



The Practice of Team Ministry

An interview with Tim Elliott

Who is on your team?

We have three administrative staff, one each for parish, finances and membership. There are four ministry staff: rector, associate, christian education coordinator and organist. We include others such as the custodian and worship team leaders from time to time.

The heart of our functioning as a team is the weekly staff meeting and having lunch together once a month. It didn't always go well. People used to leave early and often were quite passive/aggressive. In those days it was a fairly loose agenda with people just bringing what they wanted to talk about. We also shared the chairing. I had to accept the fact that this wasn't working. It was my agenda for the meeting and I had to take responsibility for it. So now I chair and we have a fixed agenda. People know what to expect, they come prepared and that helps a lot.

How does your staff meeting work?

We have an opening reflection, then move on to issues of money and attendance. We're presented with a one page summary of our services and givings for the week (we have about five services). We learn where donations have been directed, who's filled out membership forms, who wants a visit, that sort of thing. It's very useful for our pastoral and outreach work to keep on top of this information.

Next we debrief Sunday and recent events. We walk through the week and identify any glitches that happened. Then we have a kind of "open space" period for people to express appreciation and concerns. That's very important to build our sense of moral and working together.

Then we look ahead. The Sunday bulletin is circulated in draft and we may go through the liturgical calendar for the next two months. Next is "any other business" for 15 minutes. We spend our last 15 minutes on membership issues using three categories: new, core, and inactive. We may do a case study. We talk about communication particularly in relation to our computerized telephone tree.

And yes, we do meet in one another's homes for lunch once a month.

That sounds pretty structured. What are the benefits?

I think it's lowered anxiety and resentment. People can put issues on hold because they know they'll be dealt with. It allows things to settle a bit. One of the drawbacks is that not everything gets said. However, our monthly lunch builds openness and trust. We have to balance care for

one another and getting the job done. I think this degree of structure is appropriate to a large parish.

How do you deal with problems?

The absolute basic is to have trust in one another. The inevitable screw up can't be seen as a double cross. We have a saying that "every policy is the result of a very bad experience." Writing policy is our way of dealing with frustrations. We find that policy "solves it until the next time."

What have you learned about team building?

Know the stories of the people you're working with. This means the basic facts of a person's history, especially their work. It also means being sensitive to what's going on in their personal lives. You have to hang out with people a bit in order to do this. I believe in being sensitive and also in maintaining professional boundaries.

Truth + Love = Trust, or Tell the truth sooner. I think as caregivers we often dislike conflict and that prevents us from being open with one another when we need to be. Being open isn't just saying things we need to say. It's also being clear with people about boundaries and saying what's legitimate and what isn't. We pay for not telling the truth sooner.

Clarity about role and relationship. We're a segmented team with a philosophy of communication and cooperation. We work in the same organization but we can't back each other up in our separate jobs. We're professional colleagues working together in different departments, admittedly with a shared sense of working in a common cause. Our professionalism needs to be tempered with humility. Our sense of team develops around our debrief of worship because all of us have had a hand in producing it, from the music director, to the preacher, to the one who did the bulletin.

Joy. You do it because it's better not to work alone. You want this to be a friendly, supportive and good place to work.

Hiring. The most important question to ask yourself when you're choosing a new team member is, "Who's face do you want to see when you come through the door?"

Decisions and solidarity. We talk about issues and try to keep the door open. But at a certain point the door has to close. We try to achieve consensus if possible. If we can't, I've got to make the decision and take the consequences. The decision is definite and we expect solidarity once we're outside the door. It's also important to have some discernment about where the decisions are taken. In our polity there are lots of decisions that belong with the key lay leaders, not with the staff team.

Self knowledge. We're each responsible for our own health and need to be reminded of that. Also, you've got to be willing to be part of the team and not pretend you are a solo agent. You

have to be prepared to participate in a large system and all that entails, including showing up for meetings.

We had an interesting team building experience when we had to move out of our premises for 8 months during a major renovation. We had to decide together what we could throw out and what was absolutely necessary for us to function.

And then of course, there's our Crimmond Society. We buy each other a beer depending upon whether or not Crimmond is played at our most recent funeral.

The Rev. Dr. Tim Elliott was the incumbent of Christ Church, Deer Park for 14 years. He is an Anglican priest and a canon of the Diocese of Toronto.