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## The Examined Side: The Role of Congregations in Clergy Transitions

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## **The Examined Side: The Role of Congregations in Clergy Transitions**

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**Abstract:** The transition from theory to practice in the move from seminary to congregational ministry remains a risky leap for clergy despite curricular reforms and addition of context-based learning during professional education. Congregations that serve as teaching environments provide valuable practical ministry training for early-career clergy.

### **Background**

For over 200 years, seminaries have existed for the professional training of clergy in North America. Dissatisfaction has continued for nearly half of that time regarding graduates' readiness for ministry. Nearly a century ago, Matthews (1912) addressed tensions facing theological schools. He advocated practical experience as an integral part of the training and education so students might "lead a church in a changing social order" (Matthews, p. 168). Thirty years later in appreciation of Matthews' work, McGiffert (1942) wrote that the questions raised "helped seminaries to sharpen their focus" as they went about the work of supplying "churches with ministers and teachers adequate to the opportunities before the Christian churches" (p. 398) of that day. However, it was not until 1962 that the Association of Theological Schools approved a new set of accreditation standards that required educational field experience (Eagan, 1987). Called by various names, such as field education, supervised ministry, or contextual education, these programs are designed to bridge the gap between seminary and places of clergy practice, the gap between academic and ministerial perspectives (Foster, Dahill, Golemon, & Tolentino, 2006; Beisswenger, 1996). The interest in having well-prepared professionals ready to serve the practical and ministry demands of congregational ministry sparked curricular reforms, new developments in field education, and additional out-of-classroom learning opportunities to integrate learning and preparation of students (Dreibelbis, & Gortner, 2005; Foster et al., 2006, 2005; Peluso-Verdend & Seymour, 2005). However, dissatisfaction with readiness for ministry remains, not only among students and faculty, but among congregations and contexts that receive these new leaders (Hess, 2008).

### **Congregations as Teaching Environments**

The Transition into Ministry (TiM) initiative, funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. set out to counter the two-centuries-long approach of viewing pastoral preparation as "something that is largely completed upon graduating seminary" (Wind & Wood, 2008, p. 5). TiM offered a bold premise, "the actual performance of ministry in local congregations is how and where pastors finally become pastors" (Wood, 2006, p. 9). The core of this initiative was reshaping the preparation of Protestant clergy by supplementing conventional seminary training with "a focused apprenticeship in a 'community of practice'" (Wind & Wood, p. 5). The programs in this initiative place "the congregation at the center of the learning experience and return practicing clergy to a central teaching role, while making reflective practice rather than academic study the pivotal way of learning pastoral ministry" (Wind & Wood, 2008, p. 16). Congregations are a formative power in the professional development of beginning clergy entering full-time congregational ministry (Wind & Wood, 2008). Interestingly, these teaching congregations

involved in this inductive phase of clergy education are discovering that clergy are not the only ones learning. This process involves reflection upon all aspects of the congregation's life and practice. The beginning clergy, staff and congregation members come to understand "their work and life as one of continuous teaching and learning. In essence, as the congregations work with their new pastors, a new, local ecclesial imagination develops about what the church is and what ministry can be" (Wind & Wood, 2008, p. 36).

### **Planned Research of Teaching Congregations**

A study is planned to identify how teaching congregations are transformed in the process of facilitating the training and development of beginning clergy in this inductive phase. Questions to be asked in the research include: What changes in structure, roles, and organization, if any, occur? What factors facilitate or impede the transformation of the congregation? What learning does the congregation do in the process? How does the congregation learn? Research results are intended to expand the application and use of organizational learning with congregations and to increase the use of this theory with nonprofit organizations. Congregations can gain in understanding of their organizational system through the application of this theoretical framework. The study will provide insight into and understanding of the teaching relationship for congregations engaged in this process and offer incentives and guidance for those interested in becoming teaching congregations. Findings will aid church and denominational leaders who seek to recruit new congregations to engage in this process of clergy education.

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