



MISSOURI'S CLERGY CRISIS

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The discussion surrounding the ELCA sexuality task force's recommendation to consider ordaining non-celibate homosexuals to the public ministry raises a number of questions, not the least of which is: "Who gets to decide who is ordained to the public ministry of the church?" The ELCA is not alone; this question has lurked in the background of the LCMS in the past decades, surfacing as districts shun candidates for first call placement from one seminary or the other and as certain men seek ordained ministry via non-residential seminary routes. The question recognizes that a tension exists between the rights of an individual congregation and the responsibility of that congregation to both the wider denominational community and the church catholic.

Despite the importance of C. F. W. Walther's "The Congregation's Right to Call Its Own Pastor" in Missouri's history, there was a recognition early on that the call of a pastor ought never to take place without the consultation of those already in the office. In practice, this consultation was historically delegated to those pastoral teachers who supervised pre-seminary and then later seminary students as they made their way through the famed LCMS school system. Professors and others would weed out men unfit for ministry and thus acted as a de facto, if not forthright, answer to the question of who gets to decide within Missouri.

As the prep-school system was dismantled and more second-career candidates began to enter the seminary, a new system developed. For those still going through one of the Concordia colleges, endorsement is needed from the pre-seminary director for entrance to the seminary. All prospective seminary students must receive a recommendation from a district interviewing committee, which will make this recommendation often after meeting with the candidate only once. The weakness in both steps of the process

is that nobody likes to say no. It feels too risky to reduce further an already dwindling number of pre-seminary students by weeding them out so early in their college years. But then, saying no to a pre-seminary track student until after college graduation means having wasted four years of education and tuition. In the case of a district interview, it is extremely difficult to say no on the basis of a very limited one-day interview. In either case, it is an uncomfortable proposition to say no to a person who believes he is called by God. It is far easier to take the position of Gamaliel: "For if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38–9).

In practice, the process of weeding out candidates for ordination in Missouri is made on the basis of ontology (are they male?) and intelligence (can they pass the prerequisite classes?). It is much harder to test for what is perhaps more important: can they interact with others socially? There is no test that can determine with much certainty whether a man is an antisocial bore, or worse, an outright arrogant ass. And yet St. Paul's description of an "overseer/bishop" to Timothy speaks more to social skills than to what seminaries and pre-seminary programs have traditionally tested for and taught. While entering seminarians are given a battery of psychological tests, few candidates are dismissed; most are given "assertiveness" or "time management" classes to correct social shortcomings. It is as difficult to teach "social skills" as it is to define objectively a criterion of who has them. Ultimately, no one likes to say no, and again the Gamaliel hope is that the guy will either learn social skills or weed himself out academically or otherwise.

Vicarage, usually in the third year of seminary training, becomes one of the first and last opportunities for social evaluation to take place.¹ Here, too, there is a hesitancy to reject an individual who has sacrificed at least two years of

his life preparing for the pastoral ministry—moving family, leaving a job, taking on additional expenses, and so on. As a result, assuming that the vicar has not done anything terribly foolish or scandalous, he is sent back to the seminary with the hope that the last year will solve whatever problems remain. If a candidate needs additional help, he is told to take a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education in the hope that he will finally learn some social skills in that setting.²

After vicarage, the final hurdle of the “faculty interview” is all that is left. The primary emphasis of the exit interview is more often to judge academic fitness rather than any attempted evaluation based on St. Paul’s characteristics of an overseer/bishop. It is difficult in one question-and-answer period to evaluate distinctive pastoral skills. Perhaps the emphasis on the academic is that it is easier to give an objective no on the basis of a failed intellectual standard than a subjective no to a candidate who lacks appropriate social skills.

The continued non-evaluation of candidates for ordained ministry on the basis of their social skills, coupled with a reliance on the hope that less-than-ideal individuals will weed themselves out, is hardly compassionate. To allow a person to leave a job, amass huge debt, and move his family only to fail early in his ministry because he does not possess the necessary social skills to succeed is the opposite of compassion. Sometimes no *is* the compassionate answer.

