

Spiritual work needs material help

On Faith

The Rev. Halbert Weidner

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Wobbly bridge-building is one of my failures as a pastor. I am supposed to be the kind of person who helps people make connections in their lives, within themselves and within this beautiful world. If people do this, it is usually without my help. People I know as a pastor often do not.

One of the bridges that does not get built is between material things and spiritual things. Just by saying that, I have separated what God has joined together and no one should separate. But there it is. Why we have this tendency to separate and divide is hard to understand. The spiritual is not the nonphysical. You can be someone who fasts and keeps night prayer vigils and not be spiritual.

Nonetheless, people still separate out and say things like, "I want to help with the spiritual side of the church, not the financial or administrative side," or "People should work for the church for free unless they have some needs." Administration and finances, like taxation, are policy. The way it is done encourages some things and discourages others.

When people ask me why one out of four Catholics goes evangelical, I say it is because of the way evangelicals administer their churches. The way my church is administered constantly gets in the way of the Gospel, despite the richness of the wisdom tradition, the beauty of the liturgy and the worldwide appeal it should have.

Except for the rare megachurch, evangelicals are lay-oriented and direct, operating as small units. This invites ownership, sometimes at the risk of orthodoxy and unity, but it has a strong, lively advantage over larger and more cumbersome churches.

In my own church, two national committees of lay people have warned the bishops about this. One board, appointed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is the National Review Board on the Crisis in the U.S. Catholic Church, and the other is working with bishops, the National Roundtable on Church Management.

The sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church was not just about a small minority of priests, but a problem of large administrations whose responses were muffled in layers of lawyers, insurance and isolated decision-makers. Somewhere between a lawless monarchy and lawless anarchy, there is a way to unite administration and spirit, clergy and laity for the sake of what God, I believe, made as one and declared to be good.

A large church usually survives by people playing roles; small churches make it by people taking personal responsibility. Once I was at a meeting where a well-meaning person declared that our Catholic parishes were not unified in their approaches to ministry. They wanted a statewide workshop so we could learn how to have "unified ministries."

One of the people at the meeting said to me, "Are you taking this personally?" Well, yes! Many ministers and priests take their work personally because church takes personal sacrifices. How else can it be done?

The Rev. Halbert Weidner is pastor of Holy Trinity Catholic Church and St. Sophia Ukrainian Catholic Church.