

Becoming a Vital First Call Congregation

DVD Discussion Guide



Vocation and Education
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

“BECOMING A VITAL FIRST CALL CONGREGATION” DVD Discussion Guide

“My advice to someone not excited about calling a first call pastor is to step back and take a look at themselves and try to understand what God’s purpose in this calling might be and also what God might have in store for them personally.” [Patrick Blank, Nazareth Lutheran Church, Bridgeport, MI]

This quote is from a lay leader in one of the case study congregations visited in the “Vocation of First Call Congregations” project in ELCA Vocation & Education. Connie LEEAN Seraphine and Carol Schickel directed this study with funds from Lilly Endowment’s “Transition into Ministry” endeavor. After synods in ELCA Regions 4, 5 and 6 nominated congregations that were doing an exemplary job welcoming and supporting pastors new to ministry, 14 congregations in diverse contexts were selected to be studied for this project.

Though these congregations were selected because they were considered exemplary, in many ways they aren’t that much different from other congregations. In fact, members from these case study congregations were surprised about being selected, not seeing themselves as special but feeling honored to have been chosen for the national research project.

Case study research with these exemplary first call congregations has revealed not only remarkable and unique stories but also points to some common experiences and themes. What we have learned from these congregations we trust will be useful to you. You might even see something of your congregation reflected in these stories.

The next section summarizes the common themes and experiences across the congregational case studies which are also portrayed in the DVD resource. **Suggestions for discussion questions accompany each brief theme description.** The purpose of a discussion is to encourage viewers to tell some of their own stories that connect (in positive or negative ways) to these themes.

It is recommended that presenters click on the **Common Theme** chapters in the DVD table of contents. This stops the DVD after each theme chapter to allow time for discussion. If the size of your gathering is over 15, small group discussion is recommended. Newsprint sheets can be provided for each group to summarize their responses. Following the viewing of the DVD, these responses can be posted on a wall for everyone to read.

COMMON THEMES AND EXPERIENCES

First, **Nurturing** emerged as a common theme in a variety of ways. Members talked about being hospitable to the new pastor, like renovating the parsonage, having a welcoming potluck, introducing the new pastor in local newspaper articles, taking him or her to local sports games and providing rural route maps which plotted the residencies of members. In several of these congregations, the pastors recalled how members respected their privacy and days off and made every effort to meet synod salary guidelines. Initiating their new leaders into the cultures of congregation and community says a great deal about their desire to see that the pastor and family thrive.

QUESTIONS

1. *Thinking about the first days and weeks of a call to a new pastor, what specific actions can be (or were) taken in areas of hospitality, orientation, and nurturing?*
2. *What other ideas do you have for helping a pastor get started who is new to ministry?*

A second theme centered on the image of **Connecting**.

Connections were talked about in various ways in these congregations – from being connected to their past, connected across generations, to local community relationships, and to synod and churchwide programs. All of the congregations in our case study demonstrated a commitment to connecting with their local communities in areas of poverty, health, education, community events and ecumenical services. There were also examples of how members saw connections between their volunteer work with church programs and their daily life vocations. *The extra chapter in the table of contents features this ministry in daily life theme.*

QUESTIONS

1. *Identify the ways your congregation experiences connections within the congregation and outside the congregation.*
2. *If you had to explain how “connections” is related to faith, what would you say?*

The next common theme, **Flexibility**, appears related to the previous one, “Connecting.” As individuals or families recall their historical roots and learn about them selves as carriers of these memories, so do congregations where members tell stories, learn about themselves and discern how to build on their foundational strengths. This connection to a congregation’s “deep roots” builds awareness which helps shape an attitude of openness and flexibility.

Being flexible and open to change and growth is crucial for first call congregations. Calling a recent seminary graduate who is eager to apply what he or she has learned – whether in worship, evangelism, stewardship or education – often translates to people being patient and “giving something new a try” before evaluating it – attitudes that can bring new energy and a spirit of hope to a congregation.

QUESTIONS

1. *On a “flexibility” scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest degree of congregational flexibility and openness to change, where would you place your congregation at the present time? Please explain. Reflect whether this rating would have changed over the last several years and if so, why?*
2. *One congregational leader in the DVD commented, “We think of change as growth. If you don’t change, you don’t grow.” How does your congregation view change?*
3. *What can we learn about change and flexibility from the life of Jesus? For instance: healing on the Sabbath; theological conversations with women; eating with sinners; touching unclean persons in healing; talking about laws written on our hearts.*

Of course, change in any congregation isn’t easy for most members, but if the pastor has a vision of God’s mission for that congregation, listens to the hopes and dreams of members and works with leaders to find ways to make that happen, resistance to change is often overcome.

Perhaps you have heard similar comments in your congregation that members in a first call rural two-point parish said about how they handle change, “We go with the flow.” “We adapt.” “We’re open.” “We need each other; we don’t have much choice.”

