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Finding Better Ways to Clergy Competence Than Mandatory Continuing Education

David Zersen

If church judicatories are inclined to mandate continuing (read “lifelong”) professional education (MCE or CPE) for clergy, does that imply that there is a wide-spread assumption that clergy are always on the verge of incompetence? It is a new world! My two clergy grandfathers attended many conferences which provided learning experiences for them. They were also avid readers (and writers) of books. No one “required” them to maintain their credentials through continuing education. Within the last three years, however, at least one denominational head and one seminary president have voiced their support for MCE.¹ Research shows that clergy themselves are in favor of MCE.² Encouraged by a developing MCE movement in the professions, a number of denominations now either “expect” or “require” their clergy to participate in continuing education.³ Will all denominations move in this direction – and what does this say about current clergy competence? Perhaps, more importantly, whose incompetence is in question here, that of the judicatory official who merely assumes that clergy do not learn, or the so-called “laggards” who have not cracked a book since seminary days? Also, from a practical standpoint, given the politics of many denominations which do not allow removal of

¹Alvin Barry, unpublished address to LCMS continuing education representatives, 1994; John Johnson, unpublished address to LCMS continuing education representatives, 1994.

²J. P. O’Hara, *Continuing Education Survey* (St. Louis: LCMS Department of Planning and Research, 1990).

³B. LeGrand, “A Change of Heart: Continuing Professional Education Should Be Mandatory,” *Confronting Controversies in Challenging Times: A Call for Action*, 95-103, edited by M. W. Galbraith and B. R. Sisco (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992); W. Behrens, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Art Gafke, United Methodist Church, personal communications, November 13, 1995.

Dr. David Zersen, a 1963 graduate of Concordia Theological Seminary, is President of Concordia University, Austin, Texas.

certification for failure to participate in continuing education, how would the *mandatum* be enforced? Finally, are there alternatives to MCE that address the concern for effective performance but are better suited to the context of the professional church worker?

Changes in Entry Level Ministerial Education

Before issues related to in-service education are addressed, it should be acknowledged that a number of changes are taking place that may question existing definitions of seminary education and, thereby, alter perceptions about what constitutes continuing education. For example, although most religious groups in the United States do not have an internship as part of their seminary education, most Lutheran groups are committed to this experiential learning component and Presbyterians are considering it.⁴ Also, new understandings of how adults learn have emphasized the inevitability of learning in relationship to experience, task, and role across the life span.⁵ This has caused seminary education experts to concede that certain content areas are more appropriately explored once one is already in ministry. Additionally, considering all that a pastor has to learn in order to be a "general practitioner" today the temptation is to extend the term of seminary residency – which is impractical given that the average seminary student, nationwide, is married, working, in the late 30s, and can ill afford to prolong seminary education, or continue the seminary's formal entry-level education into the early years of ministry.⁶

Some denominations have had long experience with this latter prospect, and others are beginning to experiment with it. The United Methodist Church uses the ancient diaconate concept as a staged approach to pastoral ordination.⁷ Seminary graduates continue to learn during their post-seminary diaconate,

⁴Michael Gilligan, Association of Theological schools, personal communication, Friday, January 5, 1996.; Dennis Maher, personal communication November 13, 1995.

⁵G. Darkenwald and S. Merriam, *Adult Education: Foundations of Practice* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 87.

⁶Gilligan, January 5, 1996.

⁷Gafke, November 13, 1995.

receiving ordination as elders only upon successful completion of their diaconate. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has fifty of its sixty-five synods implementing a mandated post-seminary three-year curriculum during which time candidates will continue their preparation for entry-level roles in ministry.⁸ As valuable as such new approaches may be, this article differentiates them from what has come to be called continuing education. The continuing education in the discussion of MCE involves post-entry-level learning, the learning with which a professional is involved at the completion of a prescribed period of study (even a three-year post-seminary mandated study) and which continues throughout one's professional life.

