



Placement Questions and Answers

Dr. Carl C. Fickenscher II

In this interview, Dr. Carl Fickenscher, Dean of Pastoral Education and Certification at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, discusses the placement process of a candidate into the Office of the Holy Ministry. Because the church's placement and call process is so unique and different from any other process in the secular world, this interview will prove valuable and informative to anyone considering the pastoral ministry as a future vocation.

How does a person know when he is called and ready to serve as a pastor in the LCMS?

There are two ways to answer that. Here is the theological one first. A lot of seminary students will tell me, "I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a pastor." At that stage, the answer always is: "Don't worry about it—right now, you're not called to be a pastor. You don't have a Call. What you have at this point, as a student, is the inclination or feeling that God has probably equipped you to do the things of the pastoral office." And sometimes that feeling will be strong, other times it's weak. A lot of times the feeling that one is ready for this vocation is weaker when a student has been here for a while than when he first comes. None of those feelings is the Call, speaking theologically.

So, what do you have when you are a seminary student? What you have besides that feeling or intuition is a bunch of assignments, like writing the manuscript for your first Homiletics 1 sermon. That's your job during your time at seminary. You're not called to be a pastor. You are in the vocation of seminary student with many classes to take. You do those things God gives you at this time to do. Sometimes you may find you are not academically prepared, or for other family or personal reasons you may decide throughout your time at seminary, "I just don't think I should do the next assignment." And that can be a perfectly fine decision. The huge majority of guys do the assignments which are set before them. So, it's not a question of whether you are ready to be a pastor yet. It's a matter of doing the things God has set you up to do at this stage.

Then a night comes when you hear your name announced as a candidate who is being called to a congregation. And at this time, there is no longer any question whether you are called, because you are no longer listening to the feeling inside you. The Call comes when a congregation says, "we are calling you to be our pastor." What happens when a candidate receives the Call into the Office of the Holy Ministry is magnificent theology, totally in concert with our understanding of the Means of Grace, that is, the Call like the Means of Grace is a gift from God, coming to you completely outside yourself. For instance, with the Means of Grace God says, "You are forgiven." At your Baptism you are given eternal salvation. At Holy Communion, as you become one with Christ's body and blood, you are given heaven. Again, all of this is totally outside

yourself. The Call is the same way: it's not a matter of feeling ready, but the Call finally comes when God the Holy Spirit working through a congregation says, "you're going to be our pastor." And from then on, a pastor never has to ask, "Am I called?" He is called. And he doesn't have to look inside himself at all. He will have struggles and challenges, but in the midst of all of those, he can go back to this fact: this congregation has called him. What a great comfort this is to any faithful pastor!

The other way one knows whether he is ready to serve as a pastor is by the guidance and direction of the people at seminary. There are certain criteria the seminary uses to evaluate how the student is progressing. For instance, an LCMS pastor doesn't have to be a Rhodes Scholar, but he must be a scholar. He doesn't have to be the smartest guy around but one who is willing to study the Scriptures, Confessions, writings of the church and does well. We find it important that he study the original languages, that he pass Greek, Gospels 1, the first Homiletics course and so on. The faculty and staff at Concordia Theological Seminary want to know, "How is he doing academically?" We watch the way the student progresses through his fieldwork and vicarage, where the student is doing pastoral things, preaching and visiting. And moreover, we are aware of the faith life of our students. If a student becomes entangled in some kind of sin that Paul talks about in Titus or 1 Timothy, then we would conclude that the student really is not someone who is appropriate to be in the pastoral office. But, on the whole, most of our students fare exceedingly well at seminary.

What steps are taken to ensure the Call is good for the candidate or congregation?

The relationship between the faculty and the students is a very big element in assuring that we get placements that are good fits. People often remark that one of the most noticeable, pleasant things about CTS–Fort Wayne is the community, the mutual appreciation between students and faculty and the camaraderie. Getting to know the students contributes to placement. What happens in the seminarian's fourth year is a product of the faculty, and my work as a Placement Advisor, in getting to know the students well. As we are reading your first essays in class, we are always getting a feel for you, how you think.

