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# Flourishing in Complexity: Training the Leaders of Large Congregations

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## Making the case

**L**arge congregations (with worshipping communities of 400 individuals per weekend or more) are instrumental in encouraging, preparing, and calling leaders in the church. Because many of these congregations have correspondingly larger budgets, they are uniquely positioned with the financial means to make significant contributions off-setting the cost of a seminary education, thereby lowering the burden of educational debt for future pastors. At the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (LTSG), for example, in fiscal year 2014–15 sixty of the 183 (just under one-third) of the total Leadership Giving Circle Donors (annual supporting units providing between \$1000 and \$5000/year, which comprises 75.6 percent of the annual income for the general operating fund), were congregations, most of them larger (although not at the 400 worshipping/weekend level). These Giving Circles are key components in the 65 percent increase in general fund giving to LTSG that has occurred in less than three years. Such generosity deeply impacts the fiscal state of theological education.

However, despite the obvious significance of this support, heretofore there has been a notable lack of focus on adequate official training modules for lead pastors of such congregations, the development of which would prepare these clergy to flourish in the congregations to which they have been called. For example, one of the participants in the current program, the Rev. Mike Louia, who serves First Lutheran Church in Ellicott City, Maryland, wrote the following: “Most assuredly this type of learning event/process is something that could not be as effectively coordinated on a congregational, conference, or synodical level. Having the seminary not only organize this program but also having representation from across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has opened my eyes to the similarities and the differences within the ELCA. Learning from others and having a support structure across the ELCA is a helpful by-product of this experience.”

Pastor Louia’s comment was echoed by many other participants, who also expressed appreciation for the skills learned throughout the training program. We posit that as these pastors of large con-

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gregations flourish, so grow the churches, their ministries, and, with intentional and deliberate education, their contributions and commitments to all the ministries of the church—including the training of future leaders through excellent and affordable seminary education.

The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, who will unify on July 1, 2017, with its sister seminary, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, has committed to providing tuition-free education for all entering full-time ELCA residential students in the 2016–17 academic year and beyond. While this has resulted in a positive response from potential ministerial candidates, the capability of sustaining such tuition-free educational options will depend upon financial support from congregations and generous individuals; congregations are best able to offer such support when they are guided by a well-trained and expert leader. Within this article, the process of building, evaluating, and imagining the wider applicability of the “Leading Multi-Staff Ministries: Flourishing in Complexity” training program is described. The goal of this training program is to equip leaders with the fundamental abilities necessary to lead and flourish in just such a faithful and fruitful manner.

## Process—How the training program was developed

### *Grant application*

The Lilly Endowment was interested in receiving applications from seminaries under the title of “Economic Challenges” facing the church. With the strong encouragement of the seminary’s president and dean, as well as faculty members (particularly those who themselves had experience in large congregations), newly hired Vice President of Seminary Advancement, the Rev. Glenn E. Ludwig, began the development of a training program for senior pastors that spoke to the complexities of serving larger congregations. No such intensive and comprehensive program existed in the ELCA.

The “Economic Challenges” Grant Proposal included a subsection titled “Developing and Strengthening Partnerships.” The proposed training program fell under that category and fit all the criteria for it. It was hoped that in serving this portion of the clergy roster that stronger ties to the seminary could be made and maintained with these larger congregations who have more resources to support ministries outside of their walls. An early consideration was the scope of outreach, since ELCA seminaries hold to a commitment outlined in the denomination’s bylaws whereby, when it comes to fundraising, seminaries may approach congregations only in their designated geographical region. With a clear understanding that only those congregations in the seminary’s region would be encouraged to begin or expand seminary support, we wanted to make the program available throughout the entire ELCA. This approach was affirmed by bishops throughout the church, and has proven to be the case in terms of our Giving Circles.