Changes in Society that Require Ongoing Learning

Continuing education for clergy is more important today than ever. In our society, in which changes in technology, mores, social systems, and occupations take place at a dizzying pace, clergy on the one hand tend to remain on the job over the course of a professional lifetime. On the other hand, they are confronted over the years with issues about which their seminary professors knew nothing during those early years of entry-level formation. Today's fifty-year-old graduated from a seminary whose notable scholars did not understand family systems therapy, end of life decision making, narrative preaching, adult learning theory, substance abuse, how to access religious categories on the world wide web or the subtle effects of deconstructionism on the *textus receptus*. Assuming that the pace of change will accelerate, a congregation of astute Christians will quickly know whether their albeit caring pastor is in touch with current knowledge or is hopelessly out-of-date.

For the most part, clergy will pursue competence as the challenges of daily ministry point them toward books, mentors, workshops and certificate programs. A small percentage, however, will be intrigued by a topic because of an intellectual or ministerial challenge and will pursue graduate education. This also is continuing education, although a more formal approach to it. Masters degrees in counseling or administration,

⁸Behrens, November 13, 1995

D. Mins with generic or more specific foci, and even Th.Ds and Ph.Ds in practical or esoteric areas will grow in popularity as graduate-level education becomes more self understood. This is not to imply that this is necessary or even advisable. Education for education's sake may not serve the cause of ministry. It stands to reason, however, that bright clergy will take advantage of opportunities.

The Value of Requiring Continuing Education

Given the accelerating pace of change in our society and the need to provide a competent, effective, joy-filled ministry, it might be assumed that all clergy would participate in some form of continuing education. Why, then, should there be any need to mandate it? It is one thing to encourage, recommend, advise, invite, propose, suggest, invite – but mandate? What concern underlies such a proposal?

The professions in which MCE is accepted involve forms of service to people in which there are physical, economic, and ethical risks. The fields of medicine, accounting, pharmacy, nursing, psychiatry, law and, even real estate, are examples. With time, the professionals in many of these fields have come to take it for granted that continuing education should be required. For example, in the forty-six states that have MCE legislation for certain professions, pharmacists must complete fifteen hours of continuing education annually. Pharmacists understand and accept this requirement.⁹ Why would clergy not accept a similar requirement?

In order to protect the standards of professional groups, training programs, examinations, and re-certification processes, among others, are mandated. When individuals protest that such requirements are impositions on personal freedom, the expected retort is that professionals waive some of their freedom in order to pursue their work.¹⁰ Some research indicates that in every profession there are twenty-five to thirty

⁹LeGrand.

¹⁰K. J. Mattran, "Mandatory Education Increases Professional Competence," in B. W. Kreitlow and Associates, *Examining Controversies in Adult Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981).

percent of “laggards” who do little more than the minimum to remain competent.¹¹ In order to protect the clientele served by such, MCE is assumed to be necessary. Should it not be clear that clergy who have not stayed on top of changes in pastoral practice, law or counseling techniques could misadvise and misdirect their parishioners? Does it not seem reasonable that preachers who do not read widely, ultimately say the same things over and over—and thus cease to provide creative nourishment for spiritually-hungry seekers? Is it not possible that if one’s ethics notes from the seminary are not regularly tested and refined by real-life case studies, the pastor at the hospice bedside or pediatric crib might just exude pure nonsense? For many clergy, judicatory officials, and parishioners, anything less than MCE may seem irresponsible.

MCE May Bring More Problems Than Solutions

Before all religious denominations jump on the MCE bandwagon, however—and my opening remarks suggested that this is a trend, it is well to consider at least four issues: 1) Aspects of the adult as learner that MCE advocates tend not to understand; 2) the inability of MCE to ensure effective performance; 3) the problems associated with ecclesial polity in many Christian denominations; and 4) the exchange of gospel for law which MCE inevitably introduces.

There are two dimensions to the MCE issue involving poor understanding of the adult as learner. One has to do with the importance of independent learning for the adult and the other deals with the importance of recognizing adult learning styles. Research of the last twenty years by people like Allen Tough, Patrick Penland and Stephen Brookfield indicates that adults address major issues in their personal and professional lives with independent learning projects.¹² Tough indicates that adults are typically involved with five and more learning projects annually each of which can consume up to one hundred

¹¹LeGrand.

