

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

A Plan

Mary's perspective:

Several friends have reached out to me recently about planning – whether it's pastoral planning, or emergency preparedness planning, or simply looking to the next stage in life (job change, retirement, skilled nursing care, etc.) That's gotten me to thinking...

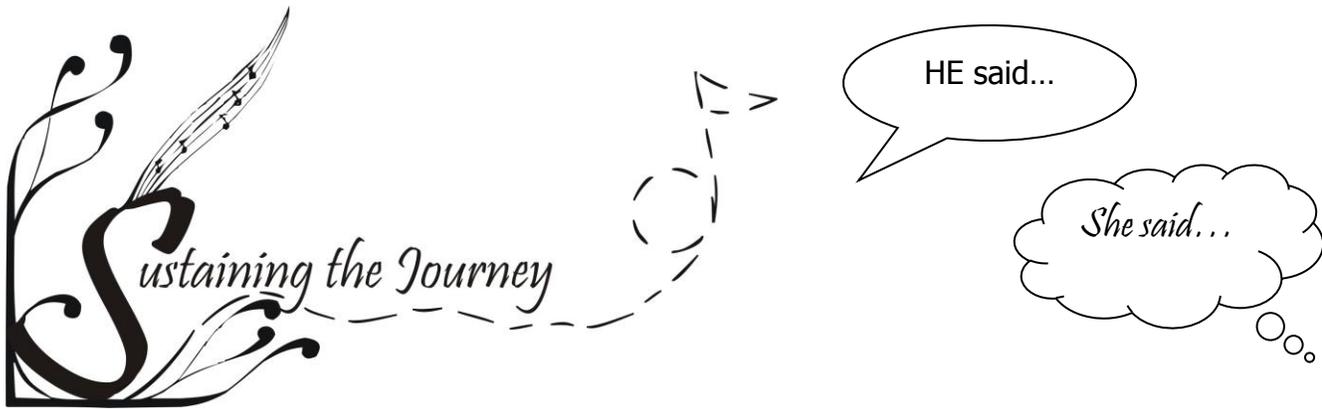
In order to have a plan, one must first figure out where they currently are, and where they want to be.

That sounds simple, but can often be quite a hurdle. In the case of a job change, this analysis is pretty clear. One might consider what features of the current employment situation are desirable, and what changes would make things better. Perhaps the type of work currently is good, but the hours or compensation are not so hot. Avoiding “pain” and seeking “pleasure” (however you define those) provide direction to the plan for new employment.

We've heard lots about viruses and being prepared for a quarantine situation. This analysis is fairly easy. If I'm stuck at home for a few weeks without being able to get to the grocery store, how much and what do I need to have on my pantry shelves? How many meals reasonably can involve pasta or peanut butter? Have I stocked up sufficiently on paper products? You get the picture.

Analysis of readiness for retirement is also conceptually easy to understand, but a bit more challenging to execute. The numbers side is dispassionate – how much retirement income do I know I have coming via pensions and packages, and how much money do I need to maintain my current standard of living? However, the retirement question begs analysis beyond finances: am I ready mentally to manage days with less structure? Full-time employment provides regular social interaction; will days with less social opportunities spur me to make lunch dates, or leave me feeling isolated and alone? Working daily requires my brain to stay engaged; will retirement result in my taking on new tasks like art courses and daily Sudoku puzzles, or will my brain rot from lack of use? If/when I retire, what would I like to do with my time? Travel? Volunteer at an animal shelter? Audit courses at a near-by college? How will those desires impact the financial picture?

When it comes to pastoral planning, I believe a whole different skill set comes into use. When determining where we currently are, and where we'd like to be, the dispassionate numbers are just a starting point. One might consider things like attendance averages, offertory collections, number of sacramental celebrations, and costs of operating expenses like salaries, benefits, and utilities. However, the “pastoral” part is, in my opinion, much more important. Yes, it takes money to have ministry – that's a harsh but factual reality. But your



ministry will not be very effective if you don't have people... either as ministers or as those to whom you minister.

