

## Best Practices in Communicating

It is 11 o'clock; do you know where your priest is?

Forgive me, priests: I know that you work hard and the last thing you need is nosy parishioners, or bishops, asking what you do all day. We are all tired of the job about working only one day a week. There are people in parishes who think it is reasonable to call at any hour of the day (or night) just to get a phone number of another parishioner!

On the other hand, when you need someone, you need that person NOW! Nothing is more frustrating than not being able to contact that person in a pastoral emergency—the only thing worse is having no idea how to leave a message. In my visits to wardens and advisory boards, the number one frustration with parish priests is the lack of response. In some cases parishioners frankly told me that they do not know what the priest does.

I have found the following practices helpful. They are gleaned from priests who seem to enjoy the confidence of their parishioners. As I was blessed to be one such in the parishes I served, some of them are my practices also.

1. It actually helps to have a routine, yes, even office hours. True pastoral emergencies are not all that frequent, and the occurrences are no excuse to have a completely unplanned life. When I was in the parish I followed something like this: Monday is a study, correspondence and catch-up day. Tuesday morning is an office day, as are most weekday mornings as that has been the traditional time to meet with parish staff. Wednesday is a meeting day, Thursday is visitation, Friday is a day off and Saturday is for weddings, funerals and events—given none of these, it is the time to put the finishing touch on my sermon, and take the rest as a grace day. Sunday I give it all I have for the liturgies (3 services), and, for most Sundays, a nap in the afternoon!
2. Communicate what you do with parishioners! Not just once but over and over again, through all the media available to you – in bulletins, newsletters and even announcements. Do not assume people know what priests do. This will help set reasonable expectations. When there is no norm, any expectation is legitimate. I also found that when people know generally what the priest does, they respect the day off.

Yes, a priest's job is complicated, but it can be made more transparent. In this way the old saw about mystery applies: a mystery is something in which one can continually gain understanding. Mystification, on the other hand, is something that defies understanding. I think a priest's job is more like the former, while non-communication will contribute to the latter.

3. Set an optimum turnaround time when emails and telephone calls are answered (48 hours? a week?). Try your utmost to stick to it. Tell your people, at least the wardens, so they can both hold you accountable and defend you if needed.

4. Learn how to accept criticism and train trusted people to do this as well. Be open to positive outcomes rather than simply being defensive. There are many techniques for this. I was trained in the "Negative Inquiry" model of John Savage, but there are many variations of this. Once you have set up a system for parishioners to provide feedback to the leaders you have trained, communicate these conduits of feedback to your parishioners. This is a way to turn negative feedback into positive feedback.
  
5. If there are persistent conflicts over time and communication, there are probably fundamental differences in expectations. Build in times for renegotiating expectations, and make the results as widely available as possible.

The task of properly communicating is never over, but when the channels are open, all the energy potentially sealed up in frustration and resentment can be released for creative ministry.