

THE QUALITY OF MINISTERIAL CANDIDATES FROM A COUNSELOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Over the past 20 years I have worked with ministerial candidates in a variety of ways. Some 1400 candidates from various denominations--Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, etc.--have counseled at the Center and, in round numbers, I have worked with 1000 of them, anywhere from five to twelve hours each. In addition, our Center provides short-term counseling to seminarians and their families and, over the years, I have counseled with roughly 150 seminarians about a variety of problems. The observations I make in the following paragraphs are based upon these experiences.

A word about the approach that is taken here. I will be making six generalizations in what I have to say. I realize that generalizations are filled with exception, both on individual and group levels. But in using generalizations I am attempting to capture a prevailing direction, a general portrait of the candidates I have seen. You will need to deal with the individual and group exceptions to these generalizations in your own minds.

And I am looking at the spirit of these candidates through a counselor's eyes rather than through a theologian's, sociologist's, or some other set of eyes. There will be references to theological and social statistics in the presentation, but the primary approach will be clinical. And because it is such, it may at times seem somewhat somber. Clinicians tend to look into the dark side so much that we tend to color our presentation with rather gloomy tones.

One last caveat--words about the quality of candidates will be saved until the last few paragraphs. The early part of the presentation will be descriptive of our present candidate scene as I see it.

The first generalization I would make is the obvious one that there is a great variety of candidates these days. They come in all shapes and sizes. There are women, second-career candidates, first-career candidates, minority candidates from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, married-divorced-widowed-single candidates, those in the 20's and those in their 60's, those of different sexual orientations and so forth. Not only do we OQ1 have a monolithic population of young white males, but we may be heading toward the feminist prediction of clergy as a female profession.

For example, the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis reported 161 male students and 169 female students for the Fall of 1990. Likewise, the Lower Susquehanna Synod of the ELCA reported 35 seminarians in 1991, 19 female and 16 males. We were getting used to talking about 30 to 40 percent female candidates. Now some numbers suggest more than 50 percent female.

A part of this variety is the mixing of denominations. Again at Christian Seminary, a Disciples of Christ Institution, the Fall 1990 enrollment figures list 92 Disciples, 70 United Methodist, 22 Episcopalians, 22 Presbyterians, and 18 Roman Catholics. The denominational seminaries are still going strong, of course, but any denominational stratification of seminarians seems well balanced by ample denominational mixing.

There are tremendous implications for the church in all of this variety, to say the least. Some of the better known questions are "Will the parishes be able to utilize such large numbers of women?" "What will happen to pension programs with the large numbers of second-career persons entering ministry?" "Is it worthwhile of the church to invest money to train and ordain persons who will have only five to seven years of work, assuming the can get a call?" "Is the shape of ministry going to be changed drastically in the direction of tent-making forms led primarily by women?" One could go on, but these questions are suggestive of the changes which are ahead of us.

A second major generalization about candidates is that many of them are coming out of traumatic change-filled, and painful backgrounds. Many grew up in broken homes; many have been sexually abused; many have either been addicted or come from families in which addiction was present. Many have been divorced.

This is not an innocent, inexperienced, rose-colored glasses group! It is a group which has seen much of the shadows and dark side of life. It is also a group of which many are adult children of alcoholics, are presently co-dependent, or have been co-dependents in major family situations.

Let me give you an example of one male seminarian with whom I worked. He came from a family in which his parents were divorced and in which almost all of his parents' generation within the family had been divorced. He made a bad marriage himself and during that time participated in radical political groups, was on and off drugs, and had many non-loving sexual involvements. He ultimately divorced, and was converted to the Christian faith. He still struggled, however, at the time of our meeting with such deep needs for affection and love that he was sleeping with and wanted to marry another seminarian. She did not want to get married, however, and he was vacillating between his new religious faith and his desire to be loved.

Another example--a mid-life candidate with whom I counseled recently came from a home in which the father was an alcoholic and the mother was one who made all the major decisions in the family. This only daughter was favored by her mother and looked down upon by her father. This candidate would periodically rescue the mother or the father or both. She gave one example of a time when she had just gotten her learner's permit, and she had to drive both her mother and her father to the hospital. Her drunken father had pushed her mother

through a glass door. She was cut and bleeding and the father also was cut and bleeding. The young woman drove both bleeding parents to the emergency room of the local hospital.

