just because it is pleasurable. I enjoy dinners with friends; drinks at a bar with a good jukebox; and conversations that drift about from politics to family to work interests to today's news. I also think it is a sign of parish health when people spontaneously gather with one another for these activities. These activities are also a setting in which the exchanges of the Holy City occur; when people encounter one another with their needs and desires, where they run up against each other, experience hurt and forgiveness, are called into courage and patience.

But should the parish spend time and energy in organizing social activities?

Some of the factors I try to take into account include:

- That social activities usually have the effect of building community. All experience of being in community has some transforming potential.
- That some parishes have allowed social life to overshadowed the parish's primary task. At times it appears that the way social activities function is to encourage superficialness in parish life.
- That some parishes have a climate that is cold; in which members know little about one another; where spontaneous events of connection and community rarely occur. Some of these parishes never have any parish sponsored social events; others have several events every year.
- Social activities can be used effectively as an entry point for new members and in the early stages of incorporation.
- It is an issue of discernment – what do we do now to shape a healthier more faithful parish?

Leadership – The task is to move the parish's people and energies toward increased health and faithfulness. This also involves effective management and administration.

That includes:

- Use of the knowledge and methods of management and organization development.
- Has a clear direction and the skills for guiding the parish in that direction

- A yearly assessment of parish life and ministry.
- Development of an informed, self-disciplined, faithful lay leadership.
- Clear decision-making and discernment processes.
- Effective financial, property, office management.
- Clear and appropriate use of authority.
- Conforms to the standards of the Church in regard to business methods

The Archbishop of York, Dr. John Sentamu -"Gracious magnanimity is the quality of the person who knows that regulations are not the last word and knows when not to apply the letter of the law," he said. "A church meeting may sit with the book of practice and procedure on the table in front of it and take every one of its decisions in strict accordance with the law of the Church; but there are times when the Christian treatment of some situation demands that the book of practice and procedure should not be regarded as the last word."

Helps in the parish's living an integrated, responsive and stable Christian life are:

1. Establishing a process of reflection, planning and acting in the fabric of parish life.
2. Rooting our decision making in prayer, Scripture and the Holy Tradition of the Church.
3. Using a conceptual framework for focusing the parish on the essentials of the Christian life - worship, doctrine, action.
4. Provide the structures and processes needed by: conducting a yearly adult "Foundations Course" in faith and practice; establishing a catechist guild to assist with new member classes, the Foundations Course, and preparing people to receive the sacraments; and by offering a stable, balanced pattern of educational offerings.

A Foundations Course

Most parishes can make good use of an adult foundations program. A substantial educational offering that grounds people in the thinking and practices of the Christian faith as lived in the Episcopal Church. It can serve multiple purposes. Use it in place of all "inquires" classes or adult baptismal or confirmation instruction.

A foundations course is a resource for moving people into a more Apostolic expression of faith and practice. There needs to be enough substance to it that it has the potential of taking participants to a new place in their spiritual life. Some parishes have nine or ten session. Others have modules that extend over three years (see the Resources section for examples).

The course is a tool in creating a "critical mass" of members who have some competence for living the life. So, it's very important that it be experiential and includes skill training.

The Parish Priest

If the parish is to develop into a healthier and more faithful community, what do we need to look for in the parish priest? Four key characteristics come to mind:

1. Leadership ability – This is the ability to get others to move; to listen and respond to one another, to the needs and opportunities, to God; political common sense; to occupy that role in a parish's life in such a way that the parish is moved toward greater health and faithfulness.
2. Emotional maturity – Including an awareness of your own emotions; accepting responsibility for how you act on your emotions; an understanding of the impact of your behavior on others; self-confidence; self-control; the ability to stay with something while being flexibly; the capacity to negotiate with others; the ability to be part of the group as well as to stand apart from the group.
3. Spiritual Maturity – Being a person of Apostolic Faith; including maintaining a spiritual discipline

4. Competence in many of the skills related to effective priestly ministry – presiding at liturgy, preaching, spiritual and pastoral guidance, Christian formation, etc. In each there are skills related to designing as well as implementing.

When a parish is in a search process for a new rector or vicar they might focus on these four characteristics and pay attention to the experience of candidates. The best indicator of a capacity for leadership, emotional intelligence and spiritual maturity is evidence of their exercise in previous situations.