The Lilly Grant was applied for and received. A portion of that the grant was dedicated to supporting a project director who would oversee the program from start to finish. Ludwig was and continues to be that staff member. His appointment to this role by Seminary President Michael Cooper-White was strategic in giving the program broad credibility. Prior to coming to the seminary, Ludwig served for three decades as the senior pastor of large congregations. He is highly regarded among all seminary constituencies, including the faculty, by virtue of having served for six years as chair of the LTSG board prior to his becoming vice president. Whereas in many schools, one might wonder why an academic offering (a non-degree certificate course of study) would be under the direction of a development staff person, at Gettysburg there has been no question that the two co-authors of this article (both of whom also engage in regular or occasional classroom teaching) would lead this program. This mirrors an overall institutional ethos wherein sharp demarcations between “faculty” and “staff” have been diminished and the gifts of all are deployed in the mission of education and formation.

### *Interviews and data gathering*

The first item of business, once the grant was received, was to gather data about what should and could be offered in such a training program. And, what better place to begin than with

current serving senior/lead pastors in the church?

Therefore, the first year of the grant was taken up with interviews of those pastors. Seventy serving pastors were interviewed, with the majority of those interviews being conducted personally, and a small minority through phone or email. All of the interviews were conducted by Ludwig, who had over twenty-seven years of experience as a senior pastor.

The pastors interviewed were informed about the grant and the intent to develop a training program for individuals who serve as senior/lead pastors of larger congregations in the ELCA. Then, they were asked to respond to two questions: 1) What should we include in this training program? and 2) What do you wish you had known when you first became a senior/lead pastor?

### *What the data revealed*

At the end of that first grant year, the data was collated and what emerged were five specific areas for consideration with a sixth “other” category. Those five main areas were: Staffing issues (far and away the number one issue); administration (including governance, management, visioning, decision-making, leadership styles, and size-transition issues); finance and stewardship; systems training; and the role of the pastor as leader. The undefined sixth area included things such as: conflict resolution, managing tensions, faith formation, communication, mentoring, and sharing of best practices.

There were a number of sub-issues under each main category; these were noted for examination. An example would be under the category of staffing issues—the concerns included, but were not limited to the following: building and deploying teams, staff supervision and management, personnel performance reviews, staff conflict, personalities, human resources skills needed, models of staffing, job descriptions, goal setting, and calling and firing. As is evident, all of these concerns relate closely to the overarching category of staffing issues.

### *Appointment and work of an Advisory Task Force*

The next task was to appoint a working task force whose job it was to review the data and to plan a training program. Because the vision for this training program was for this to be a national program, invitations were made to individuals from throughout the church who have either served as senior/lead pastors in the ELCA or are currently serving senior/lead pastors. It was also decided to invite a serving bishop to the task force to give guidance to the process of determining who should be invited to participate in the training program.

The following were invited to be part of this new, exciting, and creative program; they all agreed to serve: Martha Clementson, Co-Senior Pastor, Grace Lutheran, Westminster, Maryland; James Dunlop, Bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA; Rick Foss, Former Bishop and most recently Interim President of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota; Peter Marty, Senior Pastor, St. Paul Lutheran, Davenport, Iowa; Dee Peterson, Lead Pastor,

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Bethlehem Lutheran, St. Cloud, Minnesota; Ron Qualley, retired Senior Pastor, Lord of Life Lutheran, Fairfax and Clifton, Virginia, and parish consultant; Kevin Shively, Lead Pastor, St. Matthew Lutheran, York, Pennsylvania; Angela Zimmann, Site Director and Researcher, Lilly Grant, Gettysburg Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; and, Glenn Ludwig, Project Director, Lilly Grant, Gettysburg Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Over a two-day retreat, these Advisory Task Force members reviewed the data and designed a training program with the following components:

Six topics were chosen for presentations: Pastoral Identity, Staffing, Administration, Communication, Money and Ministry, and Visioning and Planning. It was decided to invite the best possible keynote speakers to address these topics and names were suggested.