This generation of seminarians, it seems to me, will be heavily composed of rescuers who are driven by co-dependent needs. Coming from dysfunctional families, as so many of them do, and having grown up rescuing within these families, they will be natural rescuers in church settings.

Whether this is good or bad depends upon your point of view. What is reasonable to say, though, is that vigorous assertive leadership for the church in this new generation of clergy will be in shorter supply. Co-dependency carries with it insecurity and uncertainty. These candidates will be counselors and chaplains more than they will be theologians and leaders.

The theology espoused by these candidates is likely to be what George Lindbeck has described as' "neo-evangelicalism" and/or neo-progressivism.'" The emphasis in neo-evangelicalism is that of the growth of the individual coupled with a belief in Jesus Christ. "Jesus is talked about not chiefly as the redeemer from sin both rather 'as the friend who helps find happiness and self-fulfillment. Neo- evangelicalism has a definite appeal to persons hurt deeply in their growing-up period who seek to change their lives away from ugliness and pain toward happiness and fulfillment.

Neo-progressivism appeals to that same psychological need, but is shaped in the form of liberation from cultural captivities of various sorts. A recognition of extensive evil and injustice in one's own early life can find outlet in counter-cultural actions and in a drive to push the church toward inclusiveness, multi-cultural pluralism, and the emancipation of down-trodden groups and individuals.

My guess is that there is going to be a lot more neo-evangelicalism in this generation of seminarians than there is going to be neo-progressivism because the former has less potential for conflict, is more easily tied to conservative biblical literalism, and fits the American dream of individual success and happiness better than neo-progressivism.

Seminaries will have to change (and my guess is have already begun to change) to deal with this type of student. Older, having experienced much of the dark side of life, and tending to be co-dependent, they will look to seminary as a time for personal growth and change. Academic work will be a part of that as they reformulate their intellectual understandings of themselves and the world. But many seminarians will view the seminary as a place of sanctuary rather than as a place for intellectual learnings. The pressure will be upon the seminaries to be places of community, growth and sanctuary where candidates can develop their spirituality and heal their personal wounds. The scholarship emphasis will slowly fade into the background, and seminaries will become places of spiritual formation rather than university-modeled academic centers.

1 George A. Lindbeck, "Lutheranism As Church And Movement: Trends In America Since 1980.- Lutheran Theological Seminary (Gettvsburg Bulletin, Winter. 1991.

These candidates do not have a background in classical education. They do not know classical history or classical languages. To understand classical Christian doctrine without these underpinnings is difficult. It will be easy for them to give in to current theological fads because of this. Neo-evangelicalism and neo-progressivism are current and accessible.

A third generalization: Candidates of today live in a totally confused realm of ethics. They tend either to take an "old fashioned" approach to issues--favored by conservatives--or they give lip service to traditional values but do not hesitate to experiment with a variety of different value possibilities.

In this, of course, they are reflecting the current transition and confusion in our society regarding ethics. No matter what their ethical stance and no matter what their age, many present-day candidates have trouble giving an appropriate rationale for their ethical position and then sticking with it.

The point here is that there does not seem to be any distinction, except for the extremely conservative students, between the ethics of present-day candidates and the ethics of the surrounding culture. They seem to be one and the same. I do not expect that the church of tomorrow will be providing much ethical guidance based upon solid Christian standards during the coming generation because this generation of seminarians is not different from the surrounding culture. The exception to this is those who are impacted by biblical literalism.

A fourth generalization is that academic capability has diminished in the last fifteen Years. On one of our tests, which measures advanced academic English, the difference between candidates and clergy of the last 15 years and clergy who are in their late 50's and older is that the mean is 16 points lower for the new group (1/2 a standard deviation). This means a significant reduction in advanced language skills. New clergy will not be able to write as well, understand the subtleties of their native tongue, or handle concepts imbedded in their native language as well as older clergy. One could expect that theological subtleties and distinctions will not be grasped as quickly and that language will not be as beautiful a tool as it was for former generations of clergy.

In terms of local problem-solving, this present generation of clergy score lower than an older generation, but not to the same extent as the drop in scores regarding the English language. The difference is a mean which is two points lower (or one-third of a standard deviation) between new clergy and old clergy. There will be some less capability in analyzing issues, logical problem-solving, and abstract thinking capability, but not a whole lot.

