



FACE . . .

Continuing Education and the Pastoral Vocation

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THE REQUIREMENT OF THE CHURCH THAT ITS PASTORS MUST TAKE A CERTAIN number of continuing education credits is irrelevant to the pastoral vocation. While using legalism to control pastoral ministry has historically been necessary, in continuing education it has no place. While there are laws governing marriage, we do not require husbands and wives to take a certain number of continuing education credits to maintain their relationship (though some may think that is not such a bad idea). We *encourage* and *invite* married couples to grow in their relationship by inviting them to attend marriage encounter weekends, retreats, and other conferences. It should be no different for pastors in the church. Rather than imposing legalistic structures we should be looking for ways to encourage their growth in their relationship with God.

The Christian church in the United States has too quickly bought into the idea that the pastoral vocation is in essence a pastoral career. The pastor becomes merely a professional, like the doctor or lawyer, providing a service for a fee. Given this reality, pastors are treated like any other professional and are required to obtain a certain number of continuing education credits. When the appropriate number of credits are secured, then the pastor receives the appropriate stamp of approval from the ecclesiastical governing body. Pastors then are freed from ecclesiastical scrutiny and encouraged to continue along the path of professionalism for the betterment of the institution. The institution becomes less prone to legal liability or societal scrutiny because it now has a professional, continually educated pastor.

The pastoral vocation should be built not on professionalism but rather on the pastor's relationship with Jesus Christ. External authority, whether societal or ecclesiastical, is not the basis for our vocation. Our only external authority is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, the call to pastoral ministry is authenticated by the proper ecclesiastical authorities but it is neither issued nor sustained by them (with the evangelical denominations). Given the varied nature of pastoral ministry

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TO FACE

Continuing Education: How Do We Make the Best of It?

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“THE ONLY PERSON TO WHOM I AM ACCOUNTABLE IS GOD.” THESE WORDS, spoken by an ELCA pastor at a recent synod assembly, emerged during a debate on the assembly floor. The issue was a resolution to require continuing education for all rostered persons throughout their ministry. The genesis of the resolution came in response to the required continuing education expected of all newly rostered persons for a period of three years. This is reflected in First Call Theological Education (FCTE) which was adopted last summer by the ELCA as part of its statement on Theological Education. The rationale for the resolution, as determined by the synod’s Leadership Support Committees was that there would be a two-tiered level of expectation among our rostered ministers. The resolution struck me as being legitimate in light of FCTE.

Interestingly, those who spoke in favor of the resolution were lay persons who are required in their own professions to experience continuing education to remain certified, and pastors who are in some field of counseling work where the same type of requirement exists. But the opening statement above reflects an attitude among many if not most rostered people that continuing education is a part of life that should not be required, i.e., “no one is going to tell me what I should be about in continued learning.” As I have reflected on this statement, I sensed that it was spoken with neither theological nor practical realism. Theologically we do affirm that we are accountable to God, but there is another side of that coin—we are also accountable to one another.

Practically we must know that more than God counts in our accountability. To be accountable to one another means: to the congregation or agency which has called us to do ministry, to the church into which we have been rostered, and to our colleagues in ministry. To ignore such channels of accountability is distressing to me because it so often leads to conflicts between pastors and Associates in Ministry

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try, pastors simply don't have the time to worry about whether they have met an imposed level of credits of continuing education. Faithfulness to the call of Jesus Christ on their lives for service to the Christian community is of primary importance to pastors. Only secondarily do they need to maintain a focus on the institution. The institution of the church is meant to serve the pastor and the congregation, not the other way around.

The need for continuing education arises out of two concerns. First, a pastor needs to grow in faith so that the pastor can lead the congregation. Biblically the pastor is viewed as shepherd of a flock. Being shepherd means that the pastor has been out into the open country and learned where to find healthy food to feed the sheep. The shepherd knows those places to which sheep can be safely led to graze. It matters not where the pastor finds food, as long as it is safe to eat. Thus a pastor's continuing education will take on a variety of forms in a variety of contexts. Maybe the local rotary club is offering a course on financial management. Maybe the local Catholic monastery is offering a course on contemplative prayer or the local Unitarian church a course on public action. Maybe a local support group is offering a course on sensitivity to specific needs. Maybe a seminary is offering a course on a specific biblical writing. Each of these can find a place in the life of any given congregation. The trick is discerning which is the appropriate food at the appropriate time. This can only come when the pastors have been fed themselves.

