



Strengthening Leaders

Candidacy partnerships ease the road to ministry

by Marcia Hahn

Pastor Corey Smith knows the anxiety of waiting for an exam result that could abruptly end years of academic graduate study. He also knows the feeling of being supported by a congregation, synod, and seminary as he followed a call to ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

With his PhD in history nearly completed at the University of Iowa, Smith changed course in 2006 to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque. He contacted the Northeastern Iowa Synod to begin the candidacy process, and throughout his five years in seminary Smith received continual support and affirmation that his internal sense of call was leading him in the right direction.



Pastor Corey Smith

“The synod Candidacy Committee called attention to make me think about my call in ways I hadn’t before,” says Smith, who is in his first call at St. John (Maxfield), Denver, and Messiah, Janesville. “It’s not about listing requirements for becoming a pastor. They helped me be better equipped to deal with questions. I could talk about my call in a way that made sense.”

Elayne Werges first met with the synod’s Candidacy Committee in 2002. She had been working as a social worker when she decided to pursue the ELCA’s newly established diaconal ministry. “I always have known that spirituality was a big part of my life since I was little,” Werges says.



Elayne Werges

Werges loved being a social worker for parents and children at risk for abuse and neglect, but she consistently noticed a spiritual component missing from their lives.

“Because I worked in a secular agency, I could not encourage people to explore that part of their lives,” Werges says. “When I learned about diaconal ministry, it seemed like a perfect fit and a way to invite people who lived in the fringes of society to be included in a worship community. Through prayer, time, education, and discernment I have learned that a call to be a diaconal minister is a way to empower and equip others to serve God in and through their vocations.”

Werges’ 10 years of seminary studies included online classes—often one at a time as they became available—and a year away from her family to attend the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pa.

Werges says that her mentors from the Northeastern Iowa Synod were incredible role models who encouraged her through emails, cards and letters that “made her day” when she was in Gettysburg.

“I am grateful for the experience of living in another part of the country. I was constantly challenged to think outside the box and look at things from another perspective at seminary,” says Werges, who is in her first call as a diaconal minister for Bethany, Iowa Falls, and St. Paul, Wellsburg. “I appreciated the committee pointing out the things I could do, and their prayers and support and challenging me, even though it was frustrating at times. They made me think, and I liked that.”

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The Northeastern Iowa Synod Candidacy Committee provides support and mentoring to those who have been called by God to serve in a rostered ministry of the ELCA. In partnership with the candidate, congregation and seminary, the Candidacy Committee walks with students through entrance to the candidacy process to begin theological study, complete clinical pastoral education, receive endorsement for an internship, and achieve approval of readiness to assume a leadership role in the ELCA.

Candidates meet with the committee at least three times during their years of study, and they are invited to an annual retreat. In addition, each candidate is assigned a committee member who serves as a mentor, liaison and support person throughout the candidacy process. "Our role is to make contact with candidates, check in with them, see how things are going, answer any questions, and update everyone at each meeting," says committee member Pastor Melissa Waterman.

The Candidacy Committee helps candidates work through challenges, which can range from time management to spiritual support to finances, an issue that Pastor Darrel Gerrietts says is more common now than ever before. "We keep an eye on debt with them and encourage them to slow down and work awhile if needed," says Gerrietts, who coordinates the Candidacy Committee and serves as assistant to the Bishop. "We never talked about money as much as we do now. Church salaries are just not enough to service the debt."

In partnership with the seminary, the committee may offer advice for balancing homework deadlines, family needs and extracurricular activities. The committee may recommend a candidate to meet with a therapist to address any unresolved issues revealed in the initial psychological evaluation. Many candidates are advised to find a spiritual director while in seminary to help them one-on-one in their spiritual journeys and to articulate their theology. "Everyone, even experienced pastors, can use that kind of help—someone to guide them through their faith

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process and answer theological questions," Waterman says.

The committee encouraged Smith to seek an internship outside his home synod and recommended he learn to better articulate his sense of call to others. Smith credits his internship experience in a new environment with helping him learn to talk more freely about his faith and address any questions or concerns he had.

"Some folks have the belief that the Candidacy Committee is a gatekeeper that can derail a life plan at any moment," Smith says. "They can make decisions, but they are really there to support the candidates through the process

as an ally, rather than an obstacle."

Always in the forefront when evaluating candidates for service is the ELCA's "Visions and Expectations" document for ordained ministers. "We as a committee want to endorse, send and approve good candidates for the good of the church, so there won't be problems that could arise later on," says committee member Jean Rieniets. "If issues aren't addressed in committee, and candidates are approved and allowed to serve a church, it would be a very unhealthy situation for the church and for the individual."

Jenna Couch was in high school when a family friend suggested that she would make a good pastor. That idea always stuck with Couch, and by the time she was a junior religion major at Wartburg College in Waverly, Couch made contact to enter the candidacy process. Now set to graduate from Wartburg Seminary in May, Couch is excited to serve in a first call ministry somewhere in the Northeastern Iowa Synod.

"It's been a long time of school, going to seminary right from college, but it will be worth it," Couch says. "The goal is to figure out what congregation is going to best suit me and where I can best be of service to God and the congregation."

Couch says she appreciated the



Jenna Couch

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support she received from the pastor and congregation from her home church of St. John, Sumner, and the mentoring from the Candidacy Committee members, many whom she already knew through her work as youth director at St. Paul's, Waverly. The annual candidacy retreats brought opportunities to get to know the committee members better, interact with the Bishop, and learn new topics and perspectives from a

variety of speakers.

"It's been a great process," Couch says. "The congregation and committee help you get to know yourself and grow into the person God has created you to be."

Committee members encourage all the candidates to build on their gifts and experiences to meet the needs of the church now and into the future.

"The candidates bring experiences that are rich," Rieniets says. "Sometimes after interviews we are kind of floored by what some people have already done because they come from so many backgrounds and experiences. It's a privilege to be there and listen to their stories."