

Clergy Are Putting Their Faith in Management Training

A senior rabbi of twenty years had recently offered his resignation. He was intelligent, deeply committed to social justice, and beloved by many congregants. But over time, his leadership style had alienated others. He had also been butting heads with a newly ordained assistant rabbi, who ended up resigning as well. Within the congregation, factions were legion. Some members were angry that the senior rabbi was leaving, some were upset by the assistant rabbi's departure, and some were simply frustrated about the lack of transparency surrounding the turmoil. How could they lose two rabbis in a month, they wondered, without ever knowing there was a problem? The crisis came to a boiling point when congregants were left to battle over whether the senior rabbi should be given the honorary title of "rabbi emeritus." Over 900 people attended the congregational vote—which the senior rabbi narrowly lost.

Less than a month later, Crystal began his tenure as interim rabbi.

Business and nonprofit executives alike have long consulted management scholars for guidance on how to lead their organizations through change. Slowly, leaders of faith communities are getting in on the action too.

In fact, over the past decade, faith leaders have turned to traditional management education for insights into a variety of administrative challenges. It's a trend that, from a distance, may seem obvious, even inevitable. Like their corporate counterparts, faith leaders often oversee a large staff (paid and volunteer), multimillion dollar budgets, and multimillion dollar facilities. Like executives in the private and public sectors, they are charged with meeting the needs of diverse sets of stakeholders. And they, too, are fighting for

a place in the lives of an unprecedentedly distracted population.

“Although there are many differences, the organizational challenges that a CEO of a Fortune 250 corporation has to face and the challenges that a pastor or rabbi of a large congregation has to deal with are in some ways quite similar,” says Nicholas Pearce, a clinical associate professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School. For Pearce, who cofounded and codirects the school’s annual Faith and Leadership Week program, the parallels between the faith and business worlds are not merely academic. Since 2012, he has also served as assistant pastor at Chicago’s historic Apostolic Church of God. “It’s a calling,” he says. “At the age of seven, I knew I would serve in pastoral ministry.”

The Sacred and the Administrative

Divinity schools and seminaries may do a terrific job preparing future faith leaders for sacred duties. For managerial ones—according to increasing numbers of seminary presidents and clergy—not so much.

According to Pearce, this shortcoming may not be entirely accidental. A common view among religious leaders is that management training is antithetical to the aims of the ministry. Isn’t management education just about how to make more money? And isn’t money, if not quite the enemy, certainly a “secular other” that ought to stay a peripheral concern within the sacred context of ministry?

Faith communities, it seems, are often torn between two very different value systems. One system espouses all things spiritual: proclaiming sacred scriptures, administering sacraments, nurturing the faithful, visiting the sick, and caring for the bereaved. The other value system—let’s call it administrative—dictates how large teams are managed, how the physical plant is maintained, how space is allocated, and how

unprecedented regulatory complexity is navigated.

“Many congregations rightly prize the sacred core, but unadvisedly cast aside the administrative elements,” says Pearce. “Congregations that want to grow and scale the reach and impact of their ministries recognize that you can’t have one without the other. Excellence in modern ministry demands excellence in both the sacred and the administrative.”

Beau Surratt, an interim minister of music at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church outside of Chicago, believes that as a congregation, “we’re uncomfortable, deeply uncomfortable, talking about money. If we get more leaders comfortable with embracing the business side of what we do, and the rest of the people in the churches are able to see that fruits of that, maybe that will lead to some more comfort.”

Still, Pearce is quick to correct an underlying misconception: that the management training that faith leaders seek *is* about money, or at least that it is just about money. These leaders do not simply turn to the Kellogg School because they want to fill their church coffers, he says. “What they are coming to learn is how to be better stewards of *all* the human, material, and social resources that will be at their disposal in the leadership of their congregations.”

Sally Blount, Dean of the Kellogg School of Management, agrees. “And that mission matters to society. At Kellogg, we are not taking on this work for financial reasons, but as part of how we give back. Whether one is a person of faith or not, I think we can all agree that faith organizations provide important social infrastructure for their members and a moderating voice in social debate. Human society benefits when our churches, of all faiths, are healthy organizationally.”

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