

Role Clarity

*A clear understanding of **your role** in the congregation is one of the most important tools you can acquire as a church leader – ordained or lay.*

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Role Clarity - 1

Fresh Start 

Talking Points

Just as Jesus' ministry was related to the disciples' answer to his question "Who do you say that I am?," so too does an individual's ministry relate to the role(s) assumed in a congregation. Most Biblical scholars would assert that Jesus was a disappointment to many of his followers because he failed to be the traditional notion of "messiah" they wanted him to be. Yet Jesus was crucified by the Roman authorities in large measure because this messianic "role" had been attributed to him and as such, he was a threat. Jesus assumed many other "roles": Son of Man, Good Shepherd, forgiver of sins, rabbi/teacher, Lamb of God, healer. For some roles he was praised and beloved; for others, he was faulted and despised. Congregational leaders are similarly praised and criticized for the roles they play and the roles they fail to play. Understanding one's role in a community is essential for effective leadership and ministry.

It is not just about what church leaders DO, but also about who church leaders ARE. Much of the conflict which occurs between a congregation and its clergy centers around the disparity between how the clergy and laity view themselves and how they are viewed by others.

There are two kinds of roles:

The roles we are specifically **asked** to play in a congregation

and

The roles we may be unconsciously **expected** to play in a congregation

Role Clarity - 2

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Most of us can respond appropriately to the things that we are asked to do. It is much harder to respond to unexpressed expectations.

Ask the group for examples of roles they are asked to play (pastor, preacher, treasurer, etc.) and some they might be unconsciously expected to play (Sunday coffee steward, member of every committee, etc.).

Expectations that are unspoken or even unconscious are tickets to disaster. How can one live up to expectations if one

- 1) doesn't know about them
- 2) hasn't agreed to them

Furthermore, Role:

- Is who we are in a congregation
- **And** may be a position of specific authority



Role Clarity - 3

Fresh Start

Talking Points

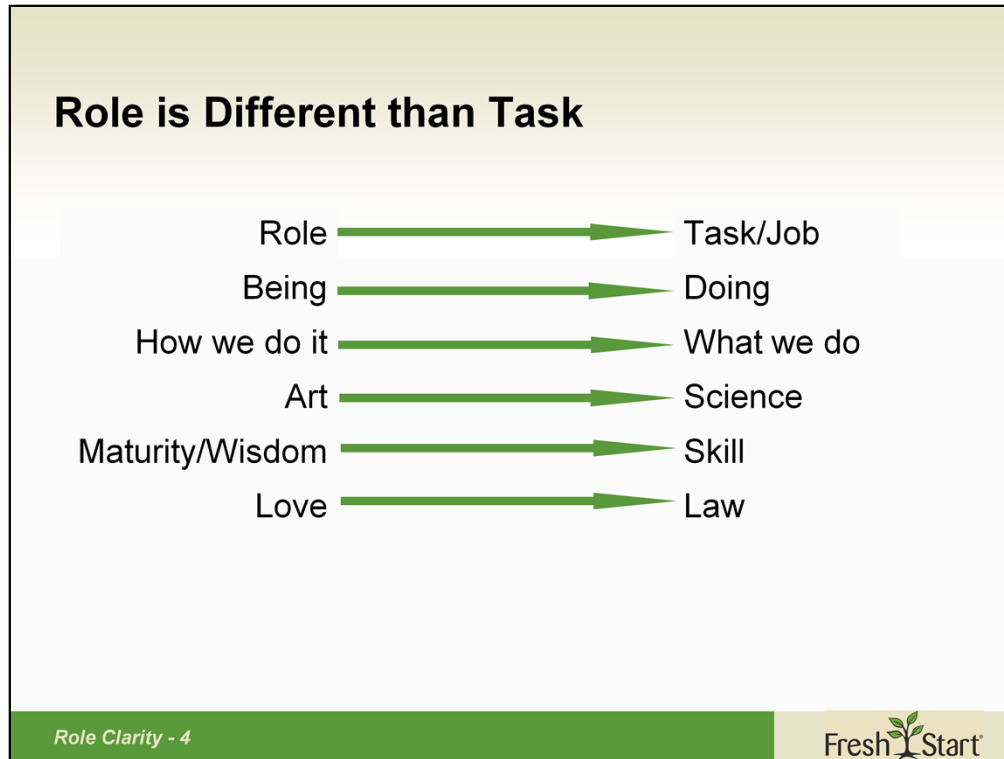
A role is a definition of who we are in a system.