The second need for continuing education arises in what author and pastor Eugene Peterson calls "vocational holiness." Vocational holiness is moving beyond seeing the pastoral vocation as just another career to be chosen among several careers. It is seeing the need for growth in faith *for its own sake*. It is here that continuing education takes on its most important role. There is no professional growth to be sought or bought, nor is there any hope for ecclesiastical advancement. Rather here the beloved seeks the lover out of sheer enjoyment of presence. One pastor friend of mine took two weeks in Ireland and Scotland learning about Celtic Christianity, primarily on the island of Iona. There was no motive of needing to share with the congregation her travels and there was no motivation of advancement through education. The primary purpose was a deepening of the relationship between beloved and lover. It was a time of showering herself in the love of God.

When pastors come to understand their vocation within the context of being children of God, their continuing education times are loosed from the bondage of institutional necessity. The doors of opportunity for continuing education are opened up through guidance by the Holy Spirit rather than a following of practical reason. What has often been thought of as indulgence in personal matters becomes growth opportunities in the deepening of faith. The question "What is good for my career?" is put in its place, and the question "What is good for my relationship with God?" is resurrected. The deepening of relationship deepens commitment, and frees pastors to view the pastoral vocation as an outgrowth of their love for the Savior. Continuing education viewed from this perspective becomes more than a necessity; it becomes an act of devotion. ⊕

with their congregation or agency. Rostered people are not lone rangers because there are so many points at which we connect with others.

I believe that one of the motivations for FCTE is to help minimize such conflict as the newly rostered begins ministry. This can be accomplished as a learning covenant is developed between the newly rostered and the congregation or agency in a three-year plan in which each is accountable to the other. A new level of partnership is formed which makes continuing education more than what seems, to some, merely additional vacation time. The product of learning is to enhance the pastoral and personal dimensions of ministry so that ministry begins well. The program with which I have been involved focuses in a three-year cycle on maintaining balance and rhythm in ministry and personal life; dealing with conflict; counseling skills, goal setting, and spiritual renewal. These learning experiences are done with other new colleagues. The intent is to develop competency (accountability to God alone does not necessarily make one competent) that will hopefully enable one to avoid some ministry problems that might arise. As I understand this goal, I find no problem with requiring continuing education for the newly rostered because the intent is to strengthen the ministry of the person and the church.

So, “how to make the best of it.” We can perceive this as just another “hoop” we have to jump through in order to be rostered, or we can perceive it as an opportunity to enhance ministry. We can extend the FCTE model so that it becomes an integrated aspect of our continuing growth in ministry. Each of us needs periodically to ask ourselves relevant questions – “How have I grown in ministry?” and “How has my ministry grown?” – in order to chart our own learning covenant and become an active, joyful, and eager participant in continuing education. We often bemoan the fact that our world with its rapidly changing values and needs leaves us befuddled. Continuing education is a must if we are to maintain effectiveness as proclaimers of the word in the midst of such change.

Education has always been a strong emphasis of the Lutheran heritage. We have an educational system comprised of colleges, seminaries, and continuing education centers. We need to encourage and promote our Lutheran understanding of biblical and systematic theology, and we do that by attending opportunities offered by these educational partners of the church. We also know that there are limitless opportunities to attend conferences, seminars, and workshops in other venues. Theological reflection and reflection on what we practice are needed for meaningful ministry.

There are always practical concerns related to an enterprise of requirements. There is the need to supervise and hold to accountability, pay for these experiences, and engender enthusiasm among those who are eligible for the program. I sense that much of our difficulty rests with this latter need. My opening statement reflects resistance to firm expectations, dialogue, and accountability. It is my hope that we are able to transcend our individualistic notions of who and what we are as rostered people. It is also my hope that we can begin to welcome the vision inherent in FCTE, with its implications for all rostered people in our church, that continued learning is one way to keep the gospel fresh. ⊕