



Pastoral associate Barbara Purnell-Small has been directing St. Francis of Assisi's gospel choir since 2001. Her courses in Church Management taught her to harmonize parish efforts so that "everything we do supports our mission, which is to continue the work of Jesus Christ."

Holy Harvest

By SUZANNE WENTZEL

Graduates of the Villanova School of Business' M.S. in Church Management program see the fruit of their labors

When the *Wall Street Journal* article caught his eye, it was like an answer to a prayer. Stan Zerkowski, a secular Franciscan, had been puzzling over one question: how could St. Brendan the Navigator Parish more effectively reach out to its Katrina-ravaged "sister" parish in Louisiana?

It wasn't that the coffers were low. St. Brendan saw its population of 1,200 families triple—and its collection increase—every year when out-of-state "snow-birds" wintered in Ormond Beach, Fla.

Still, as director of Liturgy and Outreach, Zerkowski believed that if the parish possessed better strategies for harnessing the congregation's stewardship, managing resources and integrating outreach with prayer, it could do more to build up God's kingdom nationally and globally.

Zerkowski scanned the article, which featured Charles Zech, Ph.D., director of the Center for the Study of Church Management in the Villanova School of Business. He pondered Dr. Zech's insights into stewardship and faith-based management practices. Then he flipped open his phone.

Six states of separation

Sitting at her desk in the rectory of St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Northwest Philadelphia, pastoral associate Barbara Purnell-Small mentally paged through her week: visit the inter-parochial school that afternoon; oversee religious education classes on Tuesday; welcome the seniors group on Wednesday; run gospel-choir practice on Thursday; manage the office ... every day.

A lot for one person, she knew, but if people wanted to help, they would come

forward, right? Besides, with parish membership hovering at 200 families, the volunteer pool was limited. St. Francis resembled other struggling urban parishes, where funerals equaled or outnumbered baptisms. She had seen old photos depicting the neighborhood's once robust Catholic community and longed to help her beloved parish thrive again, but how?

When her new pastor, the Rev. Eugene Sheridan, C.M., showed her an ad for a master's degree in Church Management at Villanova and said, "This program would be good for you," Purnell-Small had her answer.

Sharing one destiny

In May 2010, Zerkowski, Purnell-Small and their online classmates became Villanova's first recipients of an M.S. in

Church Management. Though separated by geography—the most distant student lived in Hong Kong—the members of this cohort had texted, posted and blogged their way to mutuality and kinship during two years of study.

Their professors, meanwhile, had challenged them to explore innovative approaches in the ecclesial environment, with one foot on the bedrock of business, the other on the foundation of faith. Neither a strictly-business nor a piety-in-the-sky mentality would suffice. “We talked about the reality of praying, serving the Lord and keeping our books in order,” Purnell-Small says.

Students acquired competencies such as strategy formation, budgeting and organizational management. Because projects paired Catholics with Protestants, accountants with liturgists, and laypeople with religious, participants picked up each other’s vocabulary. “Being able to talk about spreadsheets and Web technology has made me a better manager,” Zerkowski says.

One beauty of the online program was that students could continue working in their ministries while taking courses—and Zerkowski and Purnell-Small did not wait until graduation to try out their newfound knowledge.

Letting the left hand know

In the crucible of 2008’s economic meltdown, Zerkowski tested the worthiness of the mantras he was learning at Villanova: transparency and accountability. To pay their bills and still assist people in need, he and other administrators at St. Brendan decided to cut funds to services not essential to the parish’s mission and to partner with local businesses to sustain those that were. They disclosed how every penny was being spent.

“Parishioners and visitors share their time, talent and treasure to do God’s work,” Zerkowski says, “but in return, they expect accountability and transparency. When we give them that, we show them respect and acknowledge their role.”

This policy succeeded. Parishioners donated a record \$40,000 and two tons of food for the Christmas outreach. When the Rev. John Ryan, St. Brendan’s pastor, incorporated details of this generosity into his Epiphany homily, the dream that had prompted Zerkowski to enroll in the degree program was realized.

“We bring everything back to the table of the Lord,” he says. “If learning ‘best practices’ makes us better stewards, God is praised and our prayer becomes more efficacious.”

Parishioners donated more in 2009 and exceeded by more than 100% their goal for the Catholic Appeal. Father Ryan

attributes these accomplishments to strategies provided by Villanova.

Identifying your mission and your market

Meanwhile, new strategies helped Purnell-Small energize St. Francis. For example, she began to recruit volunteers and delegate responsibility by walking up to people, shaking their hand and asking how they wanted to help the parish. “St. Francis may be small in number, but it is generous in heart,” she says.

