

Executive Summary of First Call Theological Education Surveys
Division for Ministry
Department for Research and Evaluation
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The Department for Research and Evaluation, in consultation with staff of the Division for Ministry (DM), conducted a survey of rostered leaders (clergy and lay) who are presently in their first four years of a call to congregational ministry. In the fall of 2002, an initial survey was sent to 824 newly rostered leaders, and 618 completed questionnaires were received, resulting in a 75 percent response rate. A second follow-up survey was sent to 784 leaders in the summer of 2003, and 510 completed questionnaires were received, resulting in a 65 percent response rate. Findings from both surveys will be summarized here. All reported differences in this report are significant at the .05 level.

Characteristics of the Respondents

For both surveys, most respondents were clergy (91%) with a good balance between males (47%) and females (53%). Average age was 42 years old. Those under 35 were identified in this research as first career.

Perceptions of Preparedness

Respondents were asked to rate how prepared they felt in their first call to handle several congregational responsibilities.

- Most prepared to: (1) preach, (2) plan worship services, (3) visit members.
- Least prepared to: (1) plan church budget, (2) plan stewardship programs, (3) manage a church office.
- Graduates from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary gave consistently higher ratings of preparedness for all ministry tasks compared to graduates of other seminaries.

In the second survey, participants were given a list of areas that they rated low in preparedness on the first survey, and they were asked to mark the best contexts in which these skills were taught or learned. Overall, internship was chosen most often as the best context, and online learning was chosen least often.

Comparing Church Needs to Level of Preparedness

Respondents rated the level of need for the church to work in several ministry areas and then rated their level of preparedness in addressing those needs.

- “Reaching out to unchurched persons” was rated the highest need, but received the lowest level of preparedness.
- Second highest rated need was “helping congregations work toward a vision.”
- Third highest rated need was “helping people grow spiritually.”

As a follow-up to this question, participants in the second survey were asked to explain the discrepancy between the need and preparedness ratings for reaching out to unchurched persons and helping people grow spiritually. Seminary or teaching difficulties were the most common responses for both of these areas. Most respondents rated reaching out to unchurched persons as important or very important, and the support of a mentor or seasoned leader was rated as most helpful in this area. For helping people grow spiritually, respondents said that providing an example and encouragements had personally been helpful, as well as the use of small groups.

Factors in Accepting a First Call

By far the most important factor in accepting a first call was “a sense of call.” The next highest rated factors were “the geographic location of the congregation” and “needs of the larger church.” Women were affected by more factors than men in accepting a first call. The only item rated as more important for male leaders was “a preference for working as a solo pastor.”

This gender difference was explored in the follow-up survey by asking respondents to provide possible explanations for men preferring solo positions. The most common responses were the cultural shaping of males (e.g., men wanting control) and the cultural shaping of females (e.g., women wanting support).

Challenges in Early Months

Respondents indicated that the most challenging task in the early months or year of their first call was “finding time for my own spiritual growth.” In the follow-up survey, having a spiritual mentor/guide was rated as most helpful in finding time for this activity.

Two other tasks were also seen as quite challenging: “finding ways to move the congregation toward a mission-field perspective,” and “pacing myself with all the responsibilities of the congregation.”

Most respondents to the second survey rated “finding ways to move the congregation toward a mission-field perspective” as important or very important. Again, the support of a mentor or seasoned leader was rated as most helpful in this task.

Competencies to Develop and Support Needs

Several items which respondents felt ill-prepared to deal with in their early months of ministry were also high on their list of competencies to develop. These areas were, in order of importance: (1) managing disputes and conflict situations, (2) planning stewardship programs, (3) training/equipping others for their ministries, (4) planning a church budget, (5) working effectively with congregational leaders, (6) visiting prospective members, and (7) addressing social and ethical issues facing communities.

Another question asked respondents to rate the importance of different types of support during their first call. The top three types rated as “highly important or important” were the following:

- Colleague group support
- A mentor
- Help on how to train and empower lay leaders.

When asked on the second survey what skills would be most helpful in working with lay leaders, the overwhelming response was for help in maintaining spiritual foundations. Respondents also indicated needing the most help working with the church council.

About half of the respondents to the follow-up survey are currently in an ongoing FCTE colleague group, have a mentor or coach, and are working with a mutual ministry committee. When asked what they have done to meet their own support needs, respondents most often listed support from other colleagues or peers outside the congregation, support within the congregation, and a mentor or spiritual director.

Improving the First Call Process

Asked what might improve the first call process, the most common response was improving communication between the candidate and the synod staff, especially to have more honesty in the process. The second most frequent response was improving the interview process and included suggestions: (1) more preparation, (2) allowing candidates to interview with more than one congregation, and (3) more support throughout the process. A third frequent category involved flexibility in the process, including geographic and spouse/family considerations. A fourth category, fit, included pleas to better match a candidate with the congregation instead of merely filling a vacancy.

In the follow-up survey, respondents were asked to list specific ideas for improving the communication between the candidate and synod staff. The most common responses were sharing knowledge about the call process, synod staff contacts and responsibilities, and communication tools and methods such as email and phone contact.

Gender Differences

Many gender differences were found in both the first and second surveys. In the initial survey, women rated all kinds of support as more important, as well as various needs of the church and the impact of several factors on the decision to accept their first call. However, men were more likely to prefer a solo pastor position, possibly due to the cultural shaping of men and women.

In the second survey, women were more likely to rate the support of a mentor or seasoned leader as helpful in many areas. Males were more likely to indicate needing help with having effective meetings with a variety of lay leaders.

Career Differences

Both surveys also revealed many differences between first- and second-career leaders. In the first survey, second-career leaders overall felt more prepared in a variety of ministry areas. Supporting that finding, first-career leaders also reported more difficulties in several areas.

In the follow-up survey, second-career leaders rated the support of a mentor or seasoned leader as more helpful in many areas. Second-career respondents were also more likely to indicate needing help with listening or clarifying in working with a variety of lay leaders.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Taken together, these two surveys give us a picture of the first call experience of rostered leaders and also provide us with a number of suggestions for improving both seminary preparation and the first call process. Clearly, there are areas where first call leaders feel they could be better prepared through seminary curricula and other educational training. The importance of a mentor as support surfaced several times in these two surveys. Facilitating such mentor relationships might be helpful in providing much-needed support in the first few years of called leadership. Finally, communication during the call process is an area that could be improved, and respondents to both surveys had many specific ideas for change. Providing first call leaders with the best preparation and support possible is an important investment in the future leaders of the church.