Last month, priests within the Diocese of Colorado were asked to respond to an electronic survey relating to continuing education. Rather than mandating an annual number of hours of continuing education, the diocese is taking a low cost approach that emphasizes a sharing of experiences, knowledge and information.

Now that the responses to the questions have been received, the plan is to document the information though establishment of a continuing education resource page on the diocesan web site. In this way, useful books, courses, blogs, podcasts and other educational experiences can be readily shared with others. Since the development of a resource page will take some time to complete, this summary of the results has been developed to share the survey response information in a timely manner.

Eighty-four responses were received to the electronic survey, a participation rate of about 55%. While most of the responding clergy reported significant continuing education activity, about one-third had no formal continuing education in the past year. Courses taken cover such varied topics as suicide prevention, hospice care for VA patients, emotional intelligence, leadership and the use of social media for evangelism. Continuing education provided by seminaries was relatively rare, although offerings from the Seminary of the Southwest were taken by one priest. Online courses from various universities and institutions were taken, such as a course on biblical Hebrew from the University of Jerusalem.

Several priests are participating in the Church Development Institute, while others attended CREDO, the Spiritual Direction Colorado conference, a conference for young clergy and the Festival of Homiletics. One respondent took a number of offerings from “The Great Courses” series, while others attended seminars with Richard Rohr or Marcus Borg. One respondent commented favorably on two valuable courses from the Alban Institute: “Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership” and “Staffing and Supervision.” Courses on healthy relationships were also noted. Several priests were able to travel to Iona, New Mexico’s Ghost Ranch and other locations outside of the diocese. Others cited learning from reading and discussion groups with other clergy. Clergy applauded the continuing education received at the Clergy Conference (the recent presentation by Dwight Zscheile was worthwhile to many), Clericus and the diocesan convention.

Informal continuing education efforts (no formal coursework) were significant throughout the diocese. Local ecumenical groups with ministers from other churches are examples of informal networking, as are various clergy wellness groups and participating in spiritual exercises.

Many clergy engage in significant reading, with dozens of recommended titles. Books that were mentioned several times in response to the survey include “The
Cloud of Unknowing”, "Falling Upward" by Richard Rohr, "The People’s Way" by Dwight Zscheile and “Christianity After Religion” by Diana Butler Bass. Both DVD and audio courses (Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, Ken Wilbur, Walter Brueggemann) are being used by some priests. One priest reports listening to books on tape while exercising. Blog posts were cited by several priests, such as those by Dean Kevin Martin and Mike Angell’s “A Different Kind of Christian.” Websites mentioned as being worthwhile include the National Association of Episcopal Schools, workingpreacher.org and OnBeing.org. Podcasts that some priests listen to include “Interfaith Voices”, “Religion and Ethics Newsweekly”, “Tapestry” from CBC Radio, “Day 1.org”, “Mars Hill Bible Church” sermons and Brian Lehrer’s podcast from WNYC. A recommended daily meditation from the Right Rev. Steve Charleston is also available online. As one priest stated, spending time reading books and blogs and blogging yourself “is paramount and an excellent way to participate in ‘non-credit’ continuing ed.”

Several priests were willing to discuss subjects, verbally or in writing, for the benefit of other clergy. Examples include speaking/writing on the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, discernment, reconciliation after conflict in a church, implementing safe church policies, entrepreneurial leadership in a church, facilitation skills, appreciative inquiry, animal rights/ethics, how to read a financial statement and understand church finances, clergy tax rules, establishing new ministry initiatives, a stewardship approach known as “Consecration Sunday”, negotiating conflict and end of life issues.

Many clergy were appreciative of the continuing education the diocese already provides, and had several suggestions for additional topics. Among the subjects mentioned for learning through the diocese: hands on ministries such developing youth programs and working with the homeless, small group discussion about ministry best practices, more on “Where is the Church going”, ideas for pre-marital counseling, working with children and grief, evaluation of staff and volunteers, the convergence of science and religion, practical liturgical training for lay leaders, adopting a rule of life and how to discuss controversial issues in productive ways. Several priests want the diocese to screen and select a few books for suggested reading and make them available for regional or online discussion. Another suggested that more on the topic of parish life was needed. Still another wanted less “how to” presentations and more that make you think.

Most priests have not gone on sabbatical in the past year, but some have done retreats that range from one to eight days. Some are silent retreats, while others are directed in nature. Budgetary realities are often a barrier to sabbaticals. Several vestries have added saving for a priest’s sabbatical to the church budget. Some priests have successfully applied for a grant to fund a sabbatical through the Lily Foundation.

We appreciate the time and effort that clergy devoted in responding to the continuing education survey!