

## FTE Calling Congregations Conference 2007

Open Space Discussion:  
The Challenge and Promise of Vocation and the Call to Ministry

### Discussion Summaries

#### Discussion Theme

The characteristics/gifts of congregations who do a good job with encouraging vocational discernment in young people.

#### Summary

The four issues that elicited the most passion or energy were:

- Positive perspectives about ministry and how this is shared with young people
- Generation to generation influences
- Challenge to not profile young people who are considered “ripe” for ministry (especially if they tend to conform to the system)
- Inclusion of young people into every facet of congregational life.

These are the characteristics identified by the group:

- There is a culture of acceptance and interactions among generations.
- There is an expectation (stated or unstated) that there will be people who go into pastoral ministry from the congregation. Members ask young people to think about going into ministry (“Are you the one who is going into ministry? I think you have gifts for ministry.”).
- Presence of healthy role models in the congregation and its ministry staff. Pastors are positive about their work and calling.
- Parents have a healthy and positive attitude about the congregation and the pastor.
- The congregation has an ability to engage young people at every level of the congregation’s life and worship, treating them as *bona fide* members.
- Programs emphasize everyone as a minister: e.g., TIME, Together in Ministry Every Day asks members to spend 90 days thinking and acting on an issue and reporting back quarterly about what their ministry was during this time. AIM, All in Ministry has an expectation that everyone is involved in some form of ministry.
- Church activities are multi-generational, encouraging people in different age groups to interact and share their faith.
- It is helpful to have young men in the congregation with whom younger boys can identify.

- We need to look for those young people who are willing to break out of traditions and envision the future of the church.
- We should pay attention to young people who are introverted as well as extraverted, since introverted children/adults don't easily show what they're thinking or what their gifts are.
- There is a climate that encourages new leadership and is willing to embrace change.
- There is an awareness among members that there are many kinds of ministry and language that reinforces this.
- A culture of generosity supports those going into ministry (i.e., paying tuition for seminary; establishing an endowment for seminary education).

### **Disagreements or Unresolved Questions**

There were no disagreements about any of these ideas. But the group did pose this question:

Is there an inherent, implicit profile of young people that we think have gifts for ministry? Do we winnow out people who are not willing to follow the system or comply with others' expectations (i.e., being good children).

---

### **Discussion Theme**

Traits of young leaders

### **Summary**

The group began with a discussion of age. We pretty much had a broad range in mind having seen leadership traits in children as young as 7 years old and having a notion of "next generation" to include persons within the 21- 45 year bracket.

We felt leadership was a gradual and open ended process and for this reason spoke about the importance of ministers making ministry "attractive" for young persons through mentoring interns in their college years as well as doing mentoring in "layers" where persons receive direct mentoring in specific age-level ministries.

Our group also gave some attention to the vocation of ministry (various and sundry as it is). We noted that leaders very often claim their space and are "searching." Therefore, mentors/pastors need to create a space of openness and acceptance for young persons offering them much opportunity for asking questions and reflecting on their call.

Leaders must be honest with young persons, willing to tackle such issues as women in ministry, inclusiveness, salary and benefits, and self-care.

---

**Discussion Theme**

Obtaining equality and respect for women in ministry for leadership from the pew to the pulpit.

**Summary**

The issue does not get addressed often. We address everything else in the church. Women do not recognize women who are called, other than as youth leaders, choir directors, etc.

The stained glass ceiling is real. Women often times defeat their own vocation, other than working in Christian education or youth ministry.

The trend in mainline churches is a male senior pastor and a female associate. In shared leadership roles (i.e., husband and wife teams) the woman has great potential for getting hurt.

We are the church of Jesus Christ – not the church of Paul. The Apostle Paul is typically quoted in an effort to suppress women. Why do we have such a great reverence for Paul?

When women raise these issues they are labeled as feminists. There are labels for everything. But there is subversive grace within the church.

A challenge for women's leadership in the church is the lack of theological education, which in some case requires endorsement from the congregation.

If you are male, do not allow the church to triangulate you. Men must continue to go against the grain and take risks in encouraging and supporting women.

**Points of Conflict/Disagreement**

Sexuality is more of the problem within the church than anything else.

Male clergy are the ones with a problem with women in leadership, not men in general.

**Unresolved Questions/Issues**

For change to take place, it will take a different approach from what the church began 20 years ago. In addition, pastors must be trained in leading this kind of change and an intentional conversation about this issue will be necessary.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the possibility of having women in ordained leadership appears hopeless. What should the dialogue about women in leadership look like in that sphere?

