

Behavioral Interviewing and the Call Process:  
A Positive Interface for the Church  
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*This article first appeared in the January 27, 2006, Mission Moments newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org). For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.*

A congregation is looking to fill a new ministry position. Desiring to take seriously the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s *Ablaze!* emphasis, they have identified evangelism skills as being of the highest importance in this position. They receive the names of five pastors for their call process, and each is described as an evangelist. So how does the congregation determine the candidate that best fits the ministry role? Should they ask whether the worker talks about evangelism? Does he read books on evangelism? Has he attended evangelism training events? Or should they ask some different questions: How many adults have been baptized or confirmed during his leadership in the congregation he serves currently? Has he trained congregational leaders to be effective witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Preaching about evangelism, reading evangelism books, and attending evangelism training events may indicate that someone is interested in evangelism. But training effective witnesses and significant increases of adults baptized or confirmed will be much stronger indicators of the evangelist the congregation is seeking. What an individual has done in the past is a strong predictor of how the person will serve in a new situation.

Congregations in a call process often ask “what if” questions: what would you do if this happened? They wish to understand how a professional church worker will match the perceived ministry needs of the congregation. Score high marks for the congregation’s good intentions. But they may be in for a surprise when the worker does not act in concert with the “what if” conversation. But if the congregation had asked another type of question, the surprise factor would be reduced. Questions like “What did you do when . . .” and “Describe how you typically do . . .” will be better indicators, especially if the candidate is able to give multiple examples.

This second way of finding out more about ministry candidates is called behavioral interviewing or performance interviewing. This well-researched theory holds that past performance is a strong indicator of future performance. Many district mission leaders have received training in this interview process over the past decade or so. The Center for U.S. Missions has added staff both to do this kind of interviewing for congregations and districts and to train congregational leaders in the process.

Two very important questions are likely emerging as you read this. What about the work of the Holy Spirit in the continuing growth of a child of God? And how does our understanding of the “divine call” connect with this interview process?

Obviously, simply because an individual performed one way in a specific situation in the past, we cannot say that there is no possibility for change to take place in the future. Our sinful habits can and will change because of the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts. New birth and transformed lives are the Spirit's surprising gifts to God's people each day. So behavioral interviewing cannot state with certainty that "this" is always the way the candidate will be. But it does help us identify previous experiences and tendencies. Often times, under stress, we revert back to the familiar ways we have done things before.

The second question requires a more detailed response. The 1989 LCMS convention adopted Resolution 6-14, "Scriptural Standards and Ecclesiastical Expectations for Servants in the Office of Public Ministry," written by the Standing Committee for Pastoral Ministry. Included are statements delineating what the Scripture teaches about the "Standards." Building on Holy Baptism as the one quintessential qualification, the *sine qua non*, the document states that "all other standards...fall into the realm of talents ("First Article Gifts") or progress in the (Third Article) process of sanctification (p.5)."

A few pages later the document states:

Scripture mentions further specific states, talents (capabilities, *dynameis*) and aptitudes (dispositions, *hexis*) as needed qualities in one who is to be set aside into the office of public ministry. (It is highly *desirable* that a candidate clearly possess as much of these as possible. In any group of persons, the degrees available and the combinations present will vary; the testimony of the total person is what is important.) (Pages 6-7)

This immediately leads to consideration of "various states and talents," "First Article gifts, given in creation" (p.7). Included in the list that follows are ii) relatively good physical health; and iii) "apt to teach," referencing I Tim.3:2. Apt to teach is further defined as having "sufficient mental capacity to comprehend the content of the doctrine of Scripture" and "the personal abilities and skills in interpersonal relationships as to be able to communicate the Gospel and the doctrine of the Scriptures." This article contends that asking behavioral questions about teaching experiences is a way to ascertain this talent or first article gift. One might query: Describe typical ways you instruct junior high students in Christian doctrine. Or, tell me how you train and support lay teachers in the congregation.

The next paragraph of the 1989 document notes:

Scripture also sets down noteworthy progress in sanctification as a desirable qualification. (This again involves a person in "measurement" of "degrees." Given the choice of available candidates, one who is advanced in sanctification, further out on the spectrum towards holiness of living is to be desired. In other words: the candidate needs to be noticeably *out of* the grey area in the middle of the spectrum, so as to be a model of sanctified virtue.) (Page 8)

Put another way, First and Third Article gifts--creation and sanctification gifts--need careful consideration in a call process. The people of God are gifted people. A review of the New Testament discussion of gifts helps us to see that gifts may not be the same for

the individual members of the Body of Christ. But these various gifts in the people of God are brought together in the church to accomplish the purposes of God. Gifted people, then, are not simply interchangeable parts. One may be more gifted in one area than another. The challenge to a calling congregation is to identify the candidate with the gift mix, both creation and sanctification categories, to serve in the particular situation. There is no such person as a generic church worker who is able to do ministry in any and every place.

Some gifts (creation gifts, aptitudes and abilities) are built into an individual at birth: a fast runner, a good singing voice, a facility with numbers. Patterns develop over time: some are more introverted while others are more extroverted. Some are energized in groups of people while others find renewal in quiet places. Other gifts are the Third Article “enlightened” variety. Oftentimes these are called spiritual gifts. But the point is that both creation gifts and spiritual gifts come together in the individual and in the Body of Christ where the Church seeks to accomplish the purposes of God.

So then, this article comes full circle back to the question of the relationship of the divine call to the process of behavioral interviewing. (This writer could never find a definition of “the divine call” even though the term could be traced back to the 30’s. Recent LCMS publications make reference to the call of God to an individual in Holy Baptism and the call to a ministry in congregations.) When a professional church worker receives a call from a congregation, it is customary to state that the worker now has two calls: one from the current congregation and one from the calling congregation. Prayer and discernment are required to sort out where God is calling the professional church worker to serve. Do I have the talents, gifts and desire to serve in this new place? Is this the call of God to me? Sometimes the worker says No to a congregation that is convinced that it is extending a call from God to the worker. So also the congregation in a calling process is involved in a process of prayer and discernment. Which candidate best fits the position description we have established? How do his previous ministry experiences predict how he will function in our midst?

In a process fraught with the stains of human frailty, the church of God and its professional church workers seek to be about God’s mission in these times. Behavioral interviewing is a tool that can assist the process of bringing the congregation and the worker together. ■

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