

CONGREGATIONS THAT NURTURE FUTURE MINISTERS

Called and sent out

by *Lillian Daniel*

ONE DAY WE woke up and saw that they were everywhere. Looking back, we realized that they had been there all along, growing in the soil under our feet, watered by the same water we drank, preparing to pop up their heads and bask in the sun.

Who were these creatures? Seminarians, and future seminarians—people discerning a call to ordained ministry. Suddenly, at a church with 225 members, we had eight of them, all needing to meet with pastors and deacons to determine their fitness for ministry. Suddenly we were a calling church.

I once heard a story about a church that was well known for producing ministers. What was the church's secret, people wondered. When researchers interviewed staff, pastors and the candidates for ministry, an extraordinary theme emerged: Each ministry candidate (all male in this case) had been approached by the same elderly lady, who told each of them the same thing: "Young man, I think you have the gifts for ministry." Such was the pastoral authority of that lady that the men promptly enrolled in seminary.

So what was going on at the church that produced so many ministers? Someone was asking people to consider the call. That's why it was a calling church.

Sometimes in our attention to the state of seminary education, to the latest classroom texts or to trends in denominational training, we forget to consider that most important pipeline: the local church. If the local church is not producing future ministers, seminaries will have little to work with.

Through saints like that lady, congregations call, rebuke and recall the explorers. They take the time to say, "I think you have the gifts"—or

in some cases, "Don't quit your day job."

Seminaries would do well to give more weight to the call that comes mediated over time through a community of faith than to the call that comes in a momentary mountaintop experience or a midlife crisis.

That view would have sounded like heresy to some of the divinity students I studied with. They had arrived at seminary in order to find God, skipping the local church altogether. Or they had had a private burning-bush experience and sent straight off for the seminary application forms.

They did not pass go, they did not collect \$200 and they did not stop first in a congregation, but went straight into a master-of-divinity program and its accompanying debt load. There some of them encountered church for the first time—or the first time in a long time—by way of an obligatory parish internship.

They often encountered patient congregations that were ready to reclaim their role as calling bodies for interns whose call had thus far been worked out only between themselves and God, via direct two-way walkie-talkie without benefit of ecclesiastical eavesdropping. Faithfully and patiently, these teaching churches taught interns—who may have thought they knew it already—the value of the conference call.

I remember sitting in the back of a sanctuary, reviewing my notes for my very first sermon as an intern. It was to be a mighty word from God that would correct all the hypocrisy, greed and faithlessness of the local church (which was, nonetheless, supporting my education, as it had so many others'). As I prepared to sock it to them, I overheard one woman whisper to her pew mate, "Ah, our new intern is preaching. I see it's time for our annual scolding."

Later, as pastor of a church near a divinity school, I was on the receiving end of a few annual scoldings. More important, I experienced the enormous gift of being in a teaching church. I came to realize that being involved in a teaching church is related to being a calling church.

As to what caused that proliferation of future ministers, I have a few theories. First, churches that are fortunate enough to help train ministers through seminary internship programs have a leg up. They are constantly sending the message to their members that God calls a rich variety of people to the ministry. Rather than present one model of pastoral ministry week after week—or perhaps a few models if the staff is large—churches with a stream of interns in all their quirky eccentricity remind us of the wideness of God’s mercy, and present the delightfully disturbing idea that any one of us could be called to this work.

Second, members of a calling church recognize one another’s gifts in all areas. They have the nerve to point out, and to nurture in one another, that particular set of qualities that may lead someone to seminary. In sales terms, calling churches have the courage and the vocabulary to ask for the business and to close the deal.

Third, calling churches house happy ministers. Is it too simple to say that when we look like we’re having fun, other people want to join in? A minister who obviously enjoys the call, who is treated lovingly by the church and who seems to live a satisfying life, helps create a climate of calling. And conversely, churches in which the minister is not respected, or which tolerate ministers who do not respect themselves and the church, are not likely to produce future leaders—or will produce leaders in their own image. Can a church like that still produce gifted leaders? As surely as good things can come out of Nazareth. But still, churches and ministers who are enjoying ministry have a powerful witness.

The local church is the place where disciples are nurtured, called and sent out. Some of those Christ followers are sent to sojourn in the strange land of seminary, and then into the leadership of churches. When those leaders are asked to reflect upon their theological formation, I hope they recall their first teachers, the ones who, long before any class in practical theology, sat them down and said, “You have the gifts for ministry.” Perhaps it happened on a confirmation retreat at the campfire. Perhaps it happened over coffee, after a long and difficult deacons meeting. Perhaps it happened on the way home from a mission trip. Perhaps it happened after someone read the scripture in church beautifully, or painted the church basement patiently. At some point, someone in the body of Christ called another forward.

Lillian Daniel is senior minister of First Congregational Church (UCC) in Glen Ellyn, Ill.

Copyright 2006 CHRISTIAN CENTURY. Reproduced by permission from the Feb. 21, 2006, issue of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY. Subscriptions: \$49/year from P.O. Box 378, Mt. Morris, IL 61054. 1-800-208-4097