Leadership Conferences

Each year have a leadership conference. This is a time for leaders to get their "heads above water" and to see the parish in broader and deeper ways. This can be at a retreat center or at the parish. While many parishes have such retreats with just the rector and vestry you might consider opening them to anyone in the parish who was willing to fully participate and help with follow-up work in the three months after.

It helps to use an external consultant at least every two or three years. On occasion I've working with three parishes to do this with all three vestries attending the same weekend. Working with all three at the same time allows them to afford the services of a more experienced consultant.

As a consultant I've always asked for a three-year contact for such work. That allows building on what was done the previous year and gives everyone the opportunity to get perspective. I take the vestries through an agreed process of some work together and a lot of time in for each vestry to work on its own.

A leadership conference needs to include time in prayer and activities that build connections among those present. It's a time to explore parish dynamics, strengths, and opportunities in relationship to the primary task and core processes. Use tools to assess parish life and dynamics and focus conversations. These core frameworks can be effectively used -- Renewal-Apostolate Cycle, Christian Life Model, Benedictine Promise, and Shape of the Parish. Consider using one or two models each year. These processes can include ways of looking at dynamics such as trust and inclusion. There can also be a long-range assessment of the parish's institutional life including finances and property. All this can be the base for identifying strategic issues and goals. My own bias is to avoid creating elaborate plans. Focus on developing a sense of direction and a deeper appreciation for the community's life.

Open Leadership Conferences
In one parish I was the consultant for their leadership conference for fifteen years. That helped me and them gain a sense of the broad dynamics present in the parish. That parish required the vestry to attend and invited any members to participate as long as they would attend all the sessions and help with the follow up work. By being that open about participation they did three things.

First, it expanded the amount of listening and response. More people contributed to and owned the direction.

Second, it helped build a sense of community by creating stronger relationships among people.

Third, it allowed them to identify people with the gifts for leadership. The rector and wardens could see who had the gifts and would tap them later to be on the vestry or take on projects.

Purposes

A yearly leadership conference that is a mix of:
1. Developing strategies and plans for the improvement of parish life & ministry. This would be based on a process of reflecting on and learning about, the whole, or some area of parish life
2. Community building among parish leaders

3. Spiritual development
4. Increasing the common competencies of parish leaders for the above. Part of our purpose is for the vestry and other leaders to increase their skills and knowledge for congregational development and leadership.

These four elements of the leadership conference are interrelated. The assumption is that they support and build on one another.

Conference Assumptions

1. The conference would take place around the same time each year

2. Make an agreement with a consultant to design and facilitate the conference for at least three consecutive years. The agreement can be extended for additional years or three-year periods. Begin with the assumption of working together for a long enough period to allow a building effect in both the work and the relationships. The agreement can be ended if either the consultant or the parish believes that there is an inadequate "fit" after the first year.

3. Participants would always include at least the rector and vestry.
- Participation could be expanded to other parish leaders (e.g., leaders of ministries and committees, past vestry members, etc.).
- It could also be an open-invitation event. All vestry members would be expected to participate but any member would be welcome. Those attending would fully participate in the conference work and in the initial follow-up efforts that flow out of the conference.

4. The conference would include work, worship, meals and social time.
The optimal conditions for a conference include a location away from the parish, two nights/three days, in a setting that is renewing while allowing for group work. The leadership conference is no less than a Friday night, Saturday 8:30 - 4:00 p.m. which could be on site at the parish or at a conference center; or a Friday night through Sunday lunch event at a conference center (have other clergy cover the HE in the parish, celebrate with the vestry; this format allows more time for building glue among people and time to not make it all too driven.).

5. Advance and follow up: The advance work might include phone and e-mail contact with a small working group, including the rector (usually two conference calls to discuss where the parish is, the needs as that group sees them, etc.; The consultant writes up a set of objectives and a broad design for the event and sends it to the group for suggestions, based on the suggestions the consultant produces a "final" draft for use). The group would be selected be the rector/vestry a few months before the conference. The group may be asked to gather information from the vestry and/or others to help establish the goals. The group would also mange conference logistical issues. There would be a follow up call or e-mail exchange after the conference. Note: The extent of advance and follow up work has a considerable impact on the cost.

6. Each year's conference would include all four of the purposes in some fashion while being designed around the current needs of the parish.

7. The conference design is understood as being adaptable. It is normal for issues to surface during the conference or for the group's attention and interest to be drawn to some aspects of the work over others. The group's energy needs to be taken into account as the conference progresses.

8. One aspect of the consultant's role is to ask the group to try new ways of exploring decision making, community building and spiritual development and for the group to generally be willing to enter into the exploration of those new ways.

Possible Effects of Having a Conference

There are a variety of ways in which the pattern of having leadership conferences may impact a parish:

1. Leadership formation as people gain confidence in being parish leaders

2. Greater sense of what it is to be a leader in the church. An ability to relate leadership to the unique purposes and dynamics of a parish.

3. Setting parish issues in a broader and deeper context. Relating issues to the parish's spiritual life and dynamics, to the trends and forces in the parish's environment, to the primary task of a parish church, etc.

4. Becoming more strategic

5. The identification of potential leaders (if the conference if an open-invitation event).

6. Increased follow-through on parish issues, e.g., focusing on the most strategic and primary task related work, membership growth, staff development, etc.

7. Having an additional way to hear and engage the "rubs" that naturally and usefully emerge in a parish as people have concerns and/or ideas for change. A Conference can be part of how parish leaders stay aware of external social and wider organizational forces and shifts from within the organization. This approach to managing organizational change can keep the system in touch with itself and its environment, create a "demand system" for continuous improvement, help negotiate differences, and prevent the development of high conflict levels.

Agreement

Include the following items:

- Fee and expenses. Include any assumptions about increasing the fee over time or how added on work will be billed. Charge for travel time if any (many consultants bill travel time at half the rate)
- The anticipated time involved – on site, advance and follow up.
- Set a date for the consultant to talk with the working group that will help establish conference goals and deal with logistics.

The consultant can provide a list of items and conditions needed for the conference: Easels, large newsprint pads, markers (dark color, chisel tip), masking r blue tape, how many meeting rooms will be needed (think about break out groups) and the arrangement of those rooms.

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