¹²S. Brookfield, “How Adults Learn,” in *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986).

hours and more.¹³ My own research in recent years has shown that clergy also have extensive involvement in personal projects that seek to address challenges and increase competencies.¹⁴ The research shows that the intellectual turning points in clergy careers result largely from self-directed initiatives imposed because of personally identified learning needs. Such conclusions are very important in the MCE argument. Any discussion about what clergy need to be doing in clergy continuing education must take into account what clergy are already doing—and both judicatory officials and clergy themselves tend not to regard the largely unrecorded independent learning as “learning.” The reasons for this require another article. It is important to note, however, that those who are not attending conferences and workshops need not be branded as “laggards.” It is actually questionable, given the challenges clergy regularly face in daily ministry, whether there are many, apart from the dysfunctional, who pursue no learning at all.

Another important issue with respect to adult learning involves the way in which adults learn most effectively. Those insisting on MCE for clergy are often those who lament the loss of the church’s tradition and who insist that clergy should revisit, via some means of re-indoctrination, data and content regarding everything from the articles of faith to the principles of interpretation. The lecture-style teaching strategies typically employed by these committed incubators show that even though they may be riding a good horse in revisiting and redefining fundamentals, their approach will keep the students in the barn. If one is to ride free as a learner, those responsible for clergy continuing education need to learn more about the roots of continuing education in adult learning theory and the appropriate communication/learning techniques that arise from such theory.¹⁵

¹³A. Tough, “Major Learning Efforts: Recent Research and Future Directions,” *Adult Education* 28 (1978):250-273.

¹⁴D. Zersen, “Independent Learning among Lutheran Clergy,” unpublished dissertation proposal, Columbia University, New York, 1995.

¹⁵Darkenwald.

The second major concern regarding MCE, as mentioned above, questions whether MCE can ensure effective performance when it does not address the areas of individual incompetence and because it creates a punitive environment that stifles personal initiative. The first concern is related to the uniqueness of each pastor. Whether from heredity or educational formation, some clergy are good communicators, some able administrators, some clear thinkers, some compassionate listeners. And each have their counterparts. Which required continuing education programs can cover all these issues? What order of prioritization would be best for most clergy? Would an experiential approach work best? What amount of formation would effect the needed competence? The results of MCE research are very mixed on whether increasing competency actually results from MCE. Studies in 1990 comparing MCE in law and medicine showed that, although MCE requirements have not detracted from the quality of continuing education for these professionals, MCE does not guarantee professional competence because "the overall impact of continuing education cannot be proved conclusively."¹⁶

A second reason why MCE cannot ensure performance relates to the punitive environment created by MCE. If, in fact, most clergy are involved in some form of continuing education, then imposing MCE is like establishing sanctions for activities that are already taking place.¹⁷ Why should the majority of clergy who are already addressing their needs for personal and professional learning in an independent way be expected to comply with some generic standards in order to address a judiciary's concern for a "laggard" minority?

The third major issue concerns problems relating to the polity of most Christian denominations. Most denominational

¹⁶S. J. Frye, "Mandatory Continuing Education for Professional Relicensure: A Comparative Analysis of Its Impact in Law and Medicine," *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* 38 (1990): 16-25.

¹⁷R. G. Brockett, "Do We Really Need Mandatory Continuing Education?" in *Confronting Controversies in Challenging Times: A Call to Action*, 87-93, edited by M. W. Galbraith and B. R. Sisco (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

judicatories have no authority to remove licensing from clergy who do not participate in continuing education.¹⁸ Additionally, some denominations reserve disciplinary intervention of any kind with clergy for the congregation (for example, congregations of the Southern Baptist Convention). What sense does it make to talk about “requiring” or “expecting” twenty-five CEU annually from clergy if there are no means to enforce such standards? Furthermore, when some denominations talk about changing their polity to permit removing a license for failure to demonstrate that a presence was placed in a classroom for the required amount of time, have they not in doing this failed to appreciate the existence of independent learning and the dead-end street of expecting innovative learning to take place in sanctioned environments with angry, resentful occupiers of chairs?