On vicarage, our students get real hands-on experience by getting to see which aspects of the ministry are comfortable and exciting. On vicarage, students get a real feel for themselves. You might conclude that preaching is really something you love doing or visiting shut-ins, etc. Learning that kind of information about a student is helpful in making a good match for placement.

Then during the fourth year there are specific steps that take place. The Placement Interview is the opportunity for candidates for placement and their

wives to discuss geographical preferences, the districts in which they would be most comfortable serving. Also the candidate expresses his preference for certain types of ministry, such as work in the inner city, a dual parish, campus ministry, etc. The candidate also fills out a Self Evaluation Tool (SET) which asks his thoughts on how he would handle certain pastoral situations like weddings for non-members, female acolytes, etc. His answers to those questions help the placement officers match him up with a specific congregation.

Meanwhile, as congregations all over the Synod become vacant, they contact their District President to assess the best way they can be served. In many cases the District President concludes that the congregation would be well served by a new pastor, directly from the seminary. When a congregation makes the decision to request a seminary candidate, they fill out call documents with corresponding materials, list the kinds of ministry they are engaged in, their worship style, etc. Preliminary slotting happens when representatives from each of the seminaries, and five District Presidents who represent the 35 districts, go through the list of all the candidates available from the two seminaries. The weekend before Call service, the Vicarage and Placement Supervisors get together with all the District Presidents to solidify the Calls.

The bottom line is we work really hard to get good fits, but we are not infallible. God is. The Holy Spirit is in charge of the Call process. And I never doubt that. People often ask, “Dr. Fickenscher, you have such a hard job, how do you sleep at night?” I say, I sleep great, because I do not know all the answers. I do know that God is making this work out in the best way. Even if a placement doesn’t seem ideal to the candidate, we know that God was still getting His perfect will done in a way we can’t see. Some calls are more challenging than others, and for those tougher places, God got His will done which included the faithful service of the newly called pastor. We always get great fits in the big picture.

What are some other kinds of calls outside the traditional call into the parish?

Some Calls are not available for the first Call. It is likely the student won’t be called to academic settings, secular universities and so on. The first Calls are largely to parish settings. Sometimes the candidate is called to a dual parish—that is, one pastor, two congregations. Congregations can be rural, inner city or suburban—there are lots of variation. Another type of Call that is really common is a call to be an associate or assistant pastor. Besides those various parish situations are Calls to campus ministry. Another kind of Call would be to teach religion or theology at a Lutheran school. In the past, we have seen calls where students are assigned as church planters to start new congregations. We also have foreign missions: we’ve placed students in Ghana,

Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and so on. There are also Calls into military or medical chaplaincy and Calls to nursing homes. We've had several students who have their duties split between parish ministry and prison chaplaincy. Calls to teach are always real possibilities as well. We've had some students called as Kantor, that is, a pastor with specific music responsibilities within the congregation.

Help us to understand what really goes on at the famous “Call Night.”

I would say that, behind your own baptism (which you probably don't remember), your wedding and the birth and baptism of your kids, Call night is the next most thrilling day of your life. Even after the Calls are finalized by the placement officers and the District Presidents, the locations are kept as guarded secrets. The reason they are kept secret is that they really can change within those last couple days before the Call service. It would be disappointing to hear that you're going to a certain congregation, start to picture that congregation in your mind, and then find out that you're going someplace else. We keep the calls secret so as to avoid disappointment.

