

TOP 3

Challenges Facing Priests

It goes without saying that being a parish priest or working in a parish brings a lot of challenges. It is not for those looking for an easy life!

At The Connected Parish, our desire is to constantly provide help to those running a parish and give them ways to make their lives a little easier. Although the list of challenges is very long, we boiled them down to three.



1

No Time for Pastoral Care

2

Insufficient Self Care

3

Managing Staff & Volunteers

Challenge 1: How do I move from too much administrative work back to more pastoral care work?

This is a common organizational challenge. Many businesses spend millions of dollars training their leaders to navigate this very issue. How do you have an impact while managing your priorities? How do you replace the **urgent** with the **important**?

To stop the “tail wagging the dog” (i.e., admin and urgent work dictating how much time you spend on pastoral care), consider the following:

1. Define pastoral care and why it matters.

What is included? Why is it important?

2. Set a goal:

Try to determine a certain percentage of time you want to spend on pastoral care. This sounds strange, but having a goal will make it easier.

3. Share:

Share that goal with your staff, key volunteers, and especially your bishop! Once the people around you are aware of your goal, they will be more likely to adjust their demands and expectations of you in other areas to help you accomplish that goal.

4. Daily pulse check:

At the end of the day (as you nod off to sleep) try to estimate how close you got to that percentage. Just being aware of the pastoral care you did is a victory. The number itself is just a tool to help you see that you managed to do what is important. It is a motivator. We all need that!

5. Share:

Share your results periodically with staff/key volunteers and your bishop. This will not only serve as important motivation to the whole team, but also as a reminder of what can happen when you are given more time for pastoral care work.

6. Learn to say, “No.”

It is a complete sentence. If you can say “no” and tie it back to your priority/goal, then it doesn’t come across as being disagreeable or lazy.

7. Get used to squeaky wheels.

Be okay with non-essential things not going perfectly. That will happen. As long as you are focused on doing what is important, that is to be expected. Get used to squeaky wheels.

Challenge 2: How do I move from exhaustion and/or spiritual dryness back to being energized and on fire?

This, too, is not just in the domain of parishes, as most organizational leaders face this same challenge. Leading on an empty tank is difficult and the demands can prevent the tank from being filled. For a priest, it is even harder, as you are the face of the parish. If the tank is empty, how do you keep going?

1. Lead by example:

This is more than a throw-away business mantra. As a priest, you don't want your staff to burn out. Ideally you want them to be refreshed and motivated. But it starts with you. If you don't think it matters enough to take the time to do it, why would anybody else?

2. Try to define self-care:

Take a few moments to consider the important aspects of self-care. Depending on where you are, one may jump out at you. But to begin, consider the three main buckets:

Spiritual: How is your faith, your obedience, your joy, or your peace? Growing? Stagnant? Declining?

Physical: How is your health, your diet, your exercise, aches, or pains? Improving? Worsening?

Emotional: How is your mental health? Any depression, anxiety, anger, or other prevalent feelings that are limiting you? How is your mental health trending?

3. Define the orange and red flags.

Each of us is different, and it isn't always easy to see how our behavior slides. For yourself, try to define what the "orange" and "red" flags are. If you don't know, ask a trusted friend. When are you moving in the wrong direction (orange) and when do you need outside help (red)?

4. Take time off.

Regardless of how urgent or busy things are, always take your time off. Trust others to figure things out. People adjust. But being too busy to take time off to tend to yourself is not the path to holiness. Plan it ahead of time. Take it. Also, take larger chunks of time so you can unwind, really disconnect, and reorient yourself if needed. You can't do that in two days.

5. Have your self-care team:

Who is there to hold you accountable, who do you trust? Do you have access to a medical doctor? A counselor? Mental health professionals? Who is your team? Could you write this down? Everyone needs a good support system.

6. Lead by example:

Yes...this is here twice. Not a typo. You need to expect (dare we say "demand") that your staff do the same. They need the freedom to make their wellness a priority, regardless of the number of funerals, weddings, baptisms, building projects, or other parish demands. Taking a long-term view helps to see how important this is and how necessary it is to disappoint a few people if things don't get done. If you don't do it, neither will they.

