

SYNODICALLY AUTHORIZED MINISTRIES PILOT PROJECT FINDINGS

submitted to

Division for Ministry, ELCA

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by

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*Quotations in this report are taken from telephone interviews or final reports
from the nine pilot projects listed on the back page*

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognizes the need for synodical ministries providing pastoral or diaconal leadership for a congregation or other ministry of the church when needs exist which exceed those which can be met by rostered persons. In recognizing this need the ELCA has provided within its by-laws provisions dealing with synodically authorized ministries. Nine pilot projects funded by grants from the Division for Ministry provide examples which may help other synods as they plan a program for synodically authorized ministries.

DECISION POINTS

Setting up synodically authorized ministries requires decisions about key elements of such a program. A major decision, of course, is in determining desired outcomes. What are the synod's needs? What needs of lay people may be met by a training program? How does the synod envision utilizing those who receive training? When these decisions are made, further planning requires decisions about training to achieve these outcomes.

Desired Outcomes

A synod may desire strengthened mission outreach in geographically isolated or economically challenged areas. Synod planners may wish to recruit leaders for ethnic outreach. There may be a desire to increase ministry within congregations to free up ordained clergy for their ministries, or where there is no full-time pastor. The need may be for lay leadership throughout the synod, such as serving on councils or giving workshops. Or planners may seek to strengthen congregations in general, through increasing the number of members with deeper Lutheran theological perspectives and skills training.

Lay people who already serve within congregations in education or worship may desire additional skills development. Congregational members may be willing, but feel unprepared, to assist in pastoral care, visitation, and outreach ministries without training. Other laity may seek the opportunity to serve in a specialized ministry in areas outside their own congregation. Or they may be looking for the opportunity to grow in personal faith and understanding.

Specific outcomes may include house churches or worshipping communities, prison ministries, or campground ministries. Lay leaders may provide Bible studies and catechetical instruction, worship assistance, women's group leadership, evangelism canvassing, and visitation. They may work in community health care or advocacy with the poor or vulnerable of our society.

Models. Planning a synodical program for lay ministries takes into account the various outcomes that may be desired. It may correspond to one of three models in form:

MODEL I. Single-track. This model has as its primary outcome the certification of lay people for specific synodically authorized ministries throughout the synod. A specific curriculum or equivalent courses must be taken. For example, Montana Synod's pilot project creates a program of study for candidates for licensed ministries of Word and Sacrament, focusing on rural ministry. Care is taken in the initial selection of participants, using nominations and interviews, and satisfactory completion of coursework, with semester by semester committee review. Fulfillment of all requirements leads to a "certificate of completion." These candidates will be authorized for public ministry as there is a recognized need.

MODEL II. Multiple-tracks. This model includes routes to two or more outcomes meeting synodical needs. For example, the Hudson-Mohawk Conference of Upstate New York Synod offers training for service in congregational ministries of worship and education on three different levels: for personal growth, in which laypeople select certain courses of interest; deacon training using the full core curriculum, for service in home congregations; and Licensed Lay Leadership, for service to congregations outside the home congregation. The LLL program requires the full core curriculum and participation in the mentoring program, as well as application and endorsement.

A variation of multiple tracks includes training beyond the certification level. For example, East Central Synod of Wisconsin's Lay School of Ministry "gives access to all types of growth ... serving within the congregation and serving within the community." Those who complete the courses get a "certificate of graduation." The bishop's office will try to find part-time jobs, but there is no guarantee. A second track occurs through the Institute of Theology, which offers accredited seminary-level courses for those considering future rostered positions:

For us, it's important to have the two tracks; we use our Lay School as a recruiting tool... unless you're really near a seminary [you] need something for Associates in Ministry and those wanting seminary credits... we think you can do both.

MODEL III. Open-ended tracks. In this model, flexibility is a key word. Leadership training is the primary focus and certification is not a major concern. Although foundational areas will be covered, exact courses may be developed along the way. Multicultural concerns may provide impetus. For example, Nebraska Synod's pilot project looks to find a way "to involve

under-represented people" in its Parish Ministry Associate Program. Its specific objectives are to develop lay leaders within the Lakota community. These lay people would be able to lead Bible studies for children and adults, and/or assist the pastor in worship, visitation, and other pastoral care. Meeting synodical requirements for certification is optional.