Purnell-Small discovered that to effectively proclaim the gospel and evangelize, St. Francis would have to articulate its mission and put its dollars behind it. “Otherwise, we are a church without direction.” She and Father Sheridan created a stewardship committee to help parishioners take ownership of this process. The parish also began to do “market research” to find out who it was serving, what their needs were and how to reach to them.

Above all, Purnell-Small started communicating in relevant, appropriate ways. She directed people to an up-to-date Web site and used language that spoke to the un-churched. For example, she promoted the Ash Wednesday liturgy to everyone in the community, not just churchgoers.

Afterward, a family new to the neighborhood expressed their gratitude for the warm welcome, and one woman asked if she could have her children baptized.

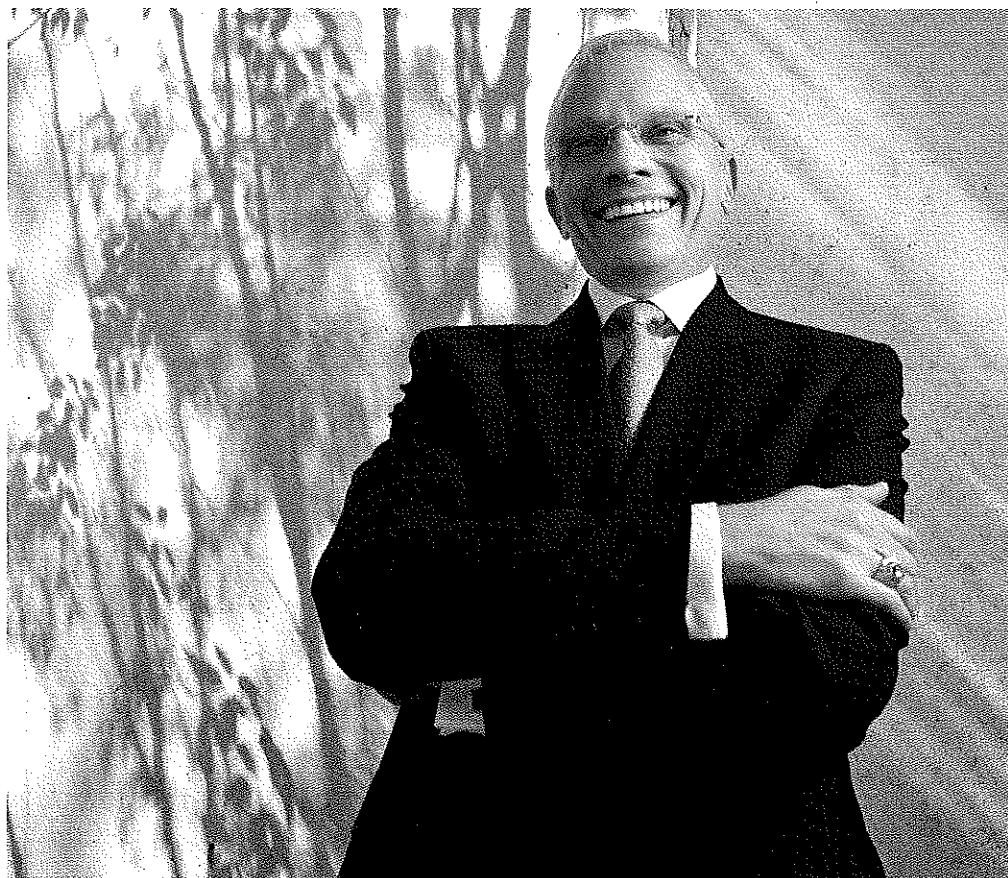
“Our faith is so rich!” Purnell-Small says. “Why wouldn’t we do everything possible to share it?”

Lighting the world

These graduates have no intention of hiding their lamps under a bushel. Purnell-Small discusses marketing strategies with other church leaders; Zerkowski recently published an article titled “Forecasting Expenses, Partnering for Solutions.” They encourage others to enroll in Villanova’s program and, with their classmates, have established a scholarship in memory of the Rev. James Hynes, O.F.M., a fellow student who died in 2008.

Their enthusiasm is good news to Robert Miller, Ed.D., director of Research and Planning for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and an adjunct professor. It is imperative, he says, that Church Management degree holders be reflective practitioners.

“If they put to good use what they have learned and inspire others to do the same, they have the potential to change the world, one parish at a time.”



A that’s-the-way-we’ve-always-done-it policy no longer works for Stan Zerkowski, director of Liturgy and Outreach at St. Brendan the Navigator Parish. The Church Management program has given him “a new lens with which to identify better strategies and methods.”