It may also be a position of influence and specific authority,

- 1) that which is “assigned” to us by the congregation (the rector, the warden, the bishop, the treasurer), AND
- 2) that which is “earned” because of personal credibility, performance or skill (e.g., the person who organizes the annual bazaar).

Assigned authority is difficult to maintain if credibility and trust do not accompany it.

Note: You might want to take a look at the Module “Power, Influence, Authority and Control” for more about this. These dynamics are more fully explored in this module.



Talking Points

Sometimes vestries and clergy do not talk about roles – only about job expectations. Then, much to the surprise of the clergyperson, certain members of the vestry/congregation are not pleased with him/her.

The talk seems to be all about **TASK/JOB DESCRIPTION**. (“She doesn’t call on people.” “He never starts meetings with a prayer.” “She won’t delegate to her committee members.” “He only visits if someone is sick – never just to visit.”) But the real discomfort is with the **ROLE** (e.g., pastor, lay leader, holy person, visionary, organizer, communicator, prophet)! The congregation may be trying to say something (consciously or unconsciously) about what they expect of their priest – NOT just in what she/he DOES, but who she/he IS. The priest may also be trying to say something about what he/she expects of lay leaders.

BOTH sides of the above chart are important. One side is not good or more noble or more holy, and the other bad. It’s just instructive to know (and pay attention to) the difference! When church leaders, clergy or lay, ask for a “review” or “evaluation,” many of them are expressing a concern about **ROLE** more than a concern with **TASK** performance, although the latter is easier to express and therefore more commonly appealed to.

It is very difficult to get people to articulate their **ROLE** expectations, though they are always present and usually at the heart of any disappointment in “performance.”

Role = Response to:

God's call to us

The call within

The call of our neighbors

Role Clarity - 5

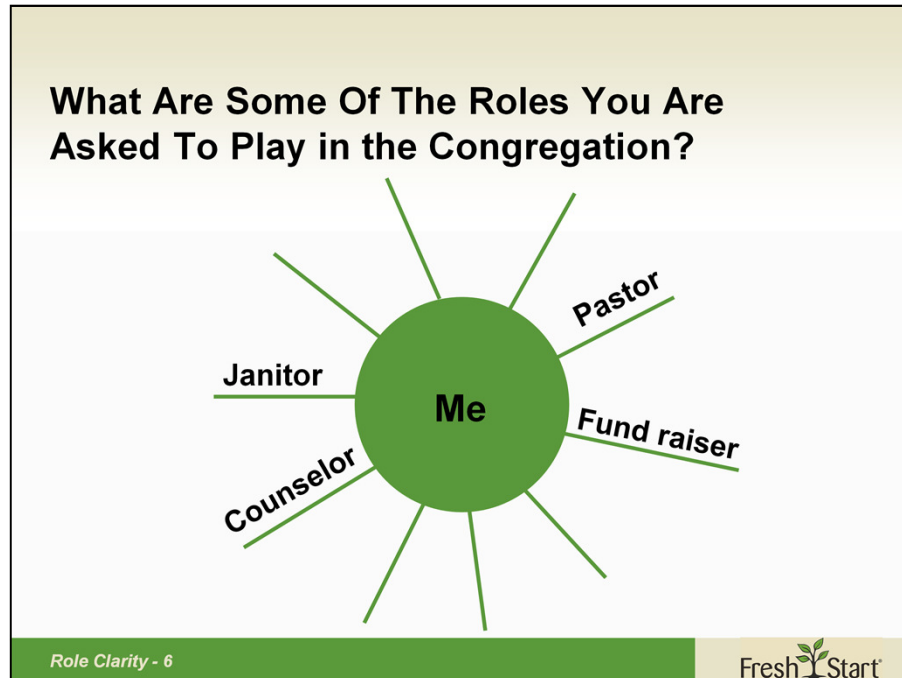
Fresh Start

Talking Points

All of us, lay and ordained, are called by God to ministry, and the roles we play come from our understanding of the baptismal covenant. Mel Kieschnick, an associate in ministry and staff associate at the Lutheran Wheat Ridge Ministries, talks about each of us having a call from above, from within, and from among that defines our roles.

The call from above comes from God. That from within is our response to God's call, our discernment of what roles we are called to play in the world. And finally our roles are influenced by the calls from among, of our neighbors. These are the calls we heed when we serve as comforter to the widow next door or as bearer of medical supplies to a refugee camp in the Sudan.

The Letter of Institution on page 557 of our Book of Common Prayer says "you have been called to work together with your Bishop and Fellow-Presbyters as a pastor, priest, and teacher, and to take your share in the councils of the Church. . . .Having committed yourself to this work, do not forget the trust of those who have chosen you. Care alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. By your words, and in your life, proclaim the Gospel. Love and serve Christ's people. Nourish them, and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come."