So then the starting point – figuring out where you currently are – becomes a pastoral analysis of not only numbers but also a subjective look at strengths, areas of challenge, and needs. Where are we ministering effectively? Who are we reaching and challenging to grow? Where are we missing the mark? This begins with a big-picture perspective, but, to be comprehensive, must also include drilling down into the details. Perhaps liturgy overall is celebrated well, but you're lacking in the number of altar servers. Perhaps one priest is a great homilist but struggles with other parts of the job, while another priest is very good ministering to the aged and infirm, but could use formation in (*fill in the blank*). This analysis is not intended to be hurtful to anyone involved – in Bob's words, they need to be observations, not judgments. And the analysis, to be effective, needs to be comprehensive. The ministry of a church goes well beyond weekend worship; consider youth ministry, faith formation, social outreach, etc. It's easy to say the music at Mass is good; but the analysis should also consider, for example, if your food pantry could be more effective.

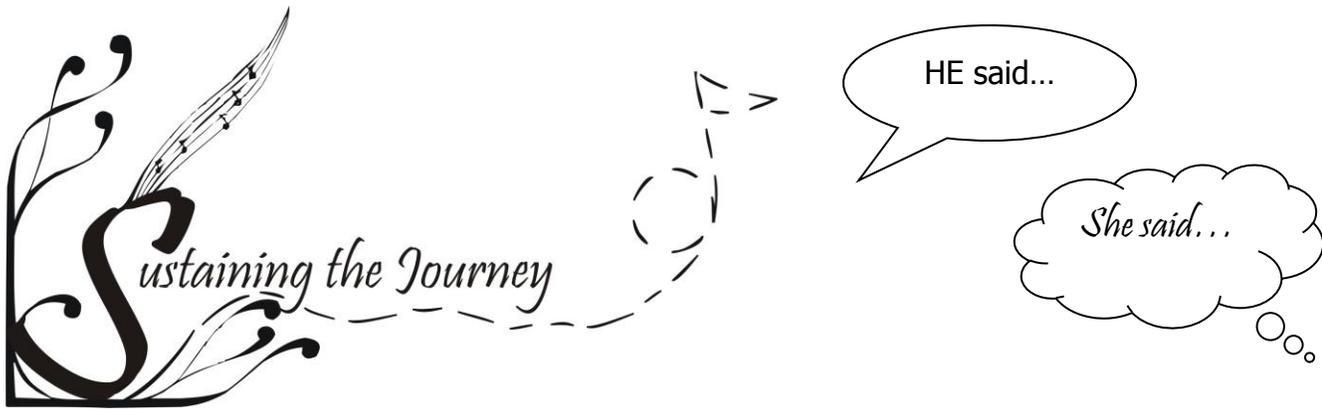
Once the starting point has been covered – you've figured out where you are – then comes the REAL work! An effective plan requires some dreaming. I believe the first round of dreaming should be without limits. So, for example, we could better feed the hungry if we expanded our food pantry facilities or collaborated with county resources – don't get caught up in the cost of building the expanded facilities at this point. My experience has been that if you dream well, and invite the Spirit to be part of the process, doors open that you might not have thought would be possible.

Now I recognize that the majority of folks are not going to get involved in pastoral planning, even if they wanted to. But the process applies to daily living, also. Think back to the retirement question. What does a happy, productive, fulfilled retirement look like? Dream big! Certainly this was touched when considering the financial impact, but I'm a big proponent of thinking out of the box. How do you want to leave your legacy? What will people remember about you – or what do you want them to remember?

Once you've figured out some of the “where you want to be” answers, then the plan can start to take shape. For example, if I know my starting point, and I know where I want to go, then I can figure out how much it will cost, what steps need to occur, what training/formation/growth I will need to work at, etc. This can be a daunting task, but worth the effort for true fulfillment and living up to your calling.

A couple more thoughts on this... first, we've all read that goals need to be SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound. I believe the same is true of plans (be they life plans, pastoral plans, or other). I also believe that we are more likely to accomplish plans that we actually write down and share – that holds us more accountable.

My second thought is somewhat unrelated, but nonetheless interesting. I have recently discovered podcasts – yes, you may roll your eyes and welcome me to the 20th century... anyway, I find listening to podcasts to be a



great tool in encouraging me to walk farther, longer, and faster when I work out. The distraction is helpful. But I digress...

