

To avoid clergy burnout, parishioners have to lend a hand

Bill Tammeus | Sep. 22, 2010 A small catholic

Last year as I was gathering information to write the centennial celebration book for a large Catholic parish in Kansas City, Mo., I asked the current priest and several men who formerly served there as priests to gather for conversation.

I wanted to unpack their brains to help me understand what makes [Visitation Catholic Parish](#) [1] tick.

It turned out to be quite a helpful session for me as I imagined the shape of the book. But there was something else about these half a dozen or so men being together that struck me as we sat in the living room of the priest's residence adjacent to the church. They relaxed. They told stories. They laughed. They responded well to each other's insights. It was like an ad hoc support group for priests. The session seemed to energize them for ministry.

That experience came quickly to mind recently when I learned that from Nov. 2-4, Seabury Western and Bexley Hall Episcopal seminaries will sponsor an event called "[Sustaining Excellence in Ministry: Accountability, Friendship & Hope in Peer Groups](#) [2]" in London, Ohio. The goal will be to look at the phenomenon that has come to be known as clergy burnout and the way it has been studied in a project funded by the [Lilly Endowment](#) [3].

Janet Maykus and Bruce Roberts, who helped to evaluate Lilly's eight-year promotion of clergy wellness, will discuss their research at the conference, which will focus on Lilly's "[Sustaining Pastoral Excellence](#) [4]" project.

We Christians -- whether Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox -- ask a great deal of our clergy. The old joke about clergy working an hour a week on Sundays is simply too embarrassing to tell for those of us who know the nearly impossible list of tasks we ask clergy to perform -- and perform well, too.

Yes, it begins in the sanctuary with worship and the sacraments, but it extends to pastoral care, teaching, marital and grief counseling, hospital calling, financial wizardry, community involvement and much more -- often including oversight of schools and other church-related organizations.

When I think about the work of the clergy these days, I imagine someone sitting in front of three active computer screens while holding and using two smart phones -- all the while carrying on an eyeball-to-eyeball conversation with a parishioner and motioning directions to a church staff member at the next desk. And while all this is going on the pastor is also praying and meditating.

That may be hyperbole but it doesn't sound unrealistic to lots of clergy I know.

The question for those of us in the pews is this: How can we help so that our clergy don't explode under this pressure but, instead, find ways to encourage and enable us to do the ministry to which each of us is called?

First, we must quit treating clergy as if they were managers of our country clubs. We must see them first as

God's servants, not ours. So we have to find ways to do for ourselves those church functions that must be done but that simply clog up clergy schedules, giving them less time to do real ministry.

You and I are the church -- a lesson we Protestants are taught with regularity -- even if we often don't act like we get it.

If we fulfill our own tasks as congregants with energy, intelligence, imagination and love we make it possible for our clergy to do their work without feeling that they are on a treadmill to nowhere.

Are there lazy, incompetent clergy? Yes. Some people learn how to game the system, violating the standards to which they pledged allegiance at ordination. But in my experience the percentage of such slackers is quite small. Much more worrisome are the clergy workaholics and those who seek to maintain balance in their lives but are simply overwhelmed by church responsibilities.

You and I can help. Let's start by asking our pastors how.

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- [1] <http://visitation.org/display/default.asp?page=Home>
- [2] <http://www.seabury.edu/enrichment/sustaining-excellence-in-ministry.html>
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- [4] http://www.lillyendowment.org/religion_spe.html
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