Finally, an issue which should be a matter of concern for evangelical churches, MCE replaces gospel with law as the driving force of personal growth, and thus frees us from growing. An example, for me, became clear as I listened to the President’s address on racial issues in Austin, Texas.¹⁹ When Mr. Clinton set up a straw-man to make his point, the crowd cheered. As if talking to someone in the audience, he said, “If you have children not living with you, you need to pay their child-support money, and, if you don’t, we’re going to catch you!” Wild applause followed. Humans like to hear the law preached to “others.” Even clergy like to hear it said that the “laggards” are going to be made to comply! No more Mr. Nice Guy! Incompetent preaching and misguided counseling will disappear! “You” are going to be expected to improve. When we do not hear the law speaking to us personally, it makes us cheer!

Were the gospel to be heart and center in all of this, we would be hearing more and more encouragement to sense a loving God claim and sustain us, and to experience Jesus, siren-like, summon us to the full-stature spirituality of redeemed sons and

¹⁸Zersen, personal communication with eight spokespersons for U.S. denominations, 1995.

¹⁹Bill Clinton, Address at University of Texas at Austin, October 16, 1995.

daughters of God. It is true that we hold δύναμις (Romans 1:16) in our hands, and that it is dangerous to be flippant or capricious or downright sloppy with the words of life and death—with techniques in the counseling room—with ethics at the beds of the dying. Only the Spirit of God presses us toward greater competence, however, and we, Barnabas-like, with our words of encouragement, dare spare no creative impulse in reminding one another to hear and respond to the love of God claiming us in Jesus, the Christ.

What's This Thing Called "Competence"?

Gospel-affirmed Christ-bearers do not need to do anything to become acceptable to God. We have all we need through faith in the grace which saves us. Day by day, however, we strive to find the ways through which God can use us powerfully to touch hurting people. Practically speaking, denominational judicatories would be more faithful to their evangelical moorings if instead of following the secular professions' headlong commitment to MCE, they would 1) develop new means of sharing the value of excellence in ministry; 2) provide performance evaluations for clergy that both affirm competence as well as provide helpful directions for mutual ministry; and 3) seek grass-roots input from the church on those general qualities most valued among ministers today.

More valuable than insisting that all pastors "put in time" would be to help pastors realize a vision of the possibilities of continuing education: Capture deeper insights in the gospel stories; have some sense of the real conflicts in a marriage relationship; be better at sharing a vision for the congregation's place in the community; communicate to young people what Jesus has done for them; facilitate worship that engages more rather than fewer in reception of God's gifts and a collective response of praise. Making such ideas visual, personal and compelling would be a great challenge—and the result could be a desire for the kind of education that could make it happen.

Of equal importance is the matter of shifting the emphasis from continuing education itself to the outcomes of ministry, a

matter of exchanging the means for the ends.²⁰ The important issue is not participating in learning events, but satisfying parishioners' ministerial needs. Instead of counting required continuing education hours, it would be more helpful to have parishioners do ministerial performance audits annually. While many clergy seem terrified of this—and may suggest that it is theologically inappropriate—such fears are unnecessary. Properly used, the basic function of audits is to affirm the person and the performance—something that happens all too infrequently for clergy. When there are shortcomings—and no pastor is so arrogant as to think there is nothing to be learned—this gentle and focused interview can put the congregational finger on those kinds of growth which would benefit all—clergy and parishioners alike.

Finally, the best way to strengthen the relationship between continuing education and professional competence is to seek ongoing grass roots input from both clergy and laity on the kinds of learning experiences that contribute to mutual ministry. Seminaries and graduate theological institutions may not have all the answers for ministry in the trenches. Annual conferences involving clergy, laity, and some outside experts (change theorists, futurists, sociologists, theologians, community leaders, and business people, among others) might provide invaluable resources for the next year's preaching, Bible classes, community outreach programs, and continuing education for the pastor. In any case, without the MCE albatross hanging over the head, clergy might be freed to explore, together with their parishioners, the real issues—including fresh and innovative avenues with which to address them. My hunch is that, were all to seek a full measure of the Spirit and a generous dose of human creativity, some of the wisest and wildest continuing education experiences might be devised—many of which might not qualify as MCE, and some of which would not be capable of being measured by CEU! But they would fill a stagnant phrase like continuing education with ozone-like possibilities—like the perfume that fills the air after a rainstorm—and learners might find it difficult to contain their appetites.

²⁰Brockett.