

Subjective Differences in Preparation Between TEEM and MDiv Pastors in the ELCA

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## **Data and Methods**

To provide a more complete and balanced look at the success of TEEM graduates and address the limitations of past approaches to studying the TEEM program (ELCA 2005; Porter 2016), the author conducted a mail-based survey of all locatable TEEM participants who were ordained by 2005 regarding their experience in the TEEM program and the preparation they received for congregational ministry. The survey was largely identical to a survey administered by the ELCA to a cohort of newly rostered and ordained ELCA leaders in 2002 (Sims 2003). Limited modifications were made as necessary based on differences in focus and target population.<sup>1</sup>

Both surveys were sent by mail to each eligible person in the sampling frame, active pastors and rostered lay leaders in their first three years of public ministry for the ELCA first call survey and known TEEM graduates for the TEEM survey. Complete responses were received from 618 of the 824 questionnaires sent out for the first call survey, a response rate of 75 percent (Sims 2003). The TEEM survey yielded a lower response rate of 44 percent (52 out of 119). Bias checks for demographic and call characteristics show the sample to be generally representative of TEEM graduates. Descriptive characteristics for the TEEM data are used to establish the strengths, weaknesses, and character of the TEEM program. Results from the TEEM survey are subsequently compared to responses for identical questions on the ELCA First Call Survey (Sims 2003) to consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of the TEEM program in comparison with the traditional MDiv preparation.

## **Descriptive Statistics**

The period of ordinations being studied ranges from 1977 to 2005, with a mean of about 2000. Most respondents were ordained through the TEEM program, but some of the earlier ordinations were through predecessor programs such as the alternate route (ARTOS) program. 37% of respondents were female and nearly half were Caucasian. The remaining half was split between Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asian Americans, with a scattering of other races and ethnicities. The racial makeup of the sample is consistent with administrative statistics (Porter 2016), while female TEEM graduates are slightly underrepresented in the survey. The racial makeup is far more diverse than clergy ordained in the ELCA as a whole, 94.2% of whom identify as white (Porter 2016).

The age at ordination of the respondents reflects the goals of the program, ranging from 29 to 68, with a mean of 51.5 (ELCA mean age at ordination is 38.0 years). At the time of the survey, ages ranged from 35 to 73, and only one of the respondents was retired from ordained ministry. TEEM participants on the whole also are more

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive summary of findings can be acquired by emailing the author. The complete text of the TEEM survey can be found associated with this file at <http://nathanieldporter.com/wp/research/>.

likely to be from very urban or very rural areas and much less likely to have been born and raised Lutheran (as measured by whether they were baptized in the Lutheran church as an infant). The distribution of previous careers for survey respondents largely mirrors the findings of the ELCA First Call survey (Sims 2003) and other research in being quite diverse overall but concentrated in the business, education, and nonprofit sectors. The wide range of personal characteristics encompassed by the respondents reflects the variety of situations and backgrounds TEEM participants are drawn from.

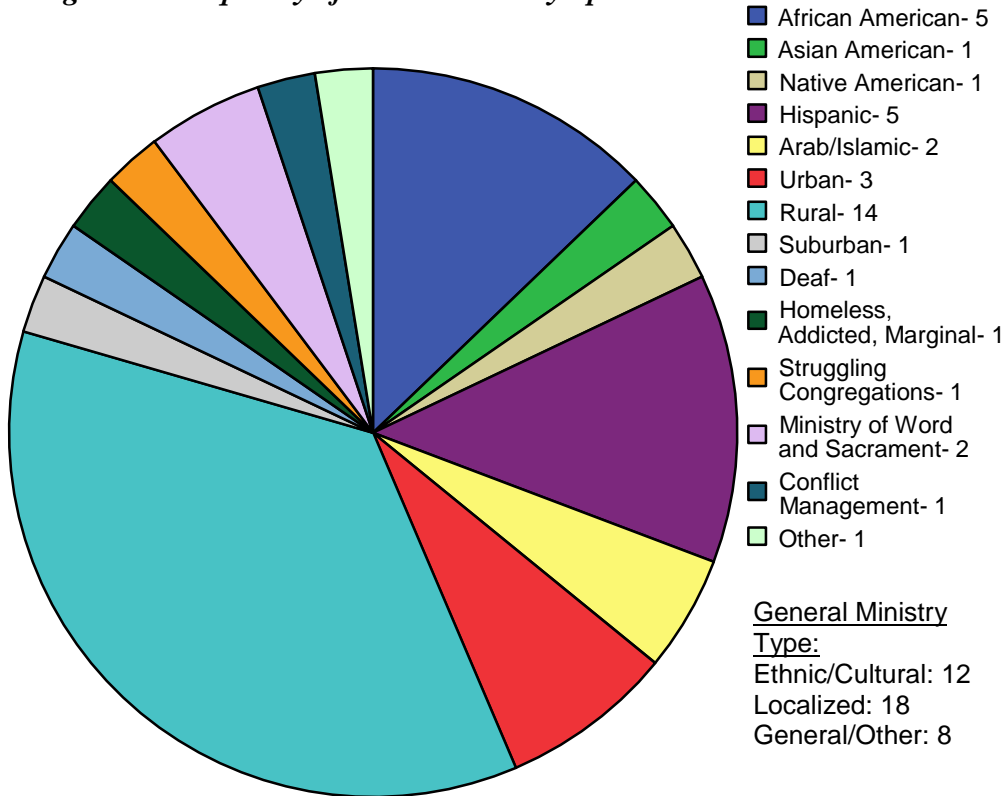
Figure 1 (next page) details the type of specialized ministry entered by TEEM survey respondents. In general, graduates are split between three major types of ministry, racial/ethnic/cultural ministry, localized ministry such as inner-city or remote rural ministries, and general ministries. The third category includes people who were acting as synodically authorized pastors or officers (i.e. assistant to the bishop) without having been ordained and were encouraged to obtain ordination through the TEEM program while continuing their ministries. Also in this category are specialists in conflict management, congregational revitalization, and social justice related ministries.

