

Reflections on Implications of First Call Research The Transition into Ministry Lilly Endowment Project

In June, 2004 a summary of reflections and implications of findings from the two major surveys with ELCA First Call participants (2002 and 2003) was written. This report was disseminated to FCTE synod coordinators and to partners in our seminaries with the goal of having conversations with these partners. By 2008, some of these reflections have been taken concrete shape; e.g., a “best practices” handbook called “Sustaining First Calls” and other items in the lists below are still are being discussed by partners in the FCTE enterprise.

Implications for ELCA Seminaries

1. Select more diverse congregations for internship experiences (e.g., small town/rural, mission development, multicultural contexts, community organizing, female senior pastor).
2. Better training of internship supervisors; present clear expectations of what is to be experienced and learned in congregational life during internship year.
3. Encourage more concrete connections to be made by faculty in all seminary classes between theological language/concepts and practice.
4. Offer spiritual formation and imprint on the hearts of students the need for spiritual formation, retreats, spiritual guides, etc. in their first call and beyond.
5. Review and discuss first call research pointing to differences between first and second career ministry candidates.
6. Engage in serious discussion about sexism in our church and gender differences in ministry styles, values, and leadership.

Implications for ELCA Synods and Candidacy Committees

1. Present to assigned candidates the synod’s call process and expectations they should have of time lapses from assignment to a call; clarify who takes responsibility for staying in touch during these tense weeks/months of waiting for a call.
2. Communicate with honesty and integrity helpful information about the congregations recommended – e.g., what could be challenges as well as blessings in those congregations.
3. Appoint person(s) to be first call contact/liason with synod who would stay in touch with candidates and provide hospitality, making sure they don’t feel alone in their first call, etc.
4. Be firm about expectations of colleague group involvement; help identify mentors/coaches for those in more isolated calls.
5. Be involved as much as possible in first call programs, especially those planned and organized by a regional person or committee.
6. Have standard expectations across synods of candidacy committees giving support after students have been approved, assigned and waiting to be ordained.
7. Impress on newly called the need for taking time off – for Sabbath times, etc.

Implications for Churchwide Units

1. Bring institutional leaders together across similar contexts/roles to talk about how to improve the whole system.
2. Create a “best practices” handbook for online review and expansion by seminaries and synods; use these as resources for first call summits and consultative meetings.
3. Write grants with partners to institutionalize needed changes in the system.
4. Work with First Call Theological Education synod/regional coordinators and planners on ways to improve the FCTE process, communication and expectations, based on the Transition into Ministry project’s research findings.