

Parish Pastoral Ministry: Task Clusters and KSAPs

One of the many fascinating aspects of parish pastoral ministry is the wide variety of tasks it involves as well as the many aspects of yourself that it requires. Every parish pastor knows the feeling of exhilaration that comes with knowing that you are using all your gifts. Every parish pastor also knows the feeling of exhaustion that comes when your ministry seems to be demanding more than you have to give.

In 2010 a study was published by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church. The study was led by Dr. Richard DeShon, a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Michigan State University. Dr. DeShon is considered one of the leading experts on job analysis, a discipline which seeks to determine the primary activities, tasks and responsibilities of a job.

Dr. DeShon writes, “The breadth of tasks performed by local church pastors, coupled with the rapid switching between tasks and roles prevalent in this job, is unique. It is remarkable how complex this job is. The pastor's work activities are highly varied, taxing, fast-paced, unrelenting, and often fragmented. This requires that the pastor be able to switch rapidly among highly diverse roles such as mentor, preacher, counselor, spiritual leader, and prophet.” He concludes with this important observation: “You must have a strong sense of call. Nothing can substitute for that. A lot of other things you can work on.”

TASK CLUSTERS

The study found 13 task clusters of parish pastors, with an average of 10 specific tasks in each cluster. Here are the task clusters, in no particular order:

- Administration
- Relationship building
- Preaching and public worship
- Care-giving
- Evangelism
- Self-Development
- Rituals and sacraments (e. g., baptisms, weddings, funerals, private Communion)
- Fellowship
- Denominational Connections
- Facility Construction
- Management
- Communication
- Development of others

KSAPs

In addition, the study defined various areas of Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Personal Characteristics (KSAPs) needed in parish pastoral ministry. Some 13 areas of knowledge were identified, along with 21 skills (things you need to know how to do), 11 abilities (gifts and talents you should have), and 23 personal characteristics. Wow!

MY OBSERVATIONS

Obviously no one individual can handle all these task clusters with excellence, and no one possesses all the KSAPs in full measure. So what do we do now? I suggest that we need to do three things: DECIDE, DISTRIBUTE, and DEVELOP.

DECIDE: Decide what matters most. Set priorities in terms of the pastor's responsibilities. This priority-setting should be done in a cooperative way between the pastor and key lay leaders. The Nominal Group Technique is an effective instrument for this purpose. I have used it and I know it can work.

DISTRIBUTE: Distribute the remaining tasks, starting with those of highest priority, among other staff, if any, and/or among lay leaders who are appropriately gifted. Consider adding staff persons, either full-time or part-time, called or contracted. There may be other tasks of lower priority which can be handled by others. If not every task can get done, so be it. Just be sure there is agreement on which tasks those are.

DEVELOP: Keep learning. I'm talking about continuing education, especially in the areas of knowledge and skills. Abilities and personal characteristics are more fixed, although not totally. New abilities can be discovered. Some personal characteristics can be worked on and modified.

I found this study very helpful in understanding the particular stresses, challenges, and opportunities of parish pastoral ministry. It provides some empirical and analytical handles for grasping the complex dynamics of this work.

Let me repeat Dr. DeShon's final comment: "You must have a strong sense of call. Nothing can substitute for that. A lot of other things you can work on." Amen to that!