Personal mentoring in interest areas has been essential in Nebraska's program, not only for leadership development, but in establishing a relationship of trust "in a context in which the traditional church has not always been trusted." A storytelling format for group sessions is appropriate for an oral culture and provides "an alternative approach to the academic" one. This requires a flexible approach to course length as well:

"we will need to allow a far greater amount of time to cover a given amount of material because of the importance of taking the time to allow people to share their stories, discuss the diversity, and develop an understanding of the biblical tradition that is consistent with the Lutheran approach to scripture. This means that a course will be done when the material that needs to be covered has been covered, rather than within a given time frame.

Other decision points have to do with the content and the logistics of training programs. The pilot projects provide examples of different ways to implement these common elements.

Content of Training

Curriculum . Some pilot projects use already existing training programs; others are creating new ones. Curricula generally follow ELCA guidelines¹ and include a mix of academic foundational courses and "how to" courses, combined in different ways. Practical application sessions may follow an academic presentation, be woven throughout such a session as times of practice, reflection and/or discussion, or be presented as separate classes or options. For example, Southwest Texas Synod's Parish Ministry Institute's class on Lutheran liturgy provides an introduction to the history of Christian worship, including the relationship between worship and evangelism, and uses the LBW companion volume, Manual on the Liturgy, as its text. The final period of each session "translates learning into ministry." Among other projects, students outline special liturgies for a service appealing to those from non-Lutheran backgrounds. A second-year contextual understanding course has as one practical application the planning of multicultural worship.

The specifics of how courses are put together relate to local needs. Nebraska's storytelling format interweaves the content of the Old Testament with that of the New Testament.

¹ *Bible, Lutheran theology, polity and the Confessions, Worship, Spiritual discernment and faith formation, Leadership expectations, Contextual understanding, and Skill development.

A second-year spiritual formation class in East Central Wisconsin Synod's Lay School of Ministry includes social action concerns and deals with current issues such as business ethics, abortion, and feminism. For many of the pilot projects, a mentoring relationship is a central component. This may be implemented as either a one-on-one or a small group association.

Resource people. Teachers include area pastors and associates in ministry, synod staff, seminary or college professors, and laypersons with specific skills. In the training programs with a mentor, the mentor is usually a local pastor, often from the student's home congregation. In some cases, video tapes, such as Select courses, are used, either for individualized study or group discussion. Montana synod, with geography limiting access, uses in-state distance learning ("Tele-com") as well as Select for the foundational courses, while "short courses" created and taught by synodical pastors and associates in ministry are taken to where the candidates live. East Central Wisconsin hopes to explore interactive learning. Northeastern Minnesota Synod will be using one of their own students to teach the leadership sessions, as that is his professional expertise.

Logistics

Time frames. Classes may occur on single days or evenings, or they may meet less frequently but for longer time periods. A common pattern is weekend retreats held two to four times a year. One synod uses a school which offers Friday night/Saturday sessions held once a month. A few have weekly sessions following the school year. One combines training weekends with annual "seminary weeks," and Select study done individually or in small groups. The timing of mentoring sessions, whether group or individual, also varies. New York's Hudson-Mohawk conference, for example, has group mentoring sessions six times a year at the church of the conference pastor who serves as mentor.

Most curricula are on a two-year cycle, but some require further study for certification. One such program involves a one-year internship; another involves a second two-year set of courses after the first two-years. A frequent element is some sort of continuing education requirement. This may be by individual study, small group meetings, or an annual conference-like gathering.

Locations. Classes meet at a synod office or center, a retreat center, a local campus, or a local congregation. There may be several sites, which keeps distances down and offers other benefits as well. For example, Metro New York Synod's *diakonia* educational program currently has seven locations, five English-speaking and two Spanish-speaking. Different elective options are available at different sites.