In thinking about the particular abilities needed in leadership there is a growing awareness of a need for leaders who can:

- Define and present their own vision and sense of direction for a community of faith; be in touch with the needs and desires of the congregation, be as collaborative as the commitment and competence of members allows; cope with their own tendencies toward excessive control and/or passivity; and efficiently deal with dependent personalities. Parish leaders serve best when they can exercise their authority without either over exerting it and setting off counter dependent behavior among too many people or by withdrawing from responsibility and leaving a vacuum. The work of Edwin Friedman, Peter Steinke and Murray Bowen have been invaluable to many organizations including the church.
- Modify their approach to leadership to fit the current needs of the particular parish, sub-group or individual. An ability to match their leadership style to the system's competence for a task: maturity in faith, practice and emotions, and level of commitment.

Under discussion in many areas is the degree of "positional authority" needed by a presiding priest to accomplish these leadership functions. Some suggest that the authority should be increased, possibly with more accountability to the congregation through mutual assessments, and more collegial support and supervision with other priests and the Bishop. Some would urge that positional authority be reduced and dispersed; still others that it remain as it is but be more clearly defined. If positional authority is dispersed, it may become more difficult to provide for competence and accountability in the parish system. The better approach is probably to allow for strong positional leadership that is accountable for making a competent effort toward goals related to the oversight areas and activities connected to the primary task of a parish, e.g., formation, development of spiritual life, and bringing people into that process of formation.

Oversight is more and more understood as the primary aspect of ordained priesthood. That oversight is interdependent with the ministry of sacrament and Word. The priest presides at the Eucharist because he or she presides in the overall life and ministry of a Christian community. This presiding in the Eucharistic community is for the sake of that community. In Eucharist and in community the priest works to bring into harmony the diversity of people and their gifts.

The abilities needed for pastoral oversight include:

- a. A capacity to develop pastoral strategy for nurturing and revitalizing life and ministry that is based on: sound pastoral theology; a grasp of the primary task of a congregation, and an understanding of the congregation's dynamics and its role in its community.
- b. The congregation's primary task is best described as a cycle: nurturing and sending; renewal in baptismal identity and purpose, and apostolate in family, work and community; gathering and scattering; an oscillation between conscious attention to God

and formation and subconscious reliance upon God as incorporated members of Christ's Body; etc.

- c. Authenticity, seen in a congruence: between the priest's beliefs, intentions and behavior: and between the public and private dimensions of life.
- d. A capacity to cope with the typical stages of relationship between priest and congregation, revolving around acceptance of the priest as both symbol and person.
- e. A collegial spirituality, that is rooted in Anglican spirituality, appropriate for the context of the priest's life and involves some form of common life with other priests. In Newark the clergy gather each week for bible study and prayer. In the Diocese of Central New York the diocese offers "The Canterbury Way" in which clergy may join together in groups around a way of prayer, study, work, stewardship, and rest/recreation. The Order of the Ascension brings together clergy and laity for a week of retreat, study and community each year and provides a Benedictine Way of life in work, civic life, family and friends.

Mutuality in decision-making is a more common expectation: within the congregation among priests, and with the Bishop. Consultation with others in the parish and diocese is being looked for in all significant decisions. Priests increasingly need a capacity for such mutuality. Mutuality requires both firmness and flexibility on the part of the priest, qualities we often tend to separate. The methods used in many organizations to empower people and establish self managing teams needs experimentation in more congregations. Mutuality in ministries of worship, education, formation and Christian action is now often looked for by lay members performing such ministries. Priests are increasingly asked to include people in the planning. The parish priest needs training and guided experience for assessing and acting on the leadership style needed in a particular situation.

Discernment is frequently held up as a mode of decision-making fitting for the People of God. Our planning processes and development of mission strategy can become more grounded in a process of respectful listening, meditation on the Scriptures and waiting on God in prayer.

Our oversight has the purpose of advancing the "holy order" of Christ. We are to enable a parish life in which people may rest in God, offer their lives to God, give themselves to the mission they share in the Body of Christ, and so be transformed more and more into his likeness. We are to enable a parish life that is a Eucharistic life. In *The Mystery of Sacrifice*, Evelyn Underhill described the shape of it "For the fully Christian life is a Eucharistic life: that is, a natural life conformed to the pattern of Jesus, given in its wholeness to God, laid on His altar as a sacrifice of love, and consecrated, transformed by His inpouring life, to be used to give life and food to other souls."

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The oversight categories are based on a framework in Robert A. Gallagher's, *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Ascension Press, late 2006, and in *Power from on High*, 198