But then the secrets are revealed on Call night in Kramer Chapel. We advise families to get there early. The entire seminary community gathers together with all the District Presidents, the President of the Synod, the Vice Presidents of the Synod, special guests, especially the families of all the candidates. There is always a guest preacher, and he is usually one of the District Presidents. After the sermon, all of the candidates line up and the Director of Placement announces the candidate's name, the name of the congregation, the city and state of the congregation and the district of the congregation. When he says all of this, the candidate walks across the front of the chancel and receives the Call documents that describe that congregation. He receives a handshake from the Chairman of the Council of Presidents and a handshake from the President of the seminary. Then all of the candidates stand up and the President of the seminary gives the “charge to the candidates” to do the things Peter writes about in 1 Peter chapter 5, which are, to shepherd the flock over which God has made you an overseer.

At this point, it's a totally thrilling, very exciting and also very humbling moment—because all of a sudden you realize the tough work which lies before you. However, the candidates know that God is going to go with them, He is going to take care of them and He is going to enable them to be faithful shepherds to the people He has entrusted to their care. Call night is an unbelievable night.

What advice do you have for families on Call Night?

Families are definitely encouraged to come to Call night. It is the big event. The service is also always livestreamed via the Internet so families can experience it that way, too.

Students who have been at the seminary for four years have a good feel for what lies before them. They came to the seminary to be pastors of a congregation and not to a particular geographical place. The students are usually pretty tuned in to the varied locations for placement, especially in the last fourth-year process. The wives of our students become pretty well oriented to the idea of placement as well. Sometimes it's harder for the wives because they don't know quite what they are going to as much as the student does. There isn't a job waiting for her. There may be a house, but it's not a house she's ever lived in. It is a new neighborhood. The schools are all different and her daily routine isn't set yet.

It's much tougher in some cases for the extended family to be as tuned into our placement and Call process unless the student's father is a pastor, or if his wife's father is a pastor. The idea that you would leave the place you live, the place you love, where your family is, have the wife give up her career, spend money to move, not know where you are going and not to have control over where you are going is really tough for people to grasp because this is totally different from what happens in the secular world. For the extended family it is really helpful to have the student and his wife talk through the process with them to help them get oriented.

At the Call service, it is very common for the extended family to have either a road atlas or sometimes a portable electronic device in the pew so as soon as their son or son-in-law gets the Call, the family is scoping out the place where they're going.

Does the seminary candidate know the congregation that is calling him ahead of time?

Interviews can take place when a congregation is calling an associate or assistant pastor. Also, for exotic calls like foreign missions and so on, those sorts of situations are always discussed closely with the student beforehand. I wouldn't announce a Call to Alaska if the student didn't know it was coming. We're always sensitive about that.

Also, for a congregation that is calling an associate or assistant, they are permitted to interview. There is a little more inkling after an interview that a congregation might declare a preference for this particular person. At that point, it is very possible that we might give that congregation the candidate they said

they especially liked, and if that's the case, then the student who was in the interview knows it is a possibility.

Other than these situations, there is always some uncertainty even if a congregation has requested a specific candidate. There are various things which sometimes cause a Call to go a different way, so most of the time the candidates don't know, but in certain circumstances they may have an idea.

Do all candidates receive a Call?

Our placement rate continues to be 100%. That means, of course, 100% of those who actually finish the program, seek Calls and are certified as ready and suitable candidates will be placed. All suitable candidates will get Calls. It is true that not every Call gets announced on Call night. When someone doesn't get to receive the thrill of having his name announced at Call night, it is a disappointment. But in the big picture, the service of the ministry is the same whether they get the Call that night or in June or July or afterwards. After 40 or 50 years of ministry, pastors will be able to look back and say what a joy it was to be a pastor all those years. They will conclude that, in the big picture, having to wait a month didn't change a lot. I sometimes say that when I got my MBA, I got some nice job offers, but no one told me that when I would finish my program I would get the job. I knew toward the end of the program that companies would come to SMU, where I was a student, and I would have interviews and have the opportunity to apply for jobs, but there were no promises. You know when you come to seminary you get to be a pastor.

If you want to be a pastor and you believe Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne is the best place to prepare you to be a pastor, then you should come, because you will get to be a pastor. It really is that simple.

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