Administration. Pilot projects generally use a Task Force or interim committee for development, with synod council feedback and approval at some point in the process. This group might include representatives from the Bishop's office, local clergy, lay representation,

and sometimes someone from the school or institute that would be involved in training. Several respondents emphasized the necessity of having the strong support of the Bishop.

Administration of the program generally follows ELCA guidelines. There is usually an oversight committee as well as a coordinator, either volunteer or paid. Applications, candidate evaluations, and placements are under the supervision of the Bishop's office. The coordinator/committee may handle recruitment of teachers and mentors, registrations, materials and course selection, site preparation, and program evaluations.. Some respondents cautioned that as the program develops the paperwork and record-keeping may be too much for one person, especially if it is a part-time position.

LEARNINGS FROM THE PILOT PROJECTS

Some pilot projects came out of prior experiences, such as the 20-some years of deacon programs in the New York synods; others were used to plan a beginning program of training. They could be synod-wide or in one conference only. Some were aimed at rural contexts; others for urban ministry. In spite of these differences, certain themes emerged from pilot project final reports or interviews. These "learnings" constitute basic advice for planning a synodically-authorized ministry program.

Be cautiously optimistic about lay participation.

You will be able to recruit and retain committed lay people who may surprise you with their enthusiasm. As the respondent from Northern Great Lakes Synod summarized their experience:

There is a great hunger for deeper spiritual and practical enhancement of skills for service in the church.

Most participants are already active in their congregations. Training gives them a "sense of direction as they serve in their congregations." They appreciate the chance to deepen their faith, increase their understanding, and be better equipped for service wherever they may be. They also appreciate the chance to gather with others and experience koinonia. Even having no guarantee of placement in a synodically-authorized ministry does not seem to discourage them:

Our basic learning is how enthusiastic these people are – they are energized by it and committed to it ... sense that these candidates simply value the learnings for their own sakes.. [knowing there is no guarantee of placement] does not diminish their enthusiasm...they value the growth in their faith.

It's helpful to have information about the program come through those who can give it legitimacy. Several respondents mentioned that it was necessary to have a supportive Bishop. Others talked about pastors as gatekeepers:

[Our program] was advertised synod-wide... the key to me is that pastors must support and be willing to encourage laypersons to come, it is pastors who pass on the information.

Legitimization may be especially important in cross-cultural recruitment efforts. In Nebraska Synod, where a certain amount of suspicion of "white do-gooders" exists among Native Americans, the "open stamp of approval of the recognized authority within that culture" was vital to the success of the pilot project, both in recruitment and in attendance:

If [the Lakota pastor] said something a few days before, they'd come – if he didn't, [there was] a big difference in attendance.

The caution is not to expect great numbers or that all participants will complete the entire training for licensure. For many laypersons who take the training, licensure may not be the goal. Especially in sparsely populated areas, the first recruitment may gather in most of the most committed and available laity so that recruitment for later years drops off. One synod dealt with this by reaching into different areas from year to year. A training site which has been shut down for a few years generates new interest when it re-opens.

As long as projected attendance is realistically modest, however, a training program can succeed:

We need to fill it [the class] up to break even ... the goal was 20 participants for the initial effort, but we ended up with 27.

Look locally for resources

You are encouraged to look close to home to find teaching resources. Where Select courses are used, a local pastor can serve as mentor or discussion leader. Some synods used paid faculty; some recruited volunteers. All, however, were able to discover local people with the desire, the knowledge, and the ability to provide training. In most cases seminary or local college professors were willing to travel to the teaching site. In some cases students came to the campus for courses, perhaps being housed by members of nearby congregations.

What is important is that the teachers, mentors, and discussion leaders are able to adapt to their group. As one coordinator put it, they must be "able to catch the imagination of the people." Lay participants come in with varying backgrounds and levels of theological sophistication, and the teachers must be sensitive to that. Especially in the more open-ended programs, listening ability and flexibility are vital:

There is a real need for flexibility on the part of those leading in order to develop themes that come up in the course of the conversation, and to deal with questions and topics as they come up, which is not always in the order it would be in a traditional curriculum.

