

SUMMARY: SYNOD CONSULTATIONS ON CASE STUDY RESEARCH
Lilly Endowment Project: The Vocation of First Call Congregations
ELCA, Vocation & Education Unit
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PURPOSE OF THE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

In 2005, Lilly Endowment Inc. awarded the ELCA – Vocation & Education unit - \$525,000 for a four year research and implementation project called, “The Vocation of First Call Congregations.” The intent is to study congregations identified by synods as “exemplary” in how they support and help form First Call pastors starting their public ministry.

An overall purpose for this study is to see if there are any common practices, values, attitudes that emerge across several case studies done with selected First Call congregation and if these might be useful in preparing more congregations to be healthy, life-giving contexts for First Call pastors.

The particular case study goals, methodology and researcher roles are described in a document called, *Case Study Goals and Methodology*, obtained by contacting Melinda Valverde (melinda.valverde@elca.org) or 1-800-638-3522, ext. 2874).

CASE STUDY CONSULTATION SUMMARY

On November 12-13, 2007 and December 13-14, 2007 sixty synod staff, nine Regional Coordinators, five first call case study pastors and a few visitors and consultants came together to help project staff discern case study implications of the exemplary first call congregational research. Summaries of the ensuing discussions and case study themes across 13 “exemplary” first call congregations follow.

What Makes First Call Congregations Unique?

Throughout the consultation as participants reflected on the case studies and common themes presented by research staff, one discussion theme emerged as a question, “What makes first call congregations unique from other congregations calling a pastor?” Major threads of that discussion were:

- **INTENTIONAL PARTICIPATION IN THE GROWTH OF THE PASTOR**
Realizing they are calling a pastor without experience, lay people take it upon themselves to help educate, nurture, support – as well as critique – their first call pastor. They are like cheerleaders as well as coaches in this special nurturing role.

- **STAKES ARE HIGH**
Hope for long term pastorate: While all congregations hope for a long term pastorate, first call congregations seem to imbue this hope with more intensity, perhaps fearing their pastor may not intend to stay long in the first call – especially if it is in a context that is foreign to him/her. Making mistakes may carry more weight in first call congregations. Lay leaders may fear that if something goes wrong, their pastor will leave; thus adding tension to how they respond to their pastor, including his/her ideas for change and style of ministry.

Responsibility for influencing pastor’s future ministry: The experiences and memories of one’s first call can color the rest of one’s ministry in positive and negative ways. Lay leaders need to be aware of their responsibility in giving shape and form to the first call leader’s expectations in future calls and a sense of confidence throughout their pastoral ministry.

- **REFRAMING OF ATTITUDES**

More prevalent in first call congregations, attitudes such as: “We can only afford a pastor just starting out,” or “We don’t have to change much since he/she won’t be with us very long” need to be reframed to create a healthy first call ministry. Lay leaders should be aware that they have a unique opportunity in receiving an eager, new leader – a first call pastor who could help them reflect on who they are and where they want to be going. An example of reframing a negative attitude might be that the first call pastor “is on loan” to the congregation, providing an opportunity to continue, even for a short time, the substantial investment of the seminary, resulting in dividends to themselves and to the pastor and his/her family.

- **IDENTITY ISSUES OF THE FIRST CALL PASTOR AND THE CONGREGATION**

Wearing the mantel of “pastor” for the first time carries with it complex but important identity issues to be discerned and reflected upon. Whether one is starting a first career or coming to the pastorate from other careers, pastoral identity needs attention across its various dimensions (ministerial role, authority, boundaries, leadership style). One’s self-identity comes into play especially during times of tension or conflict. A healthy self-awareness helps new pastors deal with whatever comes their way.

The congregation also has to deal with its corporate identity as a community of faith that is partnering with a new pastor to create a healthy, life-giving pastorate. The issue of esteem might be particularly challenging, especially if the congregation doesn’t feel they have much to offer or to sustain a first call leader.

