



Adrift in a Sea of Resources: The Quiet Crisis in Clergy Continuing Education

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On a crisp winter morning in 2009, pastors from across the country gathered in Herndon, Virginia to explore how clergy learn—and don't learn—in the twenty-first century. As it turns out, learning routinely happens in a hodgepodge of fits and starts that sometimes leaves perilous gaps in a pastor's ministry.

One pastor told how he routinely picks the brain of a local synagogue leader because the rabbi is one of the few who actually listens and understands his challenges. Another cited spontaneous interventions from colleagues as the experiences that tend to teach him what he really needs to learn. Several said they're inundated with available resources, from workshops to webinars, but too often find that what's billed as a "best practice" is nothing but a gimmick.

Similar discussions on other days last year helped bring some root causes of clergy frustration into focus. Seminary educators heard how pastors increasingly rebel when presenters try to stick to rigid agendas and dictate what their audiences will learn. Denominational officers lamented how pastors of one denomination rarely come across quality resources engineered for clergy of other denominations, an example of silo-type thinking in organizations. In sum, pastors are taking charge of their ongoing education by becoming self-directed learners, but they receive little if any guidance in how to learn strategically or convert new insights into improved congregational life.

These roundtable discussions marked core components of the Alban Institute's Consultations on Clergy Continuing Education, but the initiative didn't end there. In written reports, participants shared observations from the field and analyses of what's working and what's not. Participants in the consultation considered Alban's experiments with new content delivery systems, such as webinars. Consultants from IBM rounded out the investigation with insights for using technology in innovative ways. By the end, Alban had compiled what is arguably America's best contemporary thinking on the topic and amassed what would be the raw material for new, urgently needed educational paradigms.

The Shifting Landscape of Continuing Education

In enabling clergy to stay current and learn effectively, much is at stake for people across the spectrum of mainline Protestantism. Cash-strapped congregations easily grow leery of continuing education and travel expenses when they don't experience the return on investment they expect. Unless education systems evolve to make learning experiences more productive, frustration will likely haunt clergy, even in an age of abundant information.

The need for new approaches to clergy continuing education stems from a dramatic cultural shift on the American religious landscape. A generation ago, clergy and congregations had relatively clear senses of vocation. Pastors and congregations knew what they were supposed to do because their denominations told them. Formed in seminaries and guided by judicatory bodies, pastors then had a solid sense of what constituted effective ministry in their respective traditions.

Many who were formed in vocational ministry in an earlier time were able to watch established pastors to know what the role meant. Vocational ministry is no longer so clear.

Today, denominational identities matter less than they did a half century ago. Forty-four percent of Americans now say they've switched religious affiliations at least once, up from just fifteen percent in 1955.¹ Both pastors and congregations find they must continually discern what they are called to be and do in a unique place and time. This shift allows for creative interpretations of an ancient calling, but it also opens a gateway to endless angst if pastors and congregations cannot move beyond uneasy uncertainty. Needs for constantly examining vocation and clarifying purpose have quietly become universal. Yet educational systems—by doing little to address these issues—often operate as if such questions were settled long ago. Thus a major shift in American religion has created an

education gap that could become an ominous crevasse for pastors as they try to navigate careers as well as personal spiritual journeys.

What's Working, What's Not

This is not to say the present infrastructure for clergy continuing education is altogether lacking. On the contrary, consultation participants were keen to lift up strengths found in existing systems. Denominations, for instance, do a good job of bringing pastors together for networking, fellowship, and peer exchanges with others in their denomination. Seminaries serve effectively as repositories of theologically grounded wisdom and insight for honing skills in practical areas from preaching to stewardship. Nonprofit educational organizations have developed important specialties, such as Alban's niche in helping congregations and their leaders face their futures. Philanthropic organizations such as the Lilly Endowment finance educational and renewal initiatives that likely wouldn't materialize in the absence of such support. Pastors could surely profit from today's available resources if they had the time, money, and know-how to access what they need.

Participants also observed, however, that systemic obstacles keep many institutions from adapting to address today's clergy learning needs. Because denominations are inherently interested in shoring up group identity, they're not equipped to offer the dynamic, ecumenical mixing among peers that clergy say they crave. Pastors are also guarded in denominational settings, where gossip spreads quickly and peers have power to make or break each others' careers. Seminaries depend on revenue formulas that involve learning from experts; they don't have a business model to support dynamic learning and fluid agendas when clergy peers come together. And while philanthropic groups do crucial work, they primarily function as funders who support others' efforts, not pioneers on the frontlines of new educational delivery systems. These inherent barriers create a situation where independent nonprofits are best suited to meet a new set of needs, but even they will need to adapt to make that happen.²

In analyzing what's missing, participants found that existing paradigms weren't quite sufficient for the tasks at hand. Learning from experts isn't dynamic or interactive enough to satisfy today's self-directed learners. Learning through unstructured peer support groups in a quasi-therapeutic model puts too much stock in emotional supports and overlooks the needs for structure, method, informed guidance, and hard skills.