Talking Points

Let's think about the roles we play in ministry.

Distribute Handout 1 if this is a clergy-only group. Otherwise ask the clergy to form one group and the lay leaders to form another. Give each group a piece of flip chart paper with the graphic above on it and ask them to brainstorm and place all the roles they can think of on the chart.

The circle in the middle is you. Take a few minutes and put all the roles you are asked to play/be within the congregation - even if by just one person – on a line leading into the circle. Remember that this is NOT a listing of TASKS to be performed (e.g., celebrate the Eucharist, visit the sick) but the ROLES expected of you (fixer, shaman, manager, administrator).

For clergy- only groups: In small groups or pairs, have people share their lists. How alike/dissimilar are the lists? How many roles are asked of them? Lead a brief discussion with the whole group about any “aha’s” they might have had. Or facilitate a large group discussion, filling in all the roles on a copy of this graphic on a flip chart.

For mixed clergy-lay groups: Have the two groups share their lists with each other and facilitate a discussion. How many roles are asked of each group? Are there any surprises?



Talking Points

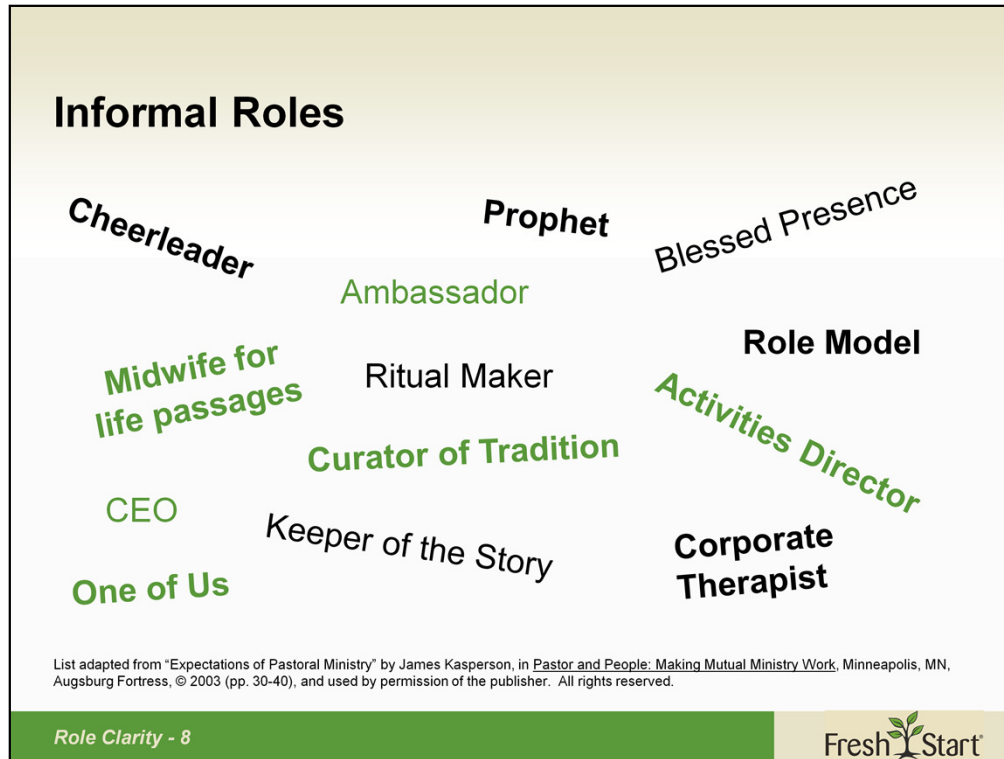
When congregations are searching for a new rector they are asked to identify the “gifts and skills” they are looking for. These are sometimes personal characteristics, but often they are roles – key positions in congregational life that members hope the new rector will fulfill. In reality there are usually not enough hours in the day to perform all these hoped-for roles, and when the crunch comes some are more important than others. Let’s take a look.

Hand out the Ministry Role cards and instructions – note that blanks are provided to add additional roles. Go through the instructions with the group. Be sure that each participant has not only a complete set of cards (with blanks) but a set of both the Importance and Priority header cards.

Give participants time to complete the exercise, then ask them to share their results.

For clergy-only groups: have them share with a small group or partner or facilitate a large group discussion of what they learned. If the discussion occurs in small groups, lead a large group discussion afterwards so they can share their observations across groups.

For mixed clergy-lay groups: have them share in parish teams, then facilitate a large group discussion so they can share observations.



