

**A Tale of Two Models:
Discerning Gifts for Ordained Ministry**

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A TALE OF TWO MODELS

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As the church enters the dawn of a new century, the bond of trust and respect between parish pastors and their denominational leaders is more critical than ever. Much is often riding on that bond, including the pastor's survival when there is conflict in the parish. It is also more apparent than ever that the relevance of the denominational leader's work is in many ways dependent on that bond, which begins prior to each pastor's ordination and continues throughout his or her ministry in the church.

In this article our attention is on the candidacy process, and in particular the assessment aspect of that process. Many denominations require their candidates for ordained ministry to participate in assessment, and many of those that do not are now wisely moving in that direction. Currently, about 50% of our work at Midwest is candidate assessment. For the individual, the assessment is likely to be the first real *confrontational* experience in candidacy. It may be the first time the candidate confronts specific shortcomings or issues to address in order to prepare for the challenges ahead. It may also be the first confrontation with the knowledge of certain gifts and potential. The way in which denominations provide that assessment does a great deal to make or break the bond that is so important. It is true that some who present themselves as prospective candidates will be unlikely ever to trust "the structure," no matter what they experience in assessment, just as there will be others whose trust and respect will be strong no matter what. But for the majority, whose experience with authorities up to this point in life has been

mixed, and whose inner sense of authority is both fragile and strong, how they are treated in this important assessment process will shape the way the bond between pastor and denomination develops.

In deciding how they can best approach assessment, denominations have a fundamental choice between two models: the *expert* model and the *developmental* model. At Midwest, from the beginning (along with all of the centers in the Ministry Development network), we have espoused and attempted to follow the developmental model.

What are the main differences between these two models? In the *expert* model, the one being assessed is expected to be passive. The instruments, in the form of standardized tests, do the work. There is little, if any, listening to the candidate. "Expert" refers to the interpreter of the tests who, presumably, has mastered knowing what the tests measure. There is a vast difference, though, in being an expert on the tests and knowing the individual.

In the *developmental* model, the aim is to get to know the person. This is done through a great deal of listening. Many of the same instruments will be used in both models, but in the developmental model it is acknowledged to the candidate that no inventory can do more than make hypotheses about who the person is. The assessment takes shape as counselor and candidate share their thoughts about the information in front of them.

An important goal of the developmental model, and one that is not possible in the expert model, is providing or strengthening a certain set of awarenesses and capabilities that the individual will carry throughout ministry. In short, they amount to “taking responsibility for oneself.” By design, this is not only the desired outcome of the developmental model; it is the nature of the process itself!

The propensity consistently to take responsibility for one’s self is one of those qualities that cannot be measured by any instrument, and thus cannot be picked up by the expert model. The importance of that quality for ministry is repeatedly demonstrated to us at the Center.

Effectiveness in all aspects of ministry depends heavily on (1) whether or not one blames the bishop/church council/spouse when things are going wrong; (2) whether or not one takes responsibility for planning and carrying out continuing professional growth; and (3) whether or not one takes clear responsibility for self-care.

The developmental program encourages and relies on the active involvement of the candidate. For example, candidates in our programs are asked to consider and describe, or sometimes role-play, how they would deal with some challenging situations in ministry. It is possible then to observe how they utilize vision, creativity, leadership, and sensitivity to both others and self. Often even more significant is the opportunity they have to reflect on their own performance in these situations.

The developmental approach is one that is dynamic in the sense that it continues to grow, changing to reflect the evolving experience of the church. Recently, our

counseling staff met together in Chicago in a very rich session to review and expand our work with simulations of situations in ministry and role-play. We are more convinced than ever of the value of this “technology” in candidate assessment, and also of there being a vast frontier yet to be explored. The benefits, for example, in terms of being able to provide more sensitive and helpful assessments in relation to ministry in particular cultural and ethnic settings seems especially promising.

To get back to our main point, the two models invite very different responses, or ways of relating to what is going on in the assessment. In addition to the invitation to passivity in the one, as opposed to active involvement prompted by the other, one calls for an adversarial stance and the other for mutual cooperation. It is this attitudinal split in the road that very easily carries over into the candidate’s way of relating to “the structure.” If the way of relating becomes adversarial, that stuckness, as we unfortunately witness far too often, can last for decades.

Why does the expert model generate an adversarial stance? Consider the candidate’s point of view. “If the ‘expert’ believes that he or she can condense my essential qualities into a series of choices between A and B or True and False, and then ferret out whether I am suited to ministry, I will experience a lack of respect. I will sense an interest in numbers and categories, but not in me, my ideas and dreams, my gifts. If this information could be used to block me from my calling, then I am in an adversarial situation with no power except that of ‘second-guessing’ the questions. It only makes sense, as I’m asked to reveal myself, to exaggerate the

good stuff and withhold the bad.”

We find that most candidates arrive expecting the expert model. At the very least, time is lost as we do the work of attempting to help the candidate understand the nature of the assessment framework that is being provided, and at the same time develop the rapport that the developmental model offers. Committees on preparation for ministry could be of great help in this regard, first of all, by becoming as familiar as possible with the developmental model as it is practiced in the Centers, and then by communicating that understanding to candidates prior to their assessment programs. At worst, the expectation of an expert model never goes away during an assessment, and that often portends difficulty for the individual in ministry. However, when the light does dawn and the realization that “we are working together, and there is something valuable for me to gain for myself,” a spirit and bond of cooperativeness occurs that is promising of a good working relationship in the future with those denominational leaders who are there to give support.

As limited and flawed as it is, the expert model continues to be used in some quarters. Its primary advantage is economic; it costs less. It also is expedient for denominational groups wanting to wash their hands of assessment and turn it completely over to “experts.” Hopefully, it will become clear that expediency of this nature is not healthy for the church.

Our commitment to the developmental model is an essential part of who we are as an organization. Beyond that, we also believe that it *is* a healthy model for the church. It may be a bit much to claim that, from the candidate’s point of view, our

Tale of Two Models is about the best of times and the worst of times. But, considering what is at stake, maybe it’s not an exaggeration after all.

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