The delivery system of these topics was to be three intensives (four days each) over one year. Two topics were to be presented at each intensive.

A shared learning model was to be designed into the intensive schedule so that the participants would be assigned a small group for processing information and sharing learnings. The number and size of what came to be called Cohort Groups was to be determined by the size of the participant pool and demographics of that group. The Advisory Task Force members all agreed to be Cohort Leaders through the first full training program.

Worship and reflection on the Word were to be a part of this experience as well; to that end a chaplain was to be assigned to each of the intensive weeks. We decided to share that responsibility among the task force members, but the person chosen for that intensive would plan all the worship for those four days.

A working title for the training program was settled upon and has stood the test of this first year very well. We chose to call the program: "Leading Multi-Staff Ministries: Flourishing in Complexity."

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Finally, an admissions process was decided upon. It was determined that the best way to seek individuals for this training

program was through the Office of the Bishop of each of the 65 synods of the ELCA. We wanted it to be a nomination process based on knowledge of the potential participant's gifts and talents. In fact, a list of qualities for the program was developed and shared with the nomination information to all bishops. We asked those bishops to nominate individuals in one of two categories: pastors already serving from 0 to 6 years in a new senior/lead pastor role, and pastors who the bishop or the bishop's staff feel have gifts to serve as a senior/lead pastor in the future. In addition to the nominations, we asked each bishop to consider financial support for their nominees both as incentive for individuals to participate and as support for them, because the expectation was that the participants would complete all three intensives in that year.

### ***Results of the nomination process***

With strong publicity and an equally strong advocate in Bishop Dunlop at the ELCA Conference of Bishops, nominations began to be received early in 2015. Our plans were to hold the first intensive in August of 2015 at Gettysburg Seminary, with the second intensive to be in February in Florida, and the third one in August of 2016 in either Chicago or Minneapolis.

Forty-three nominations were received and they each received a letter of invitation to join the training program along with a registration form. A number of bishops indicated that they would help subsidize the cost.

During the spring, thirty participants registered for the program, which was our initial goal for this first time. Since we have begun, four individuals have had to drop out of the program either because of scheduling issues or changes of call.

The participants were assigned to one of three Cohort Groups: 1) those participants who were identified by their bishops as having gifts to serve as senior/lead pastors, 2) those participants who are 0 to 2 years in a senior/lead pastor role, and 3) those participants who are 3 to 6 years in a senior/lead role. As the demographic worked out, the participants were evenly divided among those three Cohort Groups.

Because the Advisory Task Force members have made a strong commitment to this training program, they have agreed to serve as Cohort Leaders during the intensive times. Two leaders were assigned to each Cohort Group with one of those two being a currently serving senior/lead pastor.

The Cohort Group times were initially designed by the Project Director, but since these groups have developed their own identities and styles, the leaders planned the times for the last intensive.

### **What we have learned**

After two of the three intensives, the Advisory Task Force met to evaluate the program thus far and to plan the third intensive. We also wanted to discuss the broader issue of continuance of the program. In this brief section, we will outline the task force assessment of the program and report survey results from participants.

The exhaustive evaluation of our program can be summed up under two headings: positive assessment and needing to change.

On the positive assessment side are the following:

There is a strong overall sense that this program has exceeded our high expectations. We strongly believe that the church needs leaders who are equipped for today's challenges. Leadership training, such as this program, is increasingly important for the health and vitality of congregations.

One of our guiding principles was that there would be quality at all levels of this training program, but especially where it came to keynote speakers. So, we sought the best possible people to address the basic themes of each intensive, and we obtained them. The downside of that is that, because these folks are the top of their respective fields, the cost to contract with most of them was high. But the entire task force firmly believes that the cost was worth every penny spent.

