



## SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS ON THE 2008 FCTE SUMMIT (March 31 – April 2, 2008)

The ELCA Vocation & Education unit held a First Call Theological Education (FCTE) Summit, “Healthy & Holy: Supporting First Call Congregations,” on March 31-April 2, 2008, at the Lutheran Center in Chicago, Ill. Seventy participants attended from synod and regional FCTE programs, seminaries, first call case study congregations and young rostered leaders who had attended the Navy Pier Gathering at the 2007 Churchwide Assembly.

The goals of the summit revolved around a key question in the case study research of exemplary first call congregations: **How can first calls be healthy and holy experiences?**

- Learn from each other about FCTE programming strengths and challenges.
- Learn what “exemplary” first call congregations are doing.
- Explore how to apply these learnings to congregations, FCTE programs, seminary education, candidacy and assignment processes.
- Discern the work of the Spirit in these matters.
- Hear young rostered leaders and congregational leaders talk about their experiences in first call contexts.
- Learn about ELCA’s Stewardship Strategy for continuing education of rostered leaders.
- Participate in a Resource Fair.
- Envision the future of FCTE in the ELCA.

The following report summarizes key learnings from the planning and leadership team for the event. These are offered back to leaders and planners in synods and regions that relate to FCTE as food for thought in the coming months when programs and directions are being planned and evaluated.

### Summit Agenda and Dynamics

1. The diversity of stakeholder groups who participated in the summit created interest, generated some tension and sparked new ideas. An evaluation comment: “Continue to invite people with different opinions and experiences. Sometimes it’s not fun to hear all the bitterness or all the ‘everything’s wonderful’ stories, but I think it is important to see what a difference this makes in real lives both in positive and negative dimensions.”
2. Having the voices and perspectives of lay people concretized the case study findings as well as the importance of partnership between lay leadership and new clergy.
3. Inviting young rostered leaders (in addition to our case study congregations) seemed to be well received. One participant said, “How impressed I was by the commitment, faith and vision of our newly rostered leaders that attended the event. The Young Rostered Leaders panel was quite interesting.”
4. Giving people time to meet in Regional groups was again a highlight for participants. “Making acquaintances with leaders from other synods within our region and learning what other regions are doing cooperatively was stimulating to envisioning future direction for our own region,” said one participant. Another said, “The most helpful was probably the discussions and the opportunity to dialogue and collaborate with other leaders from my region...Maybe there could be more opportunity/time for cross-synodical sharing and regional discussions.”



5. Perhaps the dynamics of hearing different voices, chances to talk with others and hear the variety of ways FCTE is being done in synods will reverberate in the minds of synod/regional planners as FCTE continues to be strengthened. As one person put it, “What connected with me was coming home and figuring out what our synod’s goals are in order to evaluate how well we’re meeting them.”

### **Young Rostered Leaders**

In a panel presentation, several of these young clergy and rostered lay leaders shared the biggest surprises and learnings in the first months of a first call.

1. Biggest surprise in first call was dealing with administration since no prior experience. “Lay leaders trained me and it took nine months to get acquainted with all the details.”
2. “I realized I needed allies in the congregation to deal effectively with a difficult person.”
3. Being involved in the pre-school chapel was the biggest surprise.
4. Learned that a daily prayer discipline was important for taking care of self.
5. Heard about colleagues “withering on the vine” waiting for a call and for the synod to be aware of how important communication is during this time for “reinforcing one’s sense of call.”
6. “I haven’t found congregations seeing that a first call pastor is a gift to them.” Instead, a negative image prevails, not having enough budget for a seasoned pastor. “It’s important to let these congregations know that they are strong congregations who have gifts to give a first call pastor.”
7. In “transformational ministry training” the gifts of a congregation are emphasized.
8. Should we be looking at how to have conversations about these issues in seminary? Sometimes the message we get in seminary is “to get through the first three years and then move on.”
9. Having others normalize your experience in first call is important – as was done in the 2007 Navy Pier Gathering.
10. A colleague group, required by the synod, becomes a safe place as we learn from accompanying one another.

### **Lay Leaders from Case Study Congregations**

Lay leaders from case study congregations were asked to describe what they experienced and learned from the case study visits and reports. Their comments were honest and insightful.

1. “We didn’t realize we were special until this case study experience. We helped the pastor through a transition into a different context than what he was used to.”
2. “The health of a community (church and broader community) is important.”
3. “With our first call pastor, we made it clear that it was a partnership. Both our pastors had mentors. The pastors work as a team and are sensitive to the congregation and its issues.”
4. “Our pastor was ‘spirited’ and had ADHD. A pastoral support committee helped him delegate responsibilities. This became a strong network of support.”
5. “In our congregation, being a good first call congregation is in their DNA. We see it as a gift to the whole church to do a good job with first call pastors.”



6. First call congregations need to realize that they need to put up with the first call pastors' learning curve.
7. "We're excited about being part of the larger church."
8. "The church needs to grow and become more 'energetic.'"
9. "Being involved in the case study affirmed their identity. They hadn't celebrated that they were good congregations with first call pastors," remarked the first call pastor.

