

**First Call Theological Education Participants Survey Findings**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
**Division for Ministry**  
**June, 2003**

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 three years of a call to congregational ministry. In the late fall, 2002, a survey was sent to 824 newly rostered leaders and after a follow-up reminder, 618 completed questionnaires were received, resulting in a 75 percent response rate. All reported differences in this report are significant at the .05 level.

**Characteristics of the Respondents**

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. Significant findings are summarized below. *Differences between males and females, first and second career leaders are in italics.*

- 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.
- *Females felt more prepared to: (1) establish trusting relationships with members, (2) provide a ministry of healing, (3) help people deal with grief, (4) teach youth and children, (5) prepare Sunday bulletins.*
- *Males felt more prepared to: (1) preach, (2) plan stewardship programs, (3) plan a church budget.*
- *Second career leaders felt much more prepared to: (1) work effectively with congregational leaders, (2) give guidance/support to committees, (3) provide a ministry of healing, (4) manage a church office, (5) plan stewardship programs, (6) plan a church budget, (7) visit prospective members, (8) address social and ethical issues facing communities.*
- Differences between seminaries of graduation emerged. Graduates from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary gave consistently higher ratings of preparedness for these ministry tasks.

**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. *Differences within subgroups are in italics.*

- “Reaching out to unchurched persons” rated the highest need, but received the lowest level of preparedness. *Second career leaders felt more prepared to do this.*
- Second highest rated need (*especially for women*) was “helping congregations work toward a vision.”
- Third highest rated need was “helping people grow spiritually.” *Women rated this need higher than men and felt more prepared to address this need.*
- Other low levels of preparedness (also rated high in need) were “involving congregations in community issues of justice” and “helping congregations revitalize their ministry.”
- *Women rated higher the need for and level of preparedness to “listen to people’s questions and concerns.”*
- *“Being a teaching theologian in your congregation” was rated higher as a need by women, but men felt more prepared to address this need.*

**Factors in Accepting a First Call**

By far the **most important** factor in accepting a first call was “a sense of call” (*rated higher by women and second career leaders*). The next highest rated factors were “the geographic location of the

congregation” (*rated higher by women and second career leaders*) 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.”*

The **least important** factors were “obligations to my extended family” (*though rated more important by women and second career leaders*), “long term career plans,” and “a preference for working in a church with multiple staff” (*though rated more important by women*).

### **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.” *First career leaders found this more challenging than did second career leaders.*

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” (*the latter rated higher by female clergy*).

*First career leaders rated as more difficult than second career leaders: dealing with tax law for church workers, managing personal debts and financial planning, building a ministerial identity, applying seminary training to parish work and switching from a seminary context to a congregational context.*

### **Self-Identity**

Respondents identified themselves primarily as “preacher,” followed by “leader” in their first call ministry. Lowest self-identity ratings were given to “organizer” and “counselor.”

### **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. 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. Rated as “highly important or important” were (in order of importance):

- Colleague group support (*higher for women*)
- A mentor (*higher for women*)
- Help on how to train and empower lay leaders (*higher for first career leaders*)
- Counsel on how to handle conflict (*higher for women*)
- Getting acquainted with leaders in the synod
- Opportunities for theological reflection on context and practice
- The synod Bishop and staff
- Access to programmatic resources (*higher for women*)
- An advisor with ministerial experience outside the local community
- Counsel on self-care issues, e.g., time management, health, boundaries

### **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, (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 trying to fill a vacancy.