The Cohort shared-learning model was well-received and important to the program. Shared learning along with the processing of information and the chance to discuss implementation ideas back in congregations was extremely important to our participants. What the Cohort Leaders discovered is that these groups developed trust at varying rates during their time together. It is interesting to note that the slowest to develop trust was the group comprised of serving senior/lead pastors who have been in their call 3 to 6 years. Is it that pastors become more protective of themselves over time? Is it that there were so few opportunities in the early years to be with like-situation pastors? We are not sure of the answers, but it is interesting to note, observe, and speculate upon.

The time-frame for the intensives worked for everyone. Four days seemed about right for such an intensive program and the Monday through Thursday schedule allowed people to be back in their parishes for Sunday morning responsibilities.

With participants from all over the United States, it was important to move the location of the intensives around so that travel expenses could be equally distributed among the participants. The other advantage is that, since Lutherans tend to come from cold-weather states, it was nice to be in Florida in early February. The 80 degree weather was a great respite for many.

Although the program is costly to run, the Lilly Grant enabled us to have some flexibility in registration and expense costs. Despite that, it is still a fairly expensive continuing education program, which was an incentive for the task force to make it the best program we could. From all feedback we have received, the costs are deemed worth it for the quality and experience of both the keynote speakers and the staff.

It came as no surprise that the Advisory Task Force members enjoyed the intensives as much as the participants. There has been a clear sense that what we are doing is important for the church.

Worship has been viewed as both important and appreciated. We sought to ground the intensive experience in prayer, worship, word, and sacrament. Each of the chaplains has done an outstanding job, with their own gifts and distinctive styles clearly on display. Many of the participants noted how much they enjoyed not having to lead a meaningful worship experience but simply got to enjoy those reflective, prayerful moments.

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One of the creative features of the intensives was the introduction of SAM Moments (an acronym for "simple and meaning" moments). At the end of two of the plenary sessions, one of the task force members would offer a 5 to 7 minute reflection on a topic related to what was presented. This was a way to have the group begin to reflect on the presentation, but also a way for participants to hear from task force members other than their Cohort Leaders. In many ways, these are intended to model TED Talks, and have been informative, delightful, and enriching.

So, with all the positive things that happened, what needed to be improved and/or changed? As it turns out, there are few elements we see the need to alter significantly, but there was some healthy discussion in our evaluation time of things we wanted to address. Those included:

We discovered we needed to loosen the intensive schedule in successive workshops as friendships developed and participants wanted more free time to further those relationship and just be together. So, we shortened the Cohort Times, allowing for more interpersonal interactions or more personal time to reflect on learnings. The participants have appreciated that move.

During the second intensive, it was evident that Church Administration was too broad a topic to cover in the time allotted. We tried to narrow the topic down before the intensive by having participants do a survey of what they wanted to cover in the session. The results were decidedly unhelpful. No clear consensus was reached. So, moving forward, as we plan the next training session, the task force has chosen to substitute the general topic of Church Administration with Governance Models and Leading Change, believing that discussion of issues related to those will, in more decisive terms, cover the general issues in church administration.

The task force struggled with how to develop accountability between intensive sessions, as well as how to encourage continued interactions among Cohort participants. The task force felt that the participants themselves needed to take some initiative here. As a result, two of the three Cohort Groups have formed closed Facebook groups where questions are shared and discussions have taken place on relevant issues facing the members.

Finally, and this is related to the loosening of the schedule, we learned the value of having a hospitality suite. Participants and leaders needed a place to gather after sessions, a place that fostered relationships and afforded sharing opportunities. Therefore, as



we move forward, we are intentionally setting aside a space at the conference centers to meet this need.

## Future plans

The success and valuable feedback from the first training program have been strong sources of encouragement as we begin to make future plans. Current participants' feedback, offered after each intensive, has helped guide the planning and development of each successive intensive. A more comprehensive, narrative-style evaluation after the last intensive is planned.

The Advisory Task Force met in the spring to do a thorough evaluation of the program. All evaluations of the first two intensives were read and shared.

