

# The Priest as Change Agent

If I understand the sanctification and salvific process correctly, it is not something that is done “to” us. It is something in which we are dynamically and freely engaged – “Partakers of divine nature”, according to II Peter 1:4 and “From glory to glory” according to II Corinthians 3:18.

There are a few overarching goals in the vast portfolio of parish priest responsibilities. One of these is to create a parish environment where his parishioners can safely and supportively participate in the process of deification. Of course, first and foremost in this environment there is the worshiping, sacramental life of the church. Priests are really good at this.

Orthodox parishes preserve the life and teaching of the holy Orthodox faith and present it anew to every generation restating and offering it as best as possible in the “spirit of the age” without compromising the fullness of the Holy Spirit. As St. Nikolai Velimirovich famously wrote, "We must be super-conservative in preserving the Orthodox faith, and super-modern in propagating it."

The worshiping life of the parish provides the infrastructure for the sanctifying and deifying environment but in and around this are programs, ministries, activities, events and then more pedestrian duties such as overseeing an office, developing the parish council, raising sufficient funds, planning for the future, caretaking of facilities, etc.

This brief paper focuses on the role of a priest in facilitating not only person by person transformation through liturgical and pastoral work but overall community transformation through effective leadership, management and development. This involves a continuous process of *managing change*.

Change management is a broad and diverse topic, but the essential issues can be framed in a cycle of change:

- Recognizing the need for change
- Defining the change that is needed
- Developing a strategy to effect the change
- Implementing the change
- Assessing the effectiveness of the change
- Repeat

John Cardinal Newman said, “To live is to change. To become perfect is to have changed often.” Perhaps he was referring to the cycle of change above!

## Recognition

When focused intently on mission or preoccupied with the tyranny of the urgent task the parish priest, the staff and volunteers sometimes don't recognize practical and necessary things such as ...

- The constantly shifting conditions of internal needs or funding
- The new opportunities for reframing programs and ministries for greater impact
- The necessity of new ministries in light of external environmental challenges
- The dysfunctions that impede improvement

Even when the priest sees the need for change, it may still be a challenge to convey that need to others. The intensity of commitment to the cause and the hesitancy to challenge fundamental assumptions can obscure problems until they become very serious, or even insurmountable.

The best safeguard against the failure to recognize a need for change is a culture of strategic thinking, developed through a regular cycle of strategic, operational and program planning. Parishes that value planning and use it often enough to foster ongoing strategic thinking are much more likely to expect change and stay alert to changes of all sorts.

### Definition

Recognizing the need for change isn't the same thing as accurately determining the nature of the need or of the response. The most fundamental idea of parish strategic planning is to involve all parishioners in focusing on strategic issues and developing an informed consensus about how to address them. Their aggregate wisdom, knowledge and experience are more likely to identify changing circumstances than is a single leader or even a full parish council.

When a comprehensive strategic planning process is not practicable, individual planning tools can still be used effectively (benchmarking, SWOT, a polarity exercise, etc.) to explore and define issues and strategies for more immediate leadership, governance or management action.

### Strategy Development

A strategic plan connects mission through goals and objectives to mission-driven measurable actions. This conceptual structure fosters the rigorous thinking required to anticipate, create or face change. If necessary, this way of connecting a qualitative mission to quantifiable results can also be used independently from a full planning process to guide the parish council or management in dealing quickly and effectively with urgent issues.

Ultimately, depending on the nature of the needed change, the strategy required may be less about planning, and more about helping people (staff, parish council members, heads of

ministries and organizations, key volunteers, and ultimately the general parish membership) to adapt to change. This takes us to the front lines of managing change: implementation.

### Implementation

The implication of the title *The Priest as Change Agent* conveys the vital necessity for his leadership and management in all aspects of the cycle of change – especially implementation, once it has been recognized and defined and a plan has been developed.

Meaningful change is disruptive and uncomfortable to many if not most of the parishioners. It can require reevaluating assumptions, refocusing attention and restructuring responsibilities, power and prerogatives. Unless the process is managed effectively, some parishioners will resist, criticize, complain, or just wait to see whether the initiative will fail so that they don't have to do things differently.

Change management is the art of helping people to adapt to change—staff who need to accept changes in their responsibilities, the management function where there is a need to develop different styles of supervision and a parish council that needs to take on a different role – say, from trying to manage operations to authentic governance. These are the topmost functions within the administration of a parish, but then there is the general membership of the parish.

The keys to success in managing change are straightforward, and they are all, in one way or another, about communication – especially with the general membership:

### Clarity

Presumably there is a compelling reason for making the change. The more clearly the benefits of the change are communicated along with the negative consequences of not changing, the more likely resistance, criticism, and complaint will be minimized and active cooperation maximized.

### Engagement

If one of the challenges of making the change is to ensure staff and key volunteer cooperation, the chances of success can be enhanced by involving them in planning for the change, designing and implementing it, and feeding back responses to it. If leaders feel that they are part of the initiative, they will be much more supportive of it. Imposed change feels authoritarian or abusive even when it is beneficial, participatory change is merely awkward or uncomfortable.

### Supervision

If staff and key volunteers are expected to do things differently, they may need training, encouragement and time to adapt. They will likely need to review current responsibilities with the priest to establish priorities for tasks that may be less important than the ones that will support the change. A regular review of progress and impediments will maintain focus and support success.

### Leadership

Successful change is not about you or them, it's about us. Senior leaders in the parish should be sure to find a way to be visible participants in the changes being made, not just remote and exempt commanders. This focuses attention on the importance of the initiative(s) and enhances morale. It can also pre-empt or dampen political power plays and undercut cynics.

### Transparency

Announcing a parish change once—or even repeating it a few more times—does not convey a sufficient message of a structural or systemic change. Parishioners need to have a sense of an interactive communication with the identified leadership of the parish, including encouragement to comment and providing individual responses and regular updates on how the change is working and how it's being tweaked or improved as a result of feedback. This is where engaged listening is essential. Parishioners need to know what improvements are being achieved or what progress is occurring as the result of the change, and they need to be reminded about the importance of keeping on track.

### Assessment

Any parochial change should be accompanied by clear, quantifiable measures of success, both as a management tool and as a communication tool.

Change is inevitable. Awareness of it and the ability to respond to it are not. An understanding of the intricacies of managing change supports relevance and sustainability.

The priest as change agent requires the courage and the faith of the prophets as well as the tender, compassionate and accepting love of our Lord. It's an interesting life, no?