Talking Points

The areas preprinted on the cards are really about formal roles. But there are many informal ones as well – here are just a few identified by a Lutheran pastor. (James Kasperson, pastor of Saron Lutheran Church in Ashland, WI, in Pastor and People: Making Mutual Ministry Work, see Bibliography) Can you think of others?

These informal roles, for both clergy and lay leaders, often are an entrenched part of the congregation's culture and can be as important as the formal ones in terms of people's expectations.

Congregational Culture

- Which informal roles did the previous clergy person play? Lay leaders?
- Which were most important?
- What are the current expectations?
- Are there subgroups with different cultural expectations?
- What surprises have you encountered in this time of transition?

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Getting expectations about the role of the clergy person – and of the lay leaders – out in the open can help prevent misunderstandings or lead to a discussion about changing expectations. Expectations are often driven by memories of the previous rector or associate or by some idealized paradigm of what a “minister” or “lay leader” is supposed to do. In addition, members from different ethnic, cultural, or economic groups MAY have very different understandings and expectations of the role of clergy and laity – for example, granting greater authority to the ordained person than is typical in mainstream American culture or being reluctant to take on roles that are viewed as traditionally those of the clergy. These differences can impact on congregational norms or complicate figuring out what the expectations are. Church size can also impact role expectations, with people from smaller congregations, for example, typically more accustomed to having clergy play a family chaplain role.

Distribute Handout 3.

Take a few minutes to respond to the questions on this sheet. What do you know about how the former rector/assistant filled his/her roles? What was important to him/her that has left an impact on the congregation – and set expectations for future leadership? Is everyone comfortable with these expectations or do they need to be renegotiated? After you have had a few minutes to jot down your thoughts, we will begin our conversation.

Either have them discuss their responses in pairs or small groups (either clergy-only or parish teams) or engage in a full group discussion. If you use the small group format, do a quick sharing across the groups at the end.

Conflicts Around Role Can Occur Because ...

- Our roles are unclear (what is expected?).
- Boundaries of responsibility are fuzzy (who does what?).
- Expectations differ (how do things get done?).
- The role is not a comfortable one for us.

Role Clarity - 10

Fresh Start

Talking Points

A role is a two-way arrangement. In order for a role to be lived out effectively, the person with the role AND the system in which the role exists must agree to the “contract.” This is not unlike the Old Testament Covenant, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”


ANY role is an agreement between the one who exercises it and the community which “commissions” it. (A rector cannot be the rector without the congregation’s assent. The treasurer cannot perform his job if he is not allowed access to appropriate financial information. The vicar cannot be the spiritual guide for parishioners if they refuse to share their spiritual journeys. The priest cannot be a counselor unless the people bring their problems to her/him.)

Trouble can develop when there is disagreement about what the role is, how much authority it commands, and how it gets lived out. The situation is further complicated given that there are usually multiple people involved, each of whom may have different (and not necessarily congruent) expectations. There may also be an internal conflict when our understanding of who we are is out of sync with who others think we are called to be. Church size may have an impact as well – if we are used to the roles played as an assistant in a large congregation, we may be surprised by the expectations placed on us as a rector in a much smaller parish.

Sometimes the source of role disagreements is clear, but more often there is simply a vague and dissatisfied feeling on the part of one or more of the parties. When that happens, it is time to open up communications.

An Ounce of Prevention . . .

- Regular communications
- Routine check-ins
- Periodic, planned discussions of roles and expectations



Role Clarity - 11 Fresh Start

Talking Points

Having a regular process for checking on roles and expectations can prevent many role disagreements from escalating, or perhaps even emerging in the first place – what ways do you have in your congregation for making this happen? What ways have you heard of?

Some possible ways of building role renegotiation into the life and system of a congregation:

- Mutual ministry reviews
- Annual vestry retreats
- Brief “evaluation” of vestry meetings (and other gatherings) at end of each meeting
- Staff evaluations (paid and unpaid)
- Re-writing a clergy contract
- Changing parish by-laws
- Re-writing job description for junior or senior warden

This process needs to be a regular part of the congregation’s functioning. Most often, no one wants to do evaluation/feedback/renegotiation until there’s a huge problem – and by then, the emotions are too high and the conflict is too deep to do much more than damage control.

Congregational leadership may have had little experience with these skills and techniques, and therefore, aren’t very good at using them. It is far better for clergy/vestry/lay leaders to learn these skills when the emotions and stakes are low, so that when there’s a serious problem, there is some history (and trust) in dealing with one another in these ways.

Wrap up the discussion with this point and capture any “best practices” that people share.