

In early May, I attended a three-day “Pulpit & Pew Forum on Excellence in Ministry.” Through plenary and panel presentations, informal and small group discussions, and worship the 200 diverse Protestant and Roman Catholic participants who are parish clergy, judicatory heads, denominational executives, and theological faculty and administrators focused exclusively on parish ministry and leadership for local communities of faith.

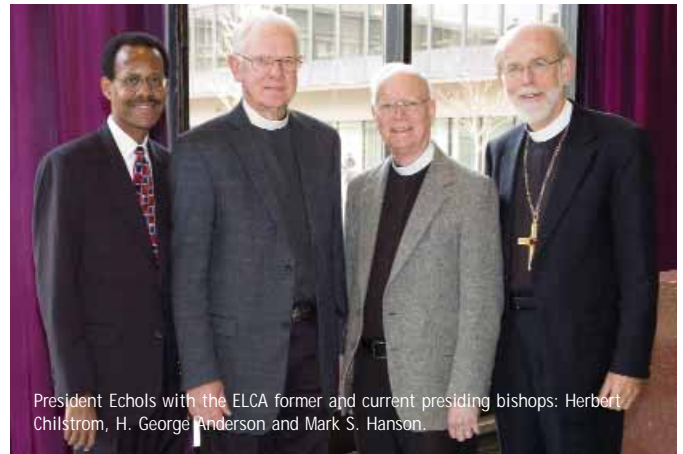
Parish ministry is foundational in the life of the church and occupies a unique place. It is in congregations that God’s people regularly gather to hear the Word and receive the Sacrament, to be nurtured in the faith from the cradle to the grave, to discern God’s will and ways, to be sent forth to be Christ’s salt and light in the world.

Participants read two recently published books on pastoral ministry that sparked lively conversation and debate. In *Resurrecting Excellence*, L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong explore the definition and meaning of excellence in pastoral ministry as a means of eschewing pastoral mediocrity. All agreed that pastoral excellence is grounded in a deeply theological perspective and commitment to pattern one’s ministry in accord with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this regard, Lutherans would point to the theology of the Cross as central to an understanding of and engagement in parish ministry. And all agreed that theological education is a key resource in developing and promoting excellence.

There was less agreement, however, about how the church “measures” excellence in pastoral ministry. To what extent should assessments be more qualitative than quantitative? And notwithstanding variations in contextual challenges, to what degree should conclusions be drawn more on the basis of outcomes versus inputs? Or, is it finally the case that excellence in parish ministry lies in the eyes of the beholders?

Jackson W. Carroll’s book, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*, provides a wealth of descriptive information on parish clergy in order to assess the “state of satisfaction” of parish clergy in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. Comparing congregations to clay jars, Carroll suggests that parish clergy are potters who, through their ministries, help to shape the life and ministries of their congregations. His research, based upon interviews of clergy from 81 denominations, uncovered the following issues that have adverse implications for satisfaction in ministry:

- Inadequate compensation, at least for many clergy in small and mid-sized congregations;
- Congregational conflict and criticism that is allowed to fester and remain unresolved;
- Stress from congregational challenges and demands, especially as they prevent pastors from spending quality



President Echols with the ELCA former and current presiding bishops: Herbert Chilstrom, H. George Anderson and Mark S. Hanson.

time with family or finding adequate time for recreation, reflection, and renewal;

- Pastoral role issues, especially the difficulty of maintaining a private life apart from one’s role as pastor, as well as being treated differently because one is a pastor; and
- The experience of loneliness and isolation.

While Jackson is primarily descriptive in his analysis, the book offers several prescriptions that, if pursued, will contribute to both satisfaction and excellence in ministry. They are:

- Developing regular spiritual disciplines;
- Developing a pastoral imagination through ongoing habits of reflection on their practice;
- Being lifelong learners who pay special attention to the kind of learning needed for the particular stage they are facing;
- Nurturing “holy” friendships both within and outside the congregation;
- Maintaining appropriate, though not rigid, boundaries between their personal and family life and their work; and
- Being diligent in self-care concerning their physical and emotional health.

The assumption of these authors as well as the consensus of the forum participants is that congregations need excellent pastoral leadership, recognizing that such leadership helps to cultivate excellent ministry in local communities of faith.

If parish pastors are called to be God’s potters in congregations, then LSTC is called to be God’s potter in preparing women and men for excellent ministry, forming them in ways that will, over time, evoke deep satisfaction in their service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and God’s people. In this holy endeavor that is the seminary’s holy work, I invite and continue to give thanks for your partnership.

Blessings and Best Wishes,

James Kenneth Echols, President