Challenge 3: How do I help staff/volunteers avoid burnout and become more vibrant and energized?

It is difficult to find/hire staff considering how tight budgets are and how many jobs are available. Then there is the challenge of managing the staff and volunteers, which can be tough.

Here are a few questions to ask your team as you go about managing and hiring people:

1. Are we filling positions or focusing on getting the key tasks done well? Start with the tasks, not the position. Use the opportunity to think outside of the box and “build from the bottom up” by seeing what is essential (deliverables) and what is less essential? What needs to be done by a professional under direct supervision and what can be done by a volunteer? The typical approach to this is as follows:

- What deliverable do we want to see? How does it tie back to the core mission of the parish? For example, how does music bring people closer to Christ? What deliverable does music need to have?
- What tasks are needed to complete that deliverable? To produce music that brings people closer to Christ, what tasks need to get done? Do you even need live music? Challenge the assumptions by going back to the goal and core purpose.
- What skill sets are needed to do those tasks? Usually far less than we may think!
- How long do you expect those tasks to take? Thinking a task through to estimate the time needed is a great way to see if you missed any details or steps. Build in buffer!
- Can some of those tasks be done by volunteers? If you had a reliable volunteer, why would you pay somebody to do this?
- New position: With a bottom-up approach that focuses on deliverables and looks to use volunteers where possible, you now have a new position to advertise. Adapt the title of the position to the new “core” of the position, rather than using a traditional title. All assuming the diocese will let you!

2. Clear definition of success or just keep going? This one is about having a clear definition of what success looks like in any position, whether volunteers or staff. This is difficult because it takes time up front. But hiring without taking that time is a path to mediocrity, making it hard to get rid of staff who underperform.

3. Volunteer management well structured or ad hoc? Not all volunteers are good volunteers. Can you fire a volunteer without causing great internal discussions? To get around this, a few suggestions:

- Treat a volunteer like a highly paid staff member. Your mission is too important to allow the wrong person to do important jobs. Standards matter.

- Have limited terms (6-12 months) so that you can find somebody else if needed.
- Have a simple onboarding process that outlines what is important, what is expected, and what happens if it isn't working out — for example, no-shows, being grumpy, etc.!
- Make volunteerism as accessible as possible for those who aren't retired. How? First of all, break down the area/project into specific deliverables and tasks. Then determine if it is a remote or on-site task. Then guess how much time each one takes. Then post it (bulletin, back of church, email, etc.): for example: “Need somebody to enter data into system. This work can be done remotely and will take around 2 hours a week. Basic IT skills are required.”

4. Staff and volunteer recognition. Take the time to publicly and privately recognize volunteers and staff. Inviting people up to the altar is very effective, especially with teens & young adults.

5. Staff evaluations and feedback. This may be redundant, but tell paid staff what they are doing well (and why it matters). Also tell them what they are not doing well, and how they can improve.

6. Example: Youth Ministry: Before hiring a youth minister, make sure you can answer the following first:
If the parish exists to bring people closer to Christ, in what way do we bring youth closer to Christ? What does that look like?
How many youth are we targeting, and how many can we expect to get engaged?

- Are all youth the same? How do we deal with the differences?
- Can our goals be achieved with a few events a year, or do we need a weekly program?
- Do we have realistic expectations of youth and their openness to spiritual growth? What can you expect or hope for?
- What does success look like? When do you celebrate a successful youth ministry?
- Do we know what obstacles are stopping kids from engaging spiritually?
- Do we have good answers/opportunities to overcome those?
- How does digital content play a role in having meaningful engagement with our youth about their spiritual lives?
- Can we partner with other parishes to be able to leverage resources better?
- Why does it matter to get this right?

The above three challenges are just the key ones shared with us. There are many more. If you see challenges where you are stuck or would like to learn from what others are doing, please email us at:
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