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5 Minutes With the Director of a Management Program for Church Leaders

Chuck Zech, of Villanova University, discusses teaching the business of doing God's work.

The Business of Doing God's Work

By Beckie Supiano



Few church leaders have a solid business background. Villanova University's new master-of-science program in church management was designed to offer them a strong grounding in business coupled with a faith-based approach. The two-year program is taught online, with a one-week residency on the campus of the Roman Catholic university outside Philadelphia. Chuck Zech, director of the Center for the Study of Church Management at the university's school of business, spoke with *The Chronicle* as the program's first class neared its graduation this past Sunday.

Q. Why have a specific degree program in church management?

A. Our mantra is that the church is not a business, but it does have a stewardship responsibility to use its resources effectively. Sometimes that stewardship responsibility requires them to use business-management techniques.

That's what we're about. We're about helping churches use their resources more effectively, be better stewards of the resources they have, so they can better carry out God's work on earth. ... Frankly, most church workers don't have a background in business. They advance through the ranks, or they have a degree in theology or religious studies or social work or education, and at some point they find themselves in a managerial situation that they're not prepared for.

Q. Your first class of students is graduating this spring. Tell us a little about these students.

A. Well, we started with 28; we'll be graduating 19 this month. Of those who aren't graduating, some have just taken maybe one course at a time, so they'll be graduating later, others have personal situations that required them to leave the program, and others frankly found that distance education was not exactly what they thought it was.

They come from a variety of positions. We have a couple guys that run retreat centers, we have a bunch of folks working in parishes and congregations, a bunch who work in diocesan or religious-order offices, and of course we have a bunch of clergy.

A third of our students are Protestants. The Protestants are really important to us ... especially in a program like this, they are critical because, frankly, every church faces the same sort of problems. Every church struggles with internal financial controls, every church struggles with performance management of their volunteers and laity, every church struggles with what civil law and church law are saying. But every church has some good solutions.

So by mingling Catholics and Protestants and a variety of faith traditions, we get to hear the good ideas that the other faith traditions have, and so the students can really learn a lot from one another. In adult education, so often students learn as much from the classmates as from their professor. That's real important here, that we have a nice, quality contingent of Protestants and Catholics so they can cross-fertilize their ideas.

Q. The sexual-abuse scandal is back in the news lately, and the leadership of the Catholic Church has been getting negative attention. How do you handle that in class?

A. The underlying problem of the sexual-abuse scandal, as well as the underlying problem of other recent scandals having to do with church embezzlement, has to do with the Catholic Church's culture of lacking transparency and accountability. ... Throughout the program we emphasize the importance of transparency and accountability in all decision making. And if the Catholic Church had done that from the beginning, they wouldn't be where they are right now with the sexual-abuse scandal.