- **CULTURAL MATCH OR MISMATCH IS CRITICAL**

First call candidates are assigned to particular synods which may not be their first choice. Within these synods, congregations that are open to first call leaders may also be limited or be in contexts that do not match the background of the candidates. Synod staff are often challenged to recommend a congregation that would be suited to the candidate. Cultural considerations need to be taken into account. Matching the candidate to a congregation that would be a healthy environment for the gifts of that candidate may be more important than whether the congregation matches the demographics of the candidate’s history.

Common Themes Considered Strongest

A thematic analysis of cross-case study issues resulted in a dramatic rendition of these findings in what is called “Readers Theater.” Excerpted content from the cases were presented to illustrate common issues which emerged across the diverse contexts of the exemplary first call congregations that were studied.

Theme titles included: Nurturing, Connected, Flexible, Lay Leadership, Spirituality Practiced, Ongoing Challenges and Advice to First Call Pastors and Congregations.

Following the Readers Theater presentation, consultation participants identified what they judged to be the strongest common themes and strengths of these **first call congregations**:

- Importance of intentionality in welcome and hospitality for pastor and family;
- Managing, adapting and embracing change as a reality;
- Lay leaders in a partner relationship with pastor vs. employer/employee roles;
- Making meaningful connections to one’s community and the broader church;
- Strong congregational identity – a “joyous pride” in knowing who they are;
- Important role of visioning and planning;
- Congregations aware they are “training ground” or “a finishing school” to help FC pastors learn and thrive;
- Congregational flexibility and the ability to live through anything;
- Dealing with the reality of their budget constraints in positive ways; and
- A sense of hope and possibility undergirding their behaviors.

Discussions also revolved around what **first call pastors** were doing in these congregations in positive ways:

- Receiving and building on the gifts of their members;
- Inviting lay members into a mutual journey;
- Tuning into the culture and appropriate behaviors and actions;
- Sensing when to be serious and when to use (and receive) humor;
- Having a keen sense of self-knowledge and healthy self-differentiation;
- Loving the people no matter what;
- Awareness of importance of boundaries and when to set them; and
- Open to learning vs. proving they know it all.

Synod Ideas for Utilizing Case Study Research

Some initial ideas surfaced about how synods might use the research findings in ways that could benefit their work with congregations in becoming healthy first call contexts.

1. Discuss with congregations considering a first call pastor; orient them to expectations and preparation and follow-up with these congregations later.
2. Discuss better ways to match first call candidates with congregations.
3. Examine unique issues with large congregations calling first call associate pastors.
4. Use research with first call pastors in the synod/region on how to survive and thrive wherever they go.
5. Examine whether there are “7 good habits” or characteristics of healthy first call congregations that will grow their ministry.
6. Work with rural call committees, perhaps becoming mutual ministry committees.
7. Critique assumptions about what first call congregations are and are not.
8. Take first call pastors to seminary to address assumptions and realities of a first call, especially with seniors after their internship.
9. Recreate “Readers Theater” with leaders from healthy first call congregations to tell their stories.
10. Plan a first call gathering with other congregations and synods and perhaps add congregational lay leaders to these deliberations.
11. FCTE events: Consider cross-institutional interactions with seminaries and first call congregations.
12. Synod staff and/or first call mentors meet with church councils (or oversight committees) to hear their joys, strengths and challenges.

NEXT STEPS

Projected goals for the last two years of the Lilly Endowment grant (2008-2009) were presented at the consultations. Goals that would impact participant synods included:

- FCTE summit for synod/regional program coordinators/planners, March 31 – April 2, 2008 at the Lutheran Center.
- Develop a video/DVD resource for synodical work with congregations.
- Plan a second gathering of young rostered leaders at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis.
- Develop Request for Proposal guidelines for small synod grants in utilizing this research with potential first call congregations, first call pastors, etc.
- Write and publish materials for broad dissemination of this project’s work and research findings, emphasizing a “Best Practices” approach.