

Complexity of congregational life inspires first annual event for church administration

DALLAS -- It's not easy being a church -- not anymore. A distrustful public, complex regulations, watchful governments, stricter zoning and the echo of past scandals all make the leadership of church harder than ever. And against the backdrop of the worst economic recession in 80 years, many church leaders are looking to each other for help.

[National Church Administration Day](#), a first-ever event set for Oct. 15, will celebrate the power of peer-learning to address the increasing complexity of "doing church" in contemporary society.

[The National Association of Church Business Administration](#), the interdenominational group sponsoring the celebration, is asking many of its [80 local chapters](#) to host instructional events, allowing its 15,000 chapter members and others to learn the latest administrative strategies from each other.

"The churches that are doing well in this climate are the ones that already had smart and informed practices and policies in place," said Phill Martin, NACBA's deputy CEO. "National Church Administration Day honors the good work done by able administrators and shares that knowledge with others."

At least 18 NACBA chapters have already scheduled peer-learning [events](#) in their local areas, most for Oct. 15. Those training events, approximately three hours in length, will share the latest professional information on wide-ranging topics, such as:

- Financial accountability – e.g., Who is responsible for handling the money?
- Employee relations – e.g., Are your personnel policies in writing?
- Insurance issues -- e.g., Would everything be replaced in a catastrophe?
- Risk management – e.g., Do you perform background checks on all volunteers?
- Security – e.g., Are your workers and worshipers protected from attack?
- Tax-exemption – e.g., Do any church activities jeopardize your tax exemption?

"Managing these challenges is becoming much more difficult," said Martin, noting churches previously escaped public scrutiny and government regulation. "And the economic crisis in the country is requiring churches to do all these things but with fewer resources."

The idea behind National Church Administration Day is for seasoned church leaders to share their expertise with anyone – whether clergy or laity – performing administrative duties in any congregation, with the goal that all churches become more effective and responsible, organizers say. If more church leaders become involved in NACBA as a result, that's a welcome side effect.

"Churches need to be the example to our communities in doing things right and with excellence," said Debbie Miller, secretary of the Greater Kansas City Chapter of NACBA. "Many smaller churches just don't have the resources or know where to find help with administrative issues."

Church Administration Day allows those of us who work in the church administration area to reach out to those small church pastors and volunteers and share our knowledge with them.”

The Oct. 15 celebration is more about serving others than receiving recognition, said Tom Danklefsen of Columbus, Ohio, who first proposed the annual event to NACBA officials.

“Only 15 to 20 percent of churches are large enough to employ an administrator,” said Danklefsen, president of NACBA’s Columbus-Central Ohio Chapter and executive pastor of Grove City United Methodist Church in Columbus. “That means there are 85 percent of churches that are vulnerable. I think we are able to provide a service to them.”

Honest mistakes or inadequate safeguards expose congregations to embezzlement, tax trouble, abusive relationships, lawsuits, unwelcome publicity and other negative outcomes, say NACBA leaders.

Last year Danklefsen led a workshop for a dozen of Ohio church leaders, most with administrative duties but little training. “These were pastors of smaller churches,” he said. “I just had a ball with those folks,” he said as he recounted the discussion, which centered on a laundry list of common problems and issues faced by almost all congregations.

That Ohio event became the template for the first annual National Church Administration Day this year. Many of the scheduled training events will cover a similar list of key current issues.

“There are some things that we simply have to, have to, have to be doing in 2009,” said Danklefsen. “We really need to get the word out to churches ... to help them serve the Lord more faithfully.”

“Church administration is a secondary function of the church that doesn’t stand out if done well but does stand out if done poorly,” said NACBA’s Martin. The organization, with members from more than 60 faith groups, offers national [certification in church administration](#).

Scrutiny of non-profit organizations, including churches, has increased in recent years. Reform of corporate accounting practices in the wake of Enron and other high-profile scandals also affects congregations, said Danklefsen. Government regulation, such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, is requiring more transparency and more business-like practices from churches.

Faced with such daunting administrative challenges, many church leaders are thrilled to find colleagues who share the same struggles, NACBA leaders say. A helping hand or a listening ear becomes invaluable.

“Most clergy do not get a lot of training in administration,” Martin said. Many churches rely on employees with business experience. But while some skills carry over from business, “what works in business does not always translate into the church setting,” Martin said.

Church administrators come from diverse backgrounds and carry a variety of job titles -- from secretary to executive pastor. When confronting today's challenges, however, they are on equal footing, the administrators say.

"There is a sense of community that develops around the common task," Martin said.

Danklefsen said the people who attend NACBA chapter events, whether clergy or laity, share something else -- "a certain and specific call ... to serve God in ways they are capable."

Miller, stewardship and finance director for the Presbyterian Church of Stanley, in Overland Park, Kan., agreed she and her colleagues have "a deep passion for God's church and hearts for service."

Learning from each other minimizes differences that would be barriers in other settings, NACBA's Martin said. He knew this was true when he saw two ministers comparing notes on the best way to handle picketers on church property.

"One was from the United Church of Christ; the other was a Southern Baptist," he said. "One was being picketed for being pro-gay, the other for being anti-gay."

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For locations and contact information for regional training events:

http://www.nacba.net/cad/cad_locations.htm

For contacting a NACBA chapter in your area:

<http://www.nacba.net/Structure/chapterlst.htm>

For more information on National Church Administration Day:

<http://www.nacba.net/cad/>

For information on the National Association of Church Business Administration:

<http://www.nacba.net/index.html>

NACBA leaders available for interview:

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