A second part of looking locally for resources is in selection of the training site. Keeping the training on "home ground," as local as possible, keeps transportation time and costs reasonable.

It also makes it easier for the site to become part of the learning process. Local, contextual, sites help keep classes "within the action/reflection model within their parish ministry." A skilled teacher can also use the site in creative ways. For example, Northwestern Ohio synod uses a Roman Catholic retreat center. Touring the site "helps people understand what makes them different within the family of Christendom...the shrine of Mary illustrates some of [Luther's Reformation positions]." At one session, where the priest was asked whether they could take communion at the Mass, his gentle response, "not yet," was used by the teacher in discussion to highlight that "we all suffer the pain of our separation."

Explain and clarify as you go.

Clarity in introducing the program to both clergy and laity is essential, so that it is not seen as a threat by either clergy or laity:

[when we designed and brought the program to synod council] it took 2 meetings... perhaps at first council meeting we had not done as much homework, so there was some confusion... from pastors who were perhaps worried about people without as much education [performing pastoral functions] ... the key is to explain that these are persons who work in relationship with and under the supervision of pastors in the area - not "lone rangers" ... the second time, no problem.

In one synod, the bishop and committee members did one-on-ones, small group sessions, and forums with synod pastors and leaders to develop a general consensus.

Introductions may need to explain what is different about this program, and what complements other ministries. One respondent mentioned possible tension between "ministry in daily life folk and diaconal folk," with a need to emphasize common goals, constantly "teaching about what is ministry" when introducing the program. Another

respondent mentioned the need for greater clarity about different outcomes for "Licensed Lay Ministers versus continuing education people."

As the program is implemented, it's important to keep expectations clear. Teachers sometimes need to be made more aware that students have different levels of academic and religious background. Frequently mentioned was the need for "more training and educating the mentors" about expectations, roles, frequency of meeting, and so on.

Although participants may be seen as self-motivated, standards of accountability are still helpful. In Model II and III programs there needs to be at least some understanding of what is expected of participants, for example, if an overnight stay is part of the requirement. Clear accountability becomes even more important in Model I certification projects:

Working with diaconal council is the only way this will be taken seriously, that they are willing to operate voluntarily with the same standards, accountability and so forth that associates in ministry have ... [it gives] integrity and legitimacy.

It's also good to make it clear what sort of placements will be available, or that placements are not guaranteed but depend on synodical needs. As one respondent put it, you "need to nurture along the way, cultivate ongoing dialog and shepherding, so there are no surprises at the end."

We're moving away from the language of "lay preacher" -- that gives the idea of lots of pulpit opportunities, that's more true in the western part of the state but we only have one or two -- it gives false hope to laity, plus ... may be confusion by pastors.

At least one respondent suggested the importance of clarity in placement tasks as well. You need to "define the ministry in a precise way." Otherwise burnout is possible, as the lay minister enthusiastically tries to do too much. Metro New York Synod provides an example of such clarity. Its written guidelines include a sample description of a diaconal appointment. This appointment lists expected tasks among identified age groups and specifies the average hours per week for each task.

Monitor academic rigor.

On the one hand, lay participants welcome the challenge of a deeper exploration of faith topics. On the other hand, educational and religious backgrounds may vary greatly, and courses presented at the seminary level are not always understandable to everyone. Academic language in texts and presentations may be a barrier to some. In one synod, for example, a liturgical skills book which was assigned was written at too high a level.

A survey taken independently of the pilot projects but reported in Montana's final report summarizes the dilemma: "some want a practical program without being too academic; some want an academically challenging program." Planners and teachers need to take care in both

directions, neither assuming too much theological sophistication nor assuming that standards need not apply.

Understanding the content of the faith remains important. Metro New York Synod, for example, was "tempted to make changes" in the Spanish-speaking classes to accommodate Pentecostal and other conservative faith traditions, but it became clear that students

want the same theological rigor [as the English-speaking classes] ... [including] use of the Book of Concord... Hispanic congregations, deacons need that confessional clarity.

