

## CORE COMPETENCIES FOR CLERGY

By Reverend Mark A. Latcovich, Ph.D.,  
and Sis Wenger

It is crucial that clergy and other pastoral ministers have a clear understanding of addiction's effect on the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of their parish families. It is widely known that this disease, if untreated, destroys marriages and alienates families from their church. Not only does alcoholism block the capacity for a meaningful spiritual life, it blocks the capacity for healthy, appropriate, interpersonal relationships and partnerships.



Hurting parishioners always have perceived clergy and pastoral ministers as potential sources of help and support. Parishioners may present with "marriage problems" or "unfaithfulness" and often do not name alcohol or drug use as the culprit.

Clergy are seldom prepared to deal with addiction-related issues. A survey (So Help Me God!) released by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in November, 1999, reported that 94.4% of clergy considered addiction to be an important issue they confronted, yet only 12.5% had done any course work during their seminary studies.

The Clergy Training Project, a partnership project of Johnson Institute(JI) and NACoA, recognized the need to develop an adequate knowledge and skill base for clergy and worked with an interdenominational panel to produce the "Core Competencies for Clergy and Other Pastoral Ministers in Addressing Alcohol and Other Drug

Dependence and the Impact on Family Members."

These core competencies establish the basis for appropriate educational modules that can be incorporated into existing courses and post-ordination education programs. The competencies are not just elements of knowledge; they are better described as elements of "know how." These elements of knowledge and practical skills are spelled out in the finished set of twelve core competencies.

Because clergy and others who minister in a pastoral setting have different opportunities in different situations, they are designed as a general framework which can be expanded to apply as needed. They reflect the scope and limits of the typical pastoral relationship, and are intended to mesh with the most common spiritual and social goals of such a relationship.

Being supportive and encouraging is a pastoral norm. The majority of spouses of alcoholics, who often present as irrational and helpless, are simply overwhelmed by the insanity of someone else's addiction. They need support offered by such groups as Al-Anon. They need to hear messages of hope and the possibility of recovery for their whole family, and they need help in finding the resources they need.

Children of alcohol or drug dependent parents need a safe haven where they can meet adults who will talk to them openly about what may have been their "family secret." The isola-

tion and stigma the children may feel are lifted when trusted adults validate their experience, and when they learn that others face the same confusion and chaos that dominates their lives. When those "trusted adults" are part of their parish leadership, they gain hope and become free to pursue a spiritual connectedness with God and to feel that they can "belong" and be valued in the parish community.

Substance abuse and addiction is a systemic deconstruction that estranges, alienates, and sedates the self from God. Ministers who support individuals in treatment need to be ready to offer some guidance, especially after treatment. The aftercare process of recovery often includes the need

---

**"...ELEMENTS OF  
KNOWLEDGE (AND)  
ELEMENTS OF  
'KNOW HOW'"**

---

to forgive oneself. It involves a reconciling community that invites those who have been estranged from each other to rediscover each other and them-

selves all over again.

Mastering the Core Competencies can help priests, ministers, and rabbis in the development of a healthy attitude about alcohol use, including how it may have affected their own lives, as well as the ability to reach out and support the many individuals and families in their congregations affected by alcohol or drug dependence.

*Reverend Mark A. Latcovich, Ph.D., is academic dean and associate professor of pastoral theology at Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology, Wickelcliffe, Ohio.*

*Sis Wenger is NACoA executive director.*

*The Core Competencies document can be found on NACoA's web site: [www.nacoa.org](http://www.nacoa.org)*