

WHAT MAKES FIRST CALL CONGREGATIONS UNIQUE?

Vocation of First Call Congregations

ELCA, Vocation & Education Unit, Lilly Endowment Project

INTENTIONAL PARTICIPATION IN THE GROWTH OF THE PASTOR

Realizing they are calling a pastor without experience, lay people take it upon themselves to help educate, nurture, support, as well as critique, their first call pastor. There is a sense that they are cheerleaders as well as coaches in this special nurturing role.

HOPE FOR LONG TERM PASTORATE

While all congregations hope for a long-term pastorate, first call congregations seem to imbue this hope with more intensity, perhaps fearing their pastor may not intend to stay long in the first call – especially if it is in a context that is unfamiliar. Making mistakes may carry more weight in first call congregations. Lay leaders may fear that if something goes wrong, their pastor will leave; thus adding tension to how they respond to their pastor, including ideas for change and style of ministry.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR INFLUENCING PASTOR'S FUTURE MINISTRY

The experiences and memories of one's first call can color the rest of one's ministry in positive and negative ways. Lay leaders need to be aware of their responsibility in giving shape and form to the first call leader's expectations in future calls and a sense of confidence throughout their pastoral ministry.

REFRAMING OF ATTITUDES

More prevalent in first call congregations, attitudes such as: "We can only afford a pastor just starting out," or "We don't have to change much since the pastor won't be with us very long" can be reframed to create a healthy first call ministry. Lay leaders have a unique opportunity in receiving an eager, new leader – a first call pastor who could help them reflect on who they are and where they want to be going. An example of reframing a negative attitude might be that the first call pastor "is on loan" to the congregation, providing an opportunity to continue, even for a short time, the substantial investment of the seminary, resulting in dividends to themselves and to the pastor and his/her family.

IDENTITY ISSUES OF THE FIRST CALL PASTOR AND THE CONGREGATION

Wearing the mantle of "pastor" for the first time carries with it complex but important identity issues to be discerned and reflected upon. Whether one is starting a first career or coming to the pastorate from other careers, pastoral identity needs attention across its various dimensions (ministerial role, authority, boundaries, leadership style). One's self-identity comes into play especially during times of tension or conflict. A healthy self-awareness helps new pastors deal with whatever comes their way.

The congregation also has to deal with its corporate identity as a community of faith that is partnering with a new pastor to create a healthy, life-giving congregation. The issue of esteem might be particularly challenging, especially if the congregation doesn't feel they have much to offer or to sustain a first call leader.

STRONGEST COMMON THEMES AND STRENGTHS OF FIRST CALL CONGREGATIONS

- ◆ Importance of intentionality in welcome and hospitality for pastor and family;
- ◆ Managing, adapting and embracing change as a reality;
- ◆ Lay leaders in a partner relationship with pastor vs. employer/employee roles;
- ◆ Making meaningful connections to one's community and the broader church;
- ◆ Strong congregational identity – a “joyous pride” in knowing who they are;
- ◆ Importance of visioning and planning;
- ◆ Congregations aware they are a “training ground” or “a finishing school” to help First Call pastors learn and thrive;
- ◆ Congregational flexibility and the ability to live through anything;
- ◆ Dealing with the reality of their budget constraints in positive ways; and
- ◆ A sense of hope and possibility under girding their behaviors.