Evaluation and feedback at set times throughout the training process, from both students and instructors, help in monitoring the level of academic challenge. Criteria for evaluating the level of student comprehension may need to be developed, especially in a more open-ended program.

Build community.

A real strength of the training programs is "the community building that happens when people gather in this kind of intimate experience." Participant evaluations rated highly the opportunity to interact with Christians from other congregations and backgrounds. Some programs built this in as an intentional communal piece; for others, it was more of a serendipitous discovery:

The first time, they stayed on their own; then for the winter retreat they stayed at camp, that worked better, so now we do that... we'd thought of it more as a class – get education and wander away – but discovered they really responded [to overnight time] to share and get to know each other; the community-building has been a real asset to the people involved.

There are other ways to build in an intentional communal piece if participants don't have overnights together. Worship together is a central experience, mentioned frequently as a valuable way to "be in community with other believers." Group-building can also be encouraged by having participants together prepare prayers and devotions for worship. One program has three meals together in their Friday-Saturday session and also uses participants in devotions throughout the two days. Small-group mentoring sessions, either as part of the course meeting times or as separate sessions, also enhance community with their opportunities for mutual exchange.

Learn from others.

Taking time to plan and gather responses from a variety of sources was also mentioned as a learning. (One respondent, however, cautioned that we Lutherans can plan too long and

suggested “jumping right in.”) This planning need not occur in a vacuum: look to resources that are already available to help you in your planning.

The Division for Ministry's "Guidelines Related to Synodically Authorized or Licensed Ministries" is a helpful document. It briefly deals with the application process, qualifications for service, and administrative structures, emphasizing quality and accountability. The section on program of preparation is a useful reference in developing the curriculum. As one respondent wrote, the guidelines:

have been effective in delineating the role and expectations of Licensed Lay Ministers. They have also proven invaluable in interpreting the role of Licensed Ministries and Worshipping Communities to potential ministry sites. We strongly affirm these guidelines!

It's also helpful to look to what's already happening elsewhere. You may be able to model your program after an existing one. For example, Task Force members from Northeastern Minnesota Synod went out to observe the GIFTS program in North Dakota. The Northwest Synod of Wisconsin served as the model for East Central Wisconsin's pilot project. A lay minister from the Northwest synod is serving as co-coordinator for the pilot project.

[For the planning committee, it would] be wise to have 1-2 persons sit in on what's going on in other [synods] near them, not have to re-invent the wheel.

Ongoing evaluations provide a way to learn from others once the program is underway. Comments from participants, mentors, teachers, and administrators can help in refining a program or suggest new directions for the future. Those involved in the pilot projects look to a "summit meeting" where they can evaluate their own programs and compare them with others.

At the end of this paper is a list of the pilot projects included. Below each project is the name and telephone number of the contact person. You are welcome to telephone any of them with your questions, and learn from their experiences.

CONCLUSION

"Adult learning" was not explicitly mentioned in final reports, although respondents did stress that effective teaching needed to be sensitive to differences in student backgrounds and levels of knowledge. Cross-cultural differences were mentioned:

You can't just transfer something that works in one culture to another one...our main Parish Ministry Associate program has a very set curriculum... in [the pilot project] the typical classroom structure did not work; the one-on-one mentoring style is what worked.

Curriculum designers may need to consider pedagogical method, such as question-driven versus experience-driven modes of instruction.

Those pilot projects who used a mentoring system were uniformly enthusiastic about its value. At the same time, several noted that this was an area which needs attention:

We also need to work on/flesh out the idea of the mentor.. perhaps an ahead-of-time written description, with expectations of relationships, semester by semester foci ... we're still working on that.

The most-mentioned difficulty was making expectations more clear. Accountability was a related concern.

The overall assessment of those involved in these pilot projects is that synodically-authorized ministries are well worth developing. They provide a real opportunity for lay people to develop their gifts of ministry in service to synodical needs. Indeed, in the words of Ephesians 4:12, they serve "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

SYNODICALLY AUTHORIZED MINISTRIES *1996 PILOT PROJECTS and Contact Persons*

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