## **Readers Theater**

Modeling what educational researchers are doing in higher education with case study research, we constructed scripts around key themes of the congregational case studies which were read in a dramatic and interactive presentation. Called "Readers Theater," it's a way to present qualitative data more wholistically (context, thick description, multiple voices) and in an experiential way so that listeners can more easily grasp complex data and reflect on the implications for their own work with congregations.

Common themes across the 14 diverse case study congregations were:

1. **NURTURING:** How members welcomed the new pastor and their family and initiated them into the congregation and community cultures pointed to a desire to see the pastor and family thrive.
2. **CONNECTING:** How congregations expressed being connected to their past, to generations, to local community relationships and to churchwide programs.
3. **FLEXIBILITY:** How congregations' connections to deep roots builds self-awareness and self-confidence, shaping an attitude of openness and flexibility to trying new things.
4. **PARTNER RELATIONSHIP:** Because they are first call congregations, they are particularly challenged to develop strong lay leaders.
5. **SPIRITUALITY PRACTICED:** Faith actions or practices were evident through the care and compassion in calling and supporting a new pastor, in forgiving pastoral mistakes, supporting and mentoring youth and other practices of hospitality.

Readers presented descriptions and quotes from six of the case study congregations around these five themes and what advice lay leaders give to first call pastors and to congregations who call a first call pastor. The presentation ended with a dramatic challenge to each of the congregations, modeled after St. John's letter to the churches in the book of Revelation.

The Readers Theater appeared to be well received. People commented that they could grasp more readily the nature of these congregations than if the research had been presented in typical data formats.

## **Synods/Seminaries**

The issue of the relationship between synod FCTE programs and seminaries became an important topic of conversation, stimulated by Dr. Phyllis Anderson's presentation (by conference call) at the beginning of the summit. Dr. Anderson, now President of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, headed up the Task Force on Theological Education in the Division for Ministry that introduced First Call Theological Education in the 1993 Churchwide Assembly as part of the Report on the Study of Theological Education. That Assembly directed



the Division for Ministry to encourage synods to develop pilot programs of “structured theological education” and the Division responded by providing grants to synods to do so. In 1995 the Churchwide Assembly “took action to require all pastors and rostered lay leaders, during their first three years under call, to participate in structured programs of theological education.”

Dr. Anderson recounted the history of this task force (led by Dr. Paul Rorem, Princeton Seminary) and the research it undertook that pointed to an uneven preparation of seminary students to be ready for their first call. Dr. Anderson recalled that the task force decided to not “stuff more into the curriculum at seminaries” to fill these gaps, but “to require extended education beyond the degree” for both clergy and rostered lay leaders that would be planned and offered by synods.

In the task force research, seminary students said that they wanted to bond with peers and raise up master teachers from the ministry field as well as from the teaching office of the Bishop. Synods were expected to subsidize the continuing education as well as congregations and rostered leaders contributing to a goal of \$800 a year for this education.

The task force recommended that first call leaders be involved in the planning of FCTE programs and that the content be organized around contextual issues of ministry as well as “polishing ministry skills and the practice of ministerial identity, especially around leadership skills.” (Dr. Anderson’s words)

In her presentation to the summit, Dr. Anderson raised the issue of how seminaries might be resources for FCTE at this stage of the program. One benefit for seminaries is that such a relationship would provide an “ideal feedback loop for the outcome assessments” that seminaries are committed to. Synods would benefit by knowing how new seminary curriculum is focusing on mission, stewardship, practical administration, congregational budget issues, community contexts and public ministry perspectives.

Dr. Anderson ended her presentation with the question, “I wonder how seminaries feed back these curriculum changes to those leading the FCTE programs?”

Patricia Lull, former Dean of Students at Luther Seminary, responded by phone with some helpful comments and reflections. She agreed that seminaries are very interested in finding out from graduates what they wished they had been taught and that first call rostered leaders can act as “spies” in the field to feed back to seminaries how ministry contexts are changing and how leaders might be better prepared for transition issues.

The need for more conversation and dialogue – and even research – between seminaries and their new curriculum efforts and synods/regional FCTE planners was discussed at the summit in a work group. More thought needs to be given to such a feedback loop in terms of who would take the initiative, how the information could be best collected and how the results would be disseminated.