## **Results**

In order to assess relative strengths and weaknesses of the TEEM program, TEEM survey responses were compared to First Call Survey responses using a T-test of the difference in means. Microdata for the First Call Survey were not available to the researcher; means for MDiv were drawn from those given in the published summary (Sims 2003).

All significant differences are summarized in Table 1 (following Figure 1). A large number of significant differences emerged, and some basic patterns can be ascertained.

**Figure 1: Frequency of TEEM Ministry Specialties**



Note: Counts do not total to 52 due to respondents who failed to answer the question.

**Table 1: Significant differences between TEEM and MDiv pastors**

| <b>Question</b>  | <b>Mean(TEEM)</b> | <b>Mean(MDiv)</b> | <b>Difference</b> |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. How prepared were you to... (5=very well, 1 = not at all)   |                   |                   |                   |
| b. visit prospective members   | 3.67              | 3.29              | .375*             |
| c. preach  | 4.53              | 4.31              | .223*             |
| d. work with congregational leaders  | 3.86              | 3.58              | .285*             |
| h. manage a church office  | 3.59              | 3.02              | .572***           |
| i. do pastoral counseling  | 3.96              | 3.52              | .442**            |
| j. give support to committees  | 3.75              | 3.49              | .257*             |
| k. plan a church budget  | 3.10              | 2.37              | .730***           |
| o. work with ecumenical partners   | 3.82              | 3.54              | .288+             |
| p. address community social/ethical issues   | 3.68              | 3.22              | .461***           |
| q. provide a ministry of healing   | 3.88              | 3.48              | .391**            |
| r. provide spiritual guidance to members   | 3.94              | 3.63              | .315*             |
| s. plan stewardship programs   | 2.90              | 2.50              | .404*             |
| v. teach youth   | 3.47              | 3.79              | -.320*            |
| <i>Overall mean</i>  | 3.77              | 3.57              | .204*             |
| 3. How needed is... by the church and how well are you prepared to address it? (5=high, 1=low)       |                   |                   |                   |
| c. reaching out to unchurched persons  |                   |                   |                   |
| level of preparedness...   | 3.38              | 2.86              | .511***           |
| d. helping members with tough moral issues   |                   |                   |                   |
| level of need...   | 4.37              | 3.95              | .417***           |
| f. involving congregations in community issues of justice  |                   |                   |                   |
| level of preparedness...   | 3.44              | 3.13              | .305*             |
| i. being a teaching theologian in your congregation  |                   |                   |                   |
| level of preparedness...   | 3.61              | 3.87              | -.254+            |
| 4. How difficult were each of the following for you? (5=very difficult, 1=not at all difficult)      |                   |                   |                   |
| a. planning worship/programs   | 2.35              | 2.02              | .331+             |
| e. discerning when to make changes   | 3.22              | 2.94              | .284*             |
| h. getting started with continuing education   | 2.67              | 2.25              | .419*             |
| l. managing personal financial planning  | 2.22              | 2.64              | -.417*            |
| r. managing debt   | 2.04              | 2.53              | -.491**           |
| 5. How important are the following kinds of support during your first call? (5=very, 1=not at all)   |                   |                   |                   |
| a. colleague group support   | 4.46              | 4.16              | .304*             |
| b. access to programmatic resources  | 3.85              | 3.59              | .266+             |
| o. counsel on technological challenges   | 3.32              | 2.94              | .383*             |
| 8. How closely did your expectations of a first call match your experience? (5=very, 1 = not at all) | 4.02              | 3.44              | .586***           |

Symbols for significant differences: + (p<.10), \* (p<.05), \*\* (p<.01), \*\*\*(p<.001)

In response to a series of questions regarding how prepared they felt in their first call after being ordained, TEEM graduates scored significantly higher on over half (13 out of 23) of the areas of ministry listed. Particular strong advantages were observed in preparation to manage a church office, do pastoral counseling, plan a church budget, address community social and ethical issues, and provide a ministry of healing. In contrast, the only area where traditional route pastors rated themselves more prepared than TEEM pastors is teaching youth. TEEM graduates, when asked what areas they would like to have had more preparation in, rated planning stewardship programs by far the highest, with more than 55% of respondents listing it as a key area. Training and equipping others for their ministries was also scored highly. The concerns of TEEM pastors in these areas are largely similar to those of traditional route pastors. Overall, TEEM pastors felt slightly more prepared to meet the demands of their first job as an ordained person.