---

## Discussion Theme

Culture and Counterculture

### Reflection on the Discussion

At one point in time, being “cultured” meant that you could dance well and identify your salad fork. But those days have ended as culture has taken on an immoral and almost sinister persona in churches. The Church claims to be “countercultural” but in what sense of the word?

I recently attended a conference on Vocation & the Vital Church, sponsored by the Fund for Theological Education. While there I had the privilege of facilitating a discussion on a relevant topic of my own choosing. That discussion revolved around the question of how the Church in America ought to be relating to the culture that it is a part of. In other words, how *does* the Church establish an appropriate relationship with its culture? And more to the point, would an *inappropriate* relationship be even better for nurturing the Church in future generations?

As facilitator, I proposed that culture can be separated into two distinct categories: basically, its work and its play. Its work involves habits that place saving, spending, and achieving at the top of our priorities, while television, movies, music, video games, and the Internet fall under the rubric of its play.

The wider Church—in its current incarnation—often scorns the entertainment industry as being too violent, too pornographic, too vulgar, and too all-around “*inappropriate*” for anyone of good moral standing. But on the other hand, it embraces the work ethic of the culture to an unhealthy extent, over-programming clergy and lay people alike in an attempt to keep up with a society of workaholics. And I would take my argument a step further, to insist that the Church of the next millennium needs to stop encouraging an unhealthy work ethic and start encouraging the freedom of play.

This means two things: First, we keep holy the Sabbath and take some regular time off. Second, we start using the entertainment industry to our advantage instead of writing it off as anathema. Many ministers claim that television and video games are distracting people from religion, but the fact is that most young people today, especially those in more liberal & progressive circles, get more theology from the irreverent TV series *South Park* and combat-driven *Matrix* trilogy than they get from the Bible. If the Church doesn’t take that fact seriously, then I suspect it will be in for a rude awakening in the next fifty years as it continues to be unapologetically lampooned by the mainstream media.

Generally speaking, this thesis went over pretty well with the group. One man reminded us all of the importance of *stories* in the Bible and in the Church, and pointed out that new stories—such as the kind we find in movies and television—are replacing the old ones. But more importantly, the fact that movies and television are so popular tells us that people are still enthralled by stories, and that the stories that have nurtured our faith for thousands of years can still be relevant and engaging to younger generations.

One particularly interesting discussion that arose was around the phenomenon of “cool.” Can church be cool? *Should* church be cool? There was some disagreement on this point, and convincing arguments on both sides of the issue. Some insisted that church needs to be cool to stay interesting, while someone else claimed that it offers us “freedom from being cool.” Either

way, the general consensus was that it at least needs to stay relevant. And I can't argue with that.

In the end, this great discussion was compromised only by our inability to decide upon first steps. No one can change a culture overnight, after all, church or otherwise. But while the Church and American culture make strange bedfellows, I'm not convinced that they should get a divorce.

---

## **Discussion Theme**

Congregation-based Ministry Internships

### **Summary**

The discussion group was made up of 9 people who gathered in a lively exchange of ideas, practices and brainstorming. The group that was gathered for the discussion was composed of people who have been in influential leadership capacities which strengthened the discussion.

Following a time of introductions we shared why we were interested in the topic. Seminary administrators, conference representatives, lead pastors, and one seminary intern all shared their hearts and experiences.

We then began a process of laying out different models which were being used around the table. Terry Shue offered the Ministry Exploration Program which they have designed at Kidron Mennonite Church. A person discerned by the lead pastor is invited to work full time (\$8/hour) for three months in a wide range of ministry experiences with all the pastoral staff. The promise made to students is a safe enjoyable time of testing ministry to see if God may be calling them to pastoral ministry. In five years Kidron has called up 11 interns from within the congregation.

George Mason told of his congregation's program for high school youth under the title of "Your Call." The students who choose to be a part of the program commit to it on a semester basis. There are weekly meetings in a variety of ministry venues and monthly meetings with the lead pastor. There are minimal ministry experiences actually participated in and more observations of others doing ministry and then reflection.

George's church also has an internship program similar to the one above, but rather than general ministry, they have a specific focus area and a specific pastor on staff working with them in that area for the whole summer. The size of the church allows them to do this with several interns every summer.

Another model of working with high school youth came from a parachurch organization that gathers interested students, pairs them with their home pastors and then convenes the group for reflection on a regular basis. They provide a large enough group of interns in a local area to learn from each other.

One model was shared by a current seminary student who is doing a year long internship. The congregation is rather small but has a long tradition of having an internship program. They have built it into their culture – welcoming and giving ministerial authority to new intern every year.

She described this as a wonderful and unique gift to her. She is doing a wide range of work with guided reflection and supervision from the lead pastor.