## **Healthy First Call Congregations**

There were questions raised throughout the event about the nature of first call congregations and ideas for how to work with them in ways that enhances their health and effectiveness. Some of these questions and examples of synod strategies were:

1. Are there really any unique opportunities and challenges for first call congregations in equipping congregations and pastors to be healthy together? It appears that transition issues for first call pastors and congregations are more pronounced than for pastors who take a new call to another congregation.
2. Should all congregations be open to a first call pastor or leader as mentioned by Southeastern Synod?
3. Southwestern Texas Synod seem to have a good system for helping first call congregations establish a healthy partnership with new leaders to hold lay leaders and pastors accountable to each other and using existing colleague and mentor leaders to coach congregational leaders. Using “Mutual Ministry” language, the emphasis is on mutual accountability.
4. There was talk in the small group on lay and clergy partnerships about using “health assessment” language for taking “the pulse of the leaders and the congregation every six months.”
5. Emlyn Ott, Professor of Ministry and Pastoral Leadership at Trinity Seminary, led a small group discussion during the Resource Fair on “Healthy Congregations” and the Peter Steinke work she is continuing. She indicated there are clear parallels between her work and what we found in the case study congregations regarding signs of congregational health.
6. What are the messages that first call congregations (or potential ones) need to hear and understand in order to change a negative self-image to a positive one? Can they see that they have gifts to give a new pastor and are excited about being part of a larger church in ministry?

## **Spiritual Formation**

Throughout the summit, we paused to reflect and pray about our holy vocation as the body of Christ, the Church. Pamela Czarnota, our spiritual formation guide, invited everyone to see and respond to the mysterious ways God’s Spirit would meander in the midst of summit activities. Time for quiet meditation, readings, songs and prayers were integrated into the summit agenda as a beautiful golden thread is woven through a fine gown. This also served as a reminder of how God continues to be present and involved in all that we do throughout the day.

In a closing “Service of Sending: Healthy, Holy and Whole in Christ,” a few participants were asked to offer reflections on what they had learned during the summit. One lay member from a first call case study congregation remarked, “I came to the summit as a blank slate; I’m leaving as a flaming billboard!” She and others conveyed how much the experience engendered a sense of advocacy for FCTE and the importance of support, including prayer, for newly called leaders in the church.



A litany of sending in the closing service underlined the promises and challenges of being healthy and holy disciples, striving as a community to be a church that matters, that makes a real difference in people's lives.

### **Synod Mini-Grants**

Our hope that synods utilize the case study research seems to be happening. There was a marked increase of synod grant requests after the summit. Ten projects are presently being considered and are in process of submitting detailed budgets and responses to how their efforts might be replicated with other synods.

### **Churchwide Issues**

The regional coordinators who were present at the summit developed a grant proposal for a research project about the impact of FCTE on first call leaders (and perhaps congregations). Conversations have been underway with Research & Evaluation about how best to do this and how to make sure that we build on the impact data we already have collected.

This issue was raised in one of the evaluations: "Is FCTE working? Is the fact that it differs from synod to synod a good thing? How can we evaluate whether or not this makes a difference in lifelong continuing education?"

In David Wood's presentation about where Lilly is with these projects, he commented that denominations need to further address the need to cultivate systems for the teaching about ministry through/in the "practice of ministry." He also said that we don't yet have the conditions for collaboration between seminaries and ministry contexts such as congregations.

### **FCTE Future**

Questions surfaced during the summit in terms of the future of FCTE. Some of the issues raised:

1. FCTE is a complex endeavor with many different models, approaches, range of synod commitments. What holds it (or might hold it) together as a churchwide program?
2. The changing ministry contexts and the preferred ways young rostered leaders want to learn are two factors that could influence changes to be made in FCTE programming.
3. Young pastors may be key recipients of transformational ministry projects since it comes with expectations that change will happen. Couple this with more emphasis in reading one's context and this might become a new focus for FCTE programs.
4. From the "Incorporation" task group, the questions about changing the policy of FCTE to include TEEM and SAM students – not just for rostered leaders – is an interesting one.
5. The Incorporation group also suggested that we "look at the possibility of regional, multi-regional or national events (physical or technological) for rostered lay leaders."
6. The critique of FCTE as focused on "curriculum-based" programming vs. other emphases such as relational, networking, wholistic ministerial identity issues might need to be further explored/discussed.
7. We might want to make sure that FCTE planners pick up on the unrealistic expectations many first call pastors have about "hitting the ground running." It may take nine months



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or more to understand the congregation and its culture, context, expectations, tensions and potentials.

8. After 2009 when the present Lilly Endowment project is completed and Connie Leean Seraphine's coordination ends, the churchwide summit gatherings may need to morph into other kinds of meetings. FCTE synod/regional contacts and planners might gather in connection to cluster/network events where it would be helpful to relate to and interact with other partners who have a similar stake in lifelong learning.

### **FCTE in the ELCA**

ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson addressed the summit on the first afternoon and lifted up the efforts of the ELCA to examine the "ecology of our diverse, interdependence." He said that the ELCA can see this so plainly in FCTE. Hanson commented that leaders need community to deepen their discernment of a lifelong call. He also spelled out a challenge for the ELCA "to seek to be younger and less white" or we won't be relevant to the needs and issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the evaluation one participant commented that the most stimulating part of the event was "that this is seen as a priority of the church." One hopes that the ELCA can continue "to be a leader in FCTE." One participant said what he/she would tell a friend about FCTE is: "We respect the call of candidates and congregations to raise up new leaders. We face our challenges together. We've got lots of room to grow, but we're talking about it! How exciting to be a part of this church!"

*Report by Connie Leean Seraphine  
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