The simple OLS regression model in Table 2 below reveals a possible caveat to the above conclusion, however. The regression tests the association of specialized ministry type with overall sense of preparedness for ministry among TEEM graduates, controlling for gender. Ministry type is split into the three general categories above, racial/ethnic/cultural, localized, and general ministry. Results show a negative relationship between racial/ethnic ministry and overall sense of preparation. More precisely, those in racial/ethnic ministry felt nearly three-quarters of a point less prepared (out of five) than those in localized ministry on the average scale for question 1 both with and without controlling for gender ( $P=.002$ ). Comparing predicted values (for males) in each type of ministry to the first call survey (MDiv) mean suggests that while most TEEM pastors feel more prepared in general for their first call, TEEM pastors engaged in racial and ethnic ministries feel less prepared than either other TEEM pastors or MDiv graduates. Many reasons could be suggested for this difference, a major one being the lack of role models and mentors in similar situations either in seminaries or home synods, a shortcoming repeatedly referred to in respondent comments. It may also be that racial and ethnic minority ministries are simply more challenging. Similar regressions were conducted on difficulties in ministry and whether their experience matched their expectations, but with no significant results.

**Table 2:** OLS Regression on Overall Sense of Preparedness among TEEM Graduates

| Variable  | B        | Standard Error |
|---|----------|----------------|
| (Constant)  | 3.902*** | .146           |
| Gender (Female=1)   | .196     | .205           |
| <i>Ministry Type (omitted category: localized ministry)</i> |          |                |
| General Ministry  | .069     | .255           |
| Racial/Ethnic/Cultural Ministry                             | -.751**  | .222           |

Symbols for significant differences: \* (p<.05), \*\* (p<.01), \*\*\*(p<.001)

Another series of questions approached measurement differently, asking first how high respondents rated something as a need for the church and then how well prepared they were for that type of ministry. TEEM graduates tended to rate both the level of need and level of preparation slightly higher across the board. In particular, TEEM graduates felt more prepared to reach out to unchurched persons and rated the need to help members with tough moral issues higher. The only need that non-TEEM pastors felt marginally better prepared to address was being a teaching theologian in their congregation (p<.10). The largest differences (unmet needs) for TEEM graduates, in order, were reaching out to unchurched persons, helping congregations revitalize their ministry, and helping congregations work toward a vision. In contrast to these overarching missional needs, TEEM graduates by and large thought they were prepared to meet more immediate needs such as listening to people’s questions and concerns.

Despite scoring higher on perceived level of preparation for ministry, TEEM graduates also scored higher than traditional path graduates overall on how difficult they found a number of ministry tasks, including planning worship, discerning when to make changes, and getting started with continuing education. However, consistent with the results of question 1, TEEM participants reported less difficulty managing debt and personal financial planning. Among TEEM graduates, there is a significant negative correlation (p<.01) between age at ordination and overall level of difficulty encountered. This supports the hypothesis that life experience prior to entering seminary and becoming ordained improves confidence and effectiveness as a newly ordained pastor. One other theoretically important question included on the survey is how closely a person’s first call experience matched their expectation. TEEM graduates on average said their experience matched their expectations well, over half a point above traditional path graduates (p<.001).

Throughout the survey, TEEM participants (with the possible exception of those in racial/ethnic/cultural minority ministries) tended to rate their level of preparation consistently higher than MDiv graduates, across a

variety of areas and measurement approaches. This sense of overall satisfaction with preparation among TEEM graduates is also reflected also in qualitative comments. The most frequent comment was that overall the TEEM program is very good and has proved a blessing for those who participate in it. Many respondents stated that they would never have been able to be ordained through the traditional route and would have had to either continue serving as semi-official lay pastors or step down. One area of concern was the lack of publicity for the program. In particular, graduates complained that many synods do not understand the program and what is available nor do they seek out qualified candidates. Also, a number of people expressed a desire that more or all of the seminaries create standing programs modeled on the PLTS distance program (Villa Parra 1998, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary 1999) rather than relying on ad hoc programs of study.<sup>2</sup> Many of the graduates felt that there was a need for more coursework tailored to particular ministry specializations and even more of a need for improved mentoring for those in specializations which might be uncommon in a person's home synod. Finally, more than one comment showed evidence that TEEM graduates are looked down upon by some traditional path graduates because they have completed less education than themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Steps have been taken by seminaries to expand and standardize the program in the intervening years since the administration of this survey.