We know that one indicator of a healthy congregation is the presence of strong and committed lay members. We found this to be true in these first call congregations and perhaps *because these are first call congregations*, they are particularly challenged to develop strong lay leaders in a **Partner Relationship** with the pastor where mutual learning is taking place. A congregation that calls a pastor new to ministry would do well to have a team or committee that carries out the functions of mutual ministry which tends to the relationship between the pastor and the people – in contrast to personnel or finance issues. A recommended resource for congregations: *Pastor and People: Making Mutual Ministry Work*, a Congregational Leader Series book from Augsburg Fortress (2003).

QUESTIONS

1. *What has been your congregation's experience of a partner relationship between lay leaders and the clergy? Has this been intentionally planned or has it evolved?*
2. *In calling a pastor new to ministry, what might be done to strengthen a partner relationship?*

We heard from people across these congregations that Lutherans are shy about witnessing to their faith. However, researchers observed actions and heard many stories about **Spirituality Practiced**. These faith actions were natural outcomes of people's faith lives as they lived out their relationships with God through concrete actions of grace, forgiveness, compassion. These expressions of faith included prayers for guidance in call processes, efforts of care and compassion for those in need, forgiving pastoral mistakes, supporting and mentoring youth and many practices of hospitality.

QUESTIONS

1. *Share some stories when you experienced your own faith growing or deepening.*
2. *In your congregation, what would be signs of "spirituality practiced" (in worship, Christian education, hospitality, committees, informal conversations, etc.)?*
3. *How does one's spiritual growth and deepening relationship with God connect to efforts of outreach, compassion, justice?*

In the case study visits to 14 exemplary congregations, the researchers asked lay people to give **Advice to First Call Pastors**, based on their experience. Here are some things they said:

- Be willing to learn together with members; don't "go it alone."
- Be involved in continuing education.
- Accept criticism and learn from it.
- Use a support group.
- Be a communicator and a problem solver.
- Be receptive to the congregation.
- Be able to delegate and manage.
- Provide empathy and support for committees and people.
- Be a good listener; do visitation and counseling.
- Proclamation/sacramental roles are important.
- Take leadership!
- Remember people's names.
- Give theological guidance.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- It's going to be a challenge; no bed of roses.
- Naturally, there'll be some challenges as we begin ministry together.
- In most cases, people will love and care for you if it's returned.

- Be a biblical guide.
- Bring out the best of things in members.
- Introduce change slowly.
- It takes time for change and the Holy Spirit to work among us.

These lay leaders also gave **Advice to Other Congregations** who may consider calling a first call pastor. They said:

- Be prepared to teach first call pastors the practicalities of ministry.
- Don't expect it to be a long-term call. Sometimes pastors can do better in the next call.
- Have patience. There is a learning curve for both pastor and congregation.
- Size of congregation is a consideration. "Big is good but smaller is better for working with a first call pastor."
- Caution: Do not unload pent-up spiritual needs on the new pastor.
- If you've had prior first call pastors do not expect each to be the same. Each is different. Each one is a unique experience. It could be better or worse.
- Don't be afraid to call a first call pastor. There is so much mutual learning going on that's it's worth it.
- Call committee needs to check out with the candidate if they're willing to put in the time to make it work.
- Put all your expectations on the table to begin with and encourage the candidate to do the same.
- Congregational members will be willing to pick up the slack and help out where needed.
- Invite other first call congregations into your process of discernment.
- Calling a first call pastor is a wonderful idea because of the enthusiasm of the pastor.
- The congregation must be open to new ideas.
- Be patient and supportive of your first call pastor.
- Provide adequate orientation in the beginning.
- Be willing to help your first call pastor over and above the usual and be ready and willing to pray for him/her.

QUESTIONS

1. *Do any of these words of advice to first call pastors and to first call congregations seem especially important or relevant to your congregation?*
2. *From your experience, what kind of advice would you give to other new pastors and their congregations?*

In **Summary**, we heard congregations responding to God's call to take a leap of faith in calling a pastor new to ministry. We saw how these pastors benefit from hospitality and nurture, flexibility and supportive partnerships – and in the process how congregations become healthy and dynamic communities for living out their faith.

We also heard congregational members talk about challenges they face as well as the accomplishments they've experienced. Whether in rural, suburban or inner city contexts, many of these challenges centered on better ways to connect to young people, especially how to give them ownership and participation in the congregation. There were also challenges in financial, stewardship and evangelism areas of ministry. Most likely your congregation is also familiar with these challenges. As you deal with such challenges we trust that God's Spirit will work with your desires and concerns to strengthen and enliven your ministries.

QUESTIONS

1. *For you, what stood out as a highlight of the DVD presentation?*
2. *What 1-3 ideas could you take home to work on in your congregation?*