At seminary, you often could tell which guys would run into trouble in ministry. They would fail the (admittedly subjective) “Would I want this guy to be my mom’s pastor?” test. Intellect, confessional fidelity, and doctrinal purity alone do not make a faithful pastor. Simply preaching and leading the liturgy, though certainly primary tasks of an “overseer,” do not make a man a good or even adequate pastor. Poor social skills are a hindrance to the gospel. It is no wonder that in some circles within Missouri there are

congregations content to be served by “lay ministers.” After a succession of poor pastors, a “lay minister” raised up from within the community, who knows the people and how to relate to them, becomes a welcome respite. Marginal congregations too tend to get marginal candidates who, under the pressures of a difficult call, have the worst of their personality brought to the fore, causing the congregation to become even more marginal as conflict erupts, presumably with some doctrine as the flash point but really with some personality problem lurking in the background.

Ultimately, the church has always recognized that an ordination to ministry does not involve just a specific congregation or its pastor. Canon IV of the First Council of Nicea decreed: “A bishop is to be chosen by all the bishops of the province, or at least by three, the rest giving by letter their assent; but this choice must be confirmed by the metropolitan.”³

Regardless of the mechanism Missouri utilizes to place individuals into the office of the public ministry, great care must be taken to avoid simply filling the office with men who “can do the job” (ontologically and intellectually). Such a functionalist view of ministry diminishes the office, as does the continued defense of pastors who exhibit boorish behavior with the excuse that “they are fulfilling their call by preaching and leading the mass,” as if the healthy relationship of a pastor to his people means nothing. To settle for a pastor who can simply “do the job” is to bring forward to our Lord an offering of our “last fruits” when we should be bringing forward our first and best.

While official LCMS sources speak of recruiting men to fill a clergy shortage, it is time for Missouri to increase the standards for pastors by seeking out men who are not just ontologically and academically fit but who are the “good guys” that St. Paul describes. The triad of qualification for a pastor should be ontological, academic, and *personable*. To settle for anything

less than all three is to place the other two in jeopardy. When congregations experience a personable non-ordained alternative to an impersonal clergyman, can they really be blamed for wondering why all of the academia is even necessary or why the ontological maleness of the pastor is the *sine qua non*?

The reality is that there is no coming “clergy shortage”; rather, there is a growing shortage of viable congregations that can afford to pay a full-time pastor.⁴ To continue to send men who don’t possess the delicate social skills necessary to serve places that are hurting and conflicted is to continue the slow death of the Missouri Synod. A new generation of extraordinary men is needed, and if they are not to be found, it is only a matter of time before the ontological standards of Missouri’s ordained go the way of the personal and the academic. *LF*

Notes

1. Students are assigned to work at an area congregation as “field workers” but the limited interaction with the congregation hardly provides ample opportunity for evaluation.

2. The use of CPE as a means of “correcting” borderline candidates for the pastoral ministry has created a perception problem for the program and institutional ministry in general: it becomes a repository for those who cannot make it in “real ministry.” This perception unfortunately denigrates the important work of those engaged in institutional ministry and the valuable help that CPE provides in training individuals for that type of ministry.

3. Using Piepkorn’s insight that bishops in the early church were nothing other than the parish pastors of a given locale, canon IV could be translated into Missouri-ese as “a pastor will not be called and set apart for ordination without the consent of those in his district and the approval of his district president.”

4. Ironically, one of the more interesting developments in this regard is the Specific Ministry Pastor program, which seeks to place locally recognized individuals in the service of these marginal congregations and provide them with the academic training necessary for them to function as ordained individuals. In this way a local congregation chooses one of its own leaders as a pastor, and then the wider church provides the training and confirmation that this individual is fit for ministry. The weakness, of course, is the “academic” component of the triad.