This present generation of seminarians seems much more life-oriented than academic-oriented. As noted above, they are much more conversant with social and personal problems than with academic brilliance. Even those who score higher on these tests frequently are under-achievers because of personal problems and issues.

We seem to be heading for a time of journeywomen clergy rather than a time of risk-taking and brilliant clergy. Another way of saying this is that the clergy who will fill our pulpits in the coming generation will probably either operate within cultural norms and cultural guidelines or will act negatively toward culture and separate from it. Few clergy will be able to intellectually and creatively rise above culture and lead it in Christian directions or live with a faith understanding of paradoxical tension between faith and culture.

A fifth generalization is that present day seminarians and candidates are stressed financially. I talk with many candidates who will be leaving seminary \$15,000 to \$20,000 in debt. I heard of one single parent recently graduating from seminary \$30,000 in debt. This is frequently an accumulation of undergraduate debt, living expenses, and seminary costs. The average physician graduating from medical school is \$42,000 debt.² But the physicians, of course, will be paying that debt off much more quickly because of their high income levels. The average physician income in 1989 was \$135,000.² In contrast, these new clergy will spend years scrimping and repaying, trying to dig out from the financial hole in which they will find themselves.

But they don't seem to mind! I, as counselor, seem much more horrified by their debt loads than they seem. This is a testimony either to their high faith and trust levels or their naiveté, but for whatever reason they don't seem daunted by it.

Perhaps this is the difference in generations, but from my point of view candidate after candidate seems to be assigning himself or herself to financial shackles for years to come. No doubt, this will increase stress levels in the new class of clergy, reduce mobility, limit risk-taking, and from time to time produce extreme actions

The final generalization is that today's candidates are much more conservative theologically. It is easier today to be a biblical literalist, to take conservative stances on abortion and other social issues, and to generally move away from the liberal positions of older clergy.

For example, many young Presbyterian clergy in parishes in Western Pennsylvania feel that their parishes will be torn apart and they will be placed in a very difficult position if the 1991 General Assembly approves a new statement on human sexuality. They have heard that the statement is radically liberal and almost in a knee-jerk way they are against it--without having even read it. I heard this viewpoint almost unanimously expressed by young Presbyterian clergy in a workshop last month. No one at the workshop raised the issue of justice or openness.

Another example: the Unitarian Universalist newer clergy frequently emphasize spiritual development rather than social ethics. At least that is a growing trend among many with whom I have talked. This would appear to be a more conservative shift within a denomination on the liberal end of the spectrum.

Based upon these six generalizations the issue of candidate quality becomes clearer. Has the quality of candidates diminished? The answer must be "yes" in many ways.

Today's candidates are less academically capable. They are not as theologically or as linguistically able or when they are, are frequently unable to use their potential to full effect.

Today's candidates are much more cautious and conservative. They usually will not provide creative and bold solutions to social problems. They will not develop new directions and take the risks compounding these. They are so financially strapped that where they serve will be determined to a big degree by financial considerations.

Today's candidates will be slowed down by a variety of personal issues stemming from traumatic background incidents and painful personal experiences. They will be much more prone to co-dependency and will probably have come from more dysfunctional family situations. .

On the other hand, there is another side to the story. Today's candidates will be much closer to present-day society than old generations of ministers. They will intuitively understand an addictive society and its issues. They will be wounded healers who understand the wounds *of* the world about them. When their parishioners talk about being in debt, they will Quickly empathize.

And today's candidates will be much closer to the variety *of* social groupings in our culture. Women clergy will mirror the large numbers *of* women in our churches; minority clergy will be able to minister to minorities; second-career clergy will understand the needs of second-career changers; and the like.

And it would appear that there will be many seminary trained persons who -6. mayor may not be ordained, but out in the world living with the world because they cannot find parish positions even though they are seminary graduates. There may ; be considerable impact upon social structures by the presence of these persons. They will tend to be care-givers and nurturers rather than social critics or social innovators. This may be what our society needs at this time in its history.

If Quality is defined as how God is using clergy to fulfill divine purposes, then the Quality may not be going down. It may simply be different to fit a different time with different needs. The Spirit is raising up a new generation *of* clergy which is Quite different from an older generation, but "this new generation may be fulfilling God's purposes just as well as the older generation, although in Quite a different fashion.

²United Press news reports. March. 1991.