Then, the big questions were asked: Should we do this again? Has this program served the purpose for which it was intended? Has the church been served by having pastors who have been offered some new perspectives in understanding the complexity inherent in larger congregations? Have the participants gained new insights into their roles as lead/senior pastors? And, have those who attended, both participants and leaders, been enriched, encouraged, and resourced through this program?

The answers to all those questions by the Advisory Task Force was a resounding "Yes!" With no other intensive and intentional program like it in the ELCA, there was unanimous acclamation for the effort and the program. A task force member even made the comment, "This is the most important and fulfilling project in which I've ever been involved." That was high praise from this effective, serving senior pastor.

The obvious next big question to the task force members was: Are you willing to continue to serve if we do this program again? With the exception of one member who had to drop out mid-year due to added pastoral responsibilities, all members indicated their strong willingness to continue.

So, plans are underway for a second training program. In response to the Lilly Endowment's invitation that seminaries submit applications for sustaining grants, a proposal was submitted for assistance in continuing this program and a sustaining grant was received. Publicity pieces are being developed and initial communications with bishops have begun as we seek their nominations for participants for the next training program. With some minor adjustments, the program launched in the fall of 2016, seeking nominations from bishops and early communications with potential participants. The first intensive is scheduled for August of 2017 on the Gettysburg Seminary campus. Because of the positive feedback we have been receiving and the encouragement of bishops to continue to offer the program, we anticipate a larger group of potential participants than the last time. We have added staff to help lead Cohort Groups during the intensives and dedicated staff time to oversee the entire project has been determined. As an interesting aside, we should note add that what is going on in future planning for this program is a microcosm of our work at both Gettysburg and Philadelphia in this time of transformative change. While we cannot make absolute commitments on behalf

of a "new" board, faculty and administration—all of which are still to be chosen—we must sustain institutional momentum and simply assume that many aspects of our mission will be embraced by new leadership. And, in all of our communications with prospective program participants, we must also be transparent about the massive changes afoot.

"But wait—," as they say in infomercials, "there is more." We are looking to actively expand our offerings under the seminary banner of a "Leadership Academy." The last section of this article will reflect on our initial thinking, for which we are eager to receive feedback, encouragement, and/or critique.

## Future plans: continuation and expansion

The planning phase for the next round of training under the banner of "Leadership Academy" for United Lutheran Seminary (the name of the new seminary) is underway and has been met with enthusiastic support. However, the question of how to continue and expand this program is multi-faceted. There are three possibilities for immediate consideration: first, and definitively being enacted, is the continuation and duplication of the current successful program with minor alterations. Second, there have been questions around the possibility of implementing a similar program with a focus on leaders in other settings, including multi-point parishes. Third, the current program is limited to and geared toward lead pastors serving in, or recognized as possessing the potential to serve in, large, complex congregations of the ELCA. When a report on this program was presented at the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers Lilly Conference in March of 2016, it was met with great interest from across the denominational spectrum. Therefore, the question of whether to expand the availability of the program to other denominations has been raised. To that end, would it be preferable to train the leaders of the denomination to implement the program for themselves, tweaked to optimally fit within and address the specific facets of each denomination—or would it be advantageous to offer such a program inter-denominationally?

The challenge to each of these scenarios continues to be the start-up cost. Clearly, it is possible for the programs to build, relatively quickly, into self-sustaining entities: that has been demonstrated in our initial program. Yet, it was the grant from Lilly that allowed the first iteration of the program to take place. Perhaps similar funding would yield similar results in one of the other prospective approaches. As we discern how to move forward, and when, it is instructive to hear the final word as a clarion call from one of our participants, the Rev. Keith Pearson, Senior Pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in New London, Minnesota, in response to the following question: *In your opinion, has participation in the "Leading Multi-Staff Ministries: Flourishing in Complexity" training program enhanced your effectiveness as a pastor?*

"Absolutely. Each lesson has been something I could take back and immediately use at my congregation. My only complaint is that I could have used all of this sooner..."

What are we waiting for?