Brainstorming sessions highlighted the need for a new vision and uncovered a

number of promising projects to inform a new way forward. Pastors listened with interest as they heard how clergy peers rely on structured formats to identify roadblocks in each other's ministries. Leadership in Ministry Workshops, for instance, have since 1992 been bringing pastors together to work in small peer groups twice a year, for three days each time. These church leaders share cases studies that focus on where they're stuck or challenged in their ministries. Evaluation indicates that the small group peer dynamic is the single most formative component of the three-day experience.

Another insight highlighted how laity and staffers have indispensable roles to play in clergy formation. Laypeople seem to be more receptive to a pastor's new ideas when they've had a role in generating them. This principle was on prominent display when an ecumenical group of pastors from twelve central New Hampshire congregations decided to include laity in a two-year series of workshops on worship. Participating churches took changes to heart with such zeal that they embraced new practices in areas from liturgy to music, from performing arts to worship space configuration, and opted to continue meeting for a third year. The program demonstrated how real learning and change can take place when constituencies are involved in all phases of the planning process and given opportunities to interact among strong leaders with diverse approaches and talents.

Guides for the Journey

From these and other examples, it became clear that a new paradigm is in need of more than experts, on the one hand, or unstructured group settings, on the other. Instead pastors might need influences roughly akin to travel guides. Guides help travelers of varying abilities have life-changing experiences that would otherwise be off-limits to them. They bring the curious into jungles, down rushing rivers, through ancient cities. They offer essential instruction for making the journey safely, as well as hermeneutical lenses to help travelers make sense of what they're encountering. Guides introduce travelers to people who would otherwise view such a stranger warily, or coldly, but instead offer a glimpse of their lives. It seems from the consultation that clergy need such influences—wise companions who help those in their care maximize what they receive through mentoring and many other ministry experiences.

Effective guides not only respect those who travel with them, but they also challenge them. They point out danger areas to avoid. They explain signs and symbols on an otherwise confusing cityscape. They listen for what clients crave

and need. They recognize needs may change from one hour to the next, as those heeding their voices constantly build upon new knowledge. Guides nudge those in their care to take reasonable risks in order to achieve well-thought-out goals. They invite clients to reflect on what they've experienced, what it means, and how new insights might shape how they live each day. In this sense, guides cultivate and create access to meaningful opportunities for growth.

Weaving the concept of continuing education as a guided journey into the life of a pastor will involve building on venerable Christian traditions. Spiritual direction, for instance, may inform how clergy learning guides discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in a pastor's life. Apprenticeship, which involves learning alongside a seasoned veteran, could be a useful component for framing how pastors might learn from one another. And mentorship could provide another helpful mental model, especially if legions of newly retired pastors take up the challenge to guide younger pastors in their learning quests. Though none of these models may be sufficient in its own right, each has much to offer the wider Christian community as it figures out how to use guides in effective, faithful ways.

Appropriating the guide motif need not be an overly restrictive process; wise guidance could take many forms. In some cases, it might involve working with a person who is specifically trained to help pastors identify needs, craft learning plans, and measure impacts. This approach need not be expensive to sustain since it could rely largely, if not exclusively, on a trained volunteer corps. Even personalized guidance could be economically sustainable in hard times if the format taps a passion for church service among newly retired clergy with time to share.

Guidance need not be limited to in-person experience. The Disciples Youth Ministry Network (DYMN) has used the lion's share of a \$20,000 grant to create a videoconferencing infrastructure that allows youth ministers to observe and dialogue with mentors in faraway places. In another example, an international pool of students pursues a Master of Divinity degree online through Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. These students are on campus for only a few weeks per year in "residencies," yet they find relationships begun during the residencies provide a lifeline for students as they struggle to balance family, work, and other responsibilities with their classes. These applications of technology illustrate how guidance need not be confined by physical proximity. Clergy could find guides in any number of locales or ministerial settings, especially if some sort of a clearinghouse resource could help them connect with

the guides most suited to their current needs.

Guidance may even include a dimension along the lines of cartography. A reputable organization might, for instance, develop a labeling system to help clergy navigate a labyrinth of ministry resources. This would help busy pastors quickly distinguish which resources truly reflect best practice for their particular situations. Such a guidance system would be roughly akin to such labels as “Good Housekeeping” or “Fair Trade,” both of which help consumers make informed choices without spending hours on research. Labels might even bring value to an online forum, where contributors of blogs and other resources could earn marks of distinction when their offerings warrant some sort of “best in class” notation.

This emerging paradigm, based on a travel guide motif, is beckoning creative responses from across clergy continuing education. Seminaries might ask whether professors and lecturers could embrace part-time roles as educational consultants to self-directed pastors. Denominations, faced with shrinking staff hours in continuing education departments, might consider pooling resources and freeing up more staff time to help clergy identify and find what they need. Philanthropic institutions might explore supplying seed money for this type of “travel guide” venture.

At this point, details remain to be worked out. The future for these new paradigms is marked more by possibilities than known outcomes. But important conversations are underway, and a framework for addressing acute needs is taking shape. With some common ground established, blueprints for the work ahead will be easier to draft.

Notes

1. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” (2008), p. 5. This survey, with a sample size of 35,000, ranks among the most comprehensive surveys of American religious life ever conducted. The 1955 data is from the Gallup Poll.

2. For more information on recent studies, see Robert E. Reber and D. Bruce Roberts, *A Lifelong Call to Learn: Continuing Education for Religious Leaders* (Alban, 2010).

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