I was listening to a podcast recently that addressed the benefits of writing. Yes, writing. Like a journal, a blog, a letter, or a note. Now I haven't taken the time to fact check some of the statistics, but the general point was that writing is good for you. It keeps one's brain sharp, encourages growth, and even has positive effects on one's immune system. The podcast advocated starting a daily gratitude journal – expanding beyond simple statements like “I'm grateful for my kids” to more articulate “Today I appreciated seeing the wonder of a potato bug through my daughter's eyes...she was gleeful and curled up like the bug and her mirth was infectious.”

Some folks may not feel like they are writers, and that's okay. The point is to actually do it – whether on paper, or a computer, or even the notepad feature of your smart phone (not an option with Bob's flip phone). This isn't the kind of essay writing for a grade that you dreaded in high school, but rather an exercise in putting thoughts together to expand your vision. I think the exercise of writing and the practice of planning go hand in hand.

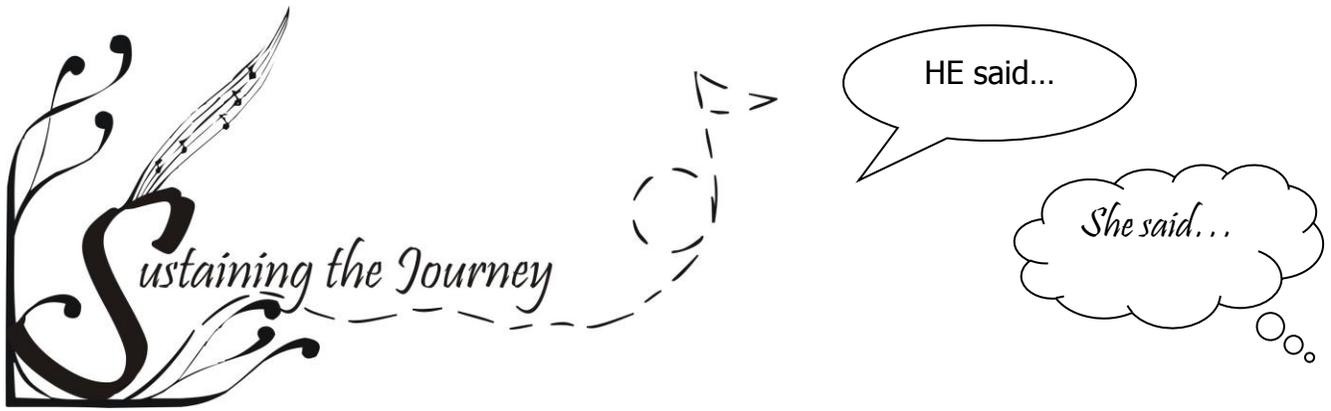
The more we expand our horizons with writing, the freer we will feel to dream. And the more we dream, the better the picture we can make of our next step. So where do you want to be? What's your plan?

Bob's perspective:

For the most part, I agree with Mary's concepts. However, my planning processes tend to look just a bit different. (Side story) When I think about reading a book, I always read the last four pages first. If I like the ending, then I know I'll find it worthwhile to go back to the beginning in order to see the author's process for reaching his/her conclusion. If, on the other hand I don't like the author's conclusion, I won't waste my time reading that particular work.

I approach personal and professional planning in much the same way. Without looking at or analyzing where I am, I first conjure in my mind where I want to end up and what that will look like. I take a lot of time imagining all of the possibilities and details of that picture – and make it clear and as real as possible in my mind's eye.

After I have the desired conclusion pretty much settled in my mind, my next step is to analyze it from the standpoints of realistic practicality and probability. The questions I ask myself are along the lines of, “Do I have the resources at my disposal to accomplish said goal?” or “How do I amass the resources I need for this accomplishment?” or “Given the amount of time, treasure and talent needed for accomplishment, is this goal realistic and/or practical?” If any of my answers are unsatisfactory, rather than immediately scrapping the plan altogether, I may take some time to see if I'm simply aiming too high. Maybe some moderate alterations can make this practically attainable. On the other hand, if I'm unable to accomplish some resolution, I chuck the idea in “file 13” and go on to something else.



If all of my answers to the aforementioned questions are satisfactory, I move forward with the next part of my process. This part of the process is a little more complicated. To state it simplistically, I plan backwards – moving step by step from where I want to be back to where I am at the present.

Granted, this process takes a lot of time and thought and prayerful discernment. Food for thought:

“The plans of the diligent end in profit, but those of the hasty end in loss.” (Proverbs 21:5).

“Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him and say, ‘This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.’” (Luke 14:28-30)