### **Common themes**

- The need to have opportunities for hands on ministry with points of reflection with a mentor.
- The support of the lead pastor was key to the success of the internship as a point of discernment.
- There are a variety of ways a congregation or a conference can offer opportunities for ministry experiences.
- The health of the relationship between the pastoral staff and the congregation as a whole was important to the success of the internship for the student.
- We all agreed that conference and seminaries need to play a more central role in equipping gifted, interested lead pastors in the specialized task of developing and leading internship programs locally.
- There was not a consensus as to why more congregations do not explore ways of creating these opportunities.

### **Discussion Theme**

Strengthening the relationship between congregations and seminaries

#### **Summary**

There is a perceived gap in congregational understanding of how ministers are prepared for their work: i.e., they just show up. Many church members have no idea of graduate education requirements.

Seminaries and churches need to understand their mutual covenantal relationships.

Seminaries must prepare pastors for the “real world” needs of congregants while in school and provide for the pastors’ real needs.

There should be a broader use of outcome-based evaluation of effectiveness of theological education (ATS is taking up this charge).

Money is a barrier to calling good pastors. Failure of the church to pay a living wage is a major problem. Seminarians graduating with huge debts cannot manage finances even if their heart is in rural ministry.

We should recognize that the degree is not an end in itself, but that the real goal of a theological education is both to be educated to become a theologian-in-residence for the congregation but to enjoy and love life as clergy.

What do we think people need from their leaders?

- Self care
- Interpersonal skills
- Salary
- Effectiveness
- Formation focus
- Builders of covenant and community

What are the steps to active two-way listening between church and seminary?

- Money
- More than anecdotal evidence of what the church needs (i.e., systems to manage data and feed it back to both sides, congregation and educational institutions)
- Interim assignment required of faculty
- Alumni in residence at the seminary
- Face time from seminary folks in churches
- More course work on conflict management

### **Unresolved Questions**

How do we make theological education accessible to all, given the residency requirements of our seminaries? What do we make of distance education options that only take a student part of the way to graduation (e.g., only 2 of 3 years can be done online)?

---

### **Discussion Theme**

Creating Sabbath intention and understanding

### **Summary**

All attendees agreed that as a group we are “pro-Sabbath.” However, the conventional wisdom is that being pro-Sabbath is countercultural. In today’s world, busyness and overachieving are expectations and means of proving our self-worth and value to the organizations to which we belong and to those around us.

Busyness is a competition – a false god. Some of the characteristics and traits of busy people (who probably have a hard time of keeping the Sabbath) are:

- Being a people pleaser
- Overachieving
- Perfectionism

Does this describe you?

Sabbath is a foreign word in most people's vocabulary. They don't know what it means and don't understand the concept of keeping the Sabbath. We teach (and value) multi-tasking more than we do contemplative thought.

Ideas on ways to promote the concept of Sabbath:

- Learn what you need for individual self care: spiritual, emotional and physical aspects.
- Say no to things you want to do as well as things you don't want to do – preserve your time.
- Create a model of ministry that embodies for staff and others the idea of Sabbath. Create structures within the church that promote Sabbath.
- Preach Sabbath from the pulpit. As Christians we're called to be apart from the world.
- Don't worship the false god of busyness.
- Learn to have fun. It can be different for each person. Do activities that are disconnected from ministry. Discover what nurtures you and what's fun for you? Is it riding a motorcycle?
- Ask about and listen to each other's highs and lows – joys and concerns. Ask "How is it with you and the Lord?" Nurture one another.
- Set up structures within the church for Sabbath accountability, including accountability for self-care.
- Set aside an hour a day for prayer – sacred, uninterrupted time that others learn to protect for you.
- Have staff members provide one hour of Sabbath time to each other (read poetry, pray together, etc.).
- Set aside a "Stewardship Night," a consistent night each week during which there are no committee meetings, athletic events, etc. held at church.
- Ask yourself "What changes would I make in my way of doing things if I had twice as many people to relate to?" and see if you can make those changes now.

Pearls of wisdom from the group:

- "Keep the Sabbath" is probably the commandment most often broken.
- How do we let Sabbath be liberating to us?
- "It isn't so much that the Jews preserve the Sabbath as it is that the Sabbath preserves the Jews."
- Part of keeping the Sabbath (and doing self care) boils down to being confident in our own value, being confident we're doing the work that God called to do to the best of our abilities; we are a treasured, valued child of God.
- A quote from Hugh Page to effect of: "Solitude is the soil in which we grow our spirit; silence is the temple in which God meets us."

Recommended authors about Sabbath:

- Eugene Peterson
- Hugh Page
- Wendell Berry
- Barbara Brown Taylor

In summary, no one is going to hand us "Sabbath," we have to create it.