Formation for Catholic Healthcare Ministry Leadership

Program Design

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Formation for Catholic Healthcare Ministry Leadership (FCHML) was designed in 2003 in direct response to the Ascension Health vision for an increased role for laity in the leadership and sponsorship of the Catholic healthcare ministry. It is an intensive two-year program, conducted by Ascension Health and the Aquinas Institute of Theology. This program includes six on-line courses in theology, eight spiritual retreats, spiritual direction, a leadership style assessment and an integration project. The six theology courses include: An introduction to theology; Christ and the Scriptures; The Church and Ministry; Catholic Social Teaching; Organizational and Clinical Ethics and a final integration course. Throughout the program practical applications of the theology are discussed in order to enable leaders to more effectively meet the following expectations of the program: Describe how Catholic healthcare is a ministry of the Church; Grow as a servant leader; Enhance workplace spirituality; Facilitate prayer and reflection; Actualize Catholic social teaching and Use the Organizational Ethics Discernment Process.

Figure 1 depicts an overview of FCHML. The six theology courses which are facilitated by Aquinas Institute faculty are placed below the retreats (1-8) at which they are reinforced. All retreats are conducted at the Washington University Knight Center in St. Louis, Mo. The initial retreat is five days and all subsequent retreats
are two days. Throughout the history of the program, the six courses have been continuously refined to support the program’s expectations. By the second retreat, participants are expected to have made their own arrangements for spiritual direction. The nature of spiritual direction is discussed at the first retreat and a role play for spiritual direction is presented. The participants’ discoveries from their spiritual direction are integrated into a variety of retreat experiences.

The leadership assessment component of FCHML uses the Ascension Health Talent Insights program. The Ascension Health Leadership Development Department presents the Talent Insights program and facilitates its application and resultant development planning. The Ascension Health Executive Competency Profile is the heart of the assessment and formation expectations are built into this profile. Servant Leadership is explored in the retreats as a model which is very supportive of the competency profile and the leadership assessment work.

Participants are aware of the requirement for an integration project from the beginning of the program and mid-way through the program they are asked to identify and begin working on their project. The intent of the project is to demonstrate that participants can integrate the spiritual practices and theological reflection they have experienced in the program, into their ministry. As indicated on Figure 1, there is a six month period between retreats seven and eight during which the participants do not attend retreats but rather work on their projects in addition to their normal duties. Projects to date have varied greatly and have included: the development of modules for use in Ongoing Executive Formation (another Ascension Health formation program); the assessment of the effectiveness of initiatives to implement workplace spirituality, uses of the Organizational Ethics Discernment Process; social justice initiatives, the Catholic Identity Matrix, the development of mentoring programs and the creation of a formation program for front-line managers. In an example of how the many components of the program can be brought together in effective experiential learning, a Vice President for Compensation was struck while working in the Catholic Social Teaching course by how
well the Church’s teachings coincided with his own beliefs. Then during the retreat at which the social teachings were integrated, he became aware of attributes of our compensation structure which could be more closely aligned to the social teachings. For his project, he and another participant developed a proposal to revamp the executive compensation structure which was accepted in part by the Ascension Health Board of Trustees.

At the bottom of Figure 1 are many tools which are presented during the course of the two years. These include general prayer and reflection techniques, discernment methods and Ascension Health organizational instruments. These often do not support the specific theme of any one retreat but are interwoven throughout the program. Also a variety of optional experiences are offered including a tour of the Missouri Botanical Garden to explore the spirituality of place, a tour of St. Louis emphasizing the spirituality of Architecture and visits to the Daughters of Charity West Central Provincialate and the Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, to connect with our sponsors heritage.

At the top of Figure 1, we have attempted to name the major movements of the participants through the program. Indeed all individuals and all groups progress differently but the themes identified in figure 1 seem to be common. At the beginning of the program, participants come together and engage in a variety of activities designed to bring them into a learning community. Throughout the first retreat they are asked to share their own story at gradually deeper levels. Program facilitators have commented that there is an observable moment in the first retreat, different for each group, during which the group has closely bonded. The group then passes into an engagement of the course materials. The participants are typically very active on-line and excited to be learning a new vocabulary and new thought structures. This often lasts into the beginning of the second year. Then, normally between the fifth and sixth retreat, the groups have met a challenging period during which they become painfully aware of the difference between their lived experience in the ministry and the learnings of the
program. At times there is disappointment, anger or confusion. The facilitators openly discuss these concerns and suggest that it is “OK” for the Church, as a human organization, to be on a journey and not yet fully arrived at its final destination. We can accept where we are on the journey. Yet as leaders we are called to help our Health Ministries take the next steps on the journey. We are called to action. The coincidence of this “awareness” experience, with the selection of integration projects has been fortuitous and has resulted in many meaningful projects.

The Ascension Health Board of Trustees and Sponsors Council are routinely informed about the progress of the program. And, the effectiveness of FCHML is being assessed in three ways:

- Participants respond retrospectively to a set of questions which assess their perspective of their ability to meet the program expectations before they entered the program and after on a five point scale. Responses average a 2.63 before the program and a 4.13 after program completion - a 57.5 % increase.
- Participant projects are documented and monitored to determine if they are having an effect on the organization. To date many of the formation projects have become Ascension Health system-wide processes and programs.
- It is not an intended measure of the program but it is very interesting to note that six of the first 150 participants in FCHML have made career changes into Mission leadership roles as a result of the program and are pursuing advanced degrees in theology.

In November of 2010, Ascension Health selected its eighth cohort of 25 participants for FCHML. The program continues to draw applicants from the senior executive and physician ranks.