

DAVID WEIDNER

# Challenges Facing DCE Ministry



The word “challenge” is a fitting description for the ministry of Directors of Christian Education during the first fifty years of its existence within The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. From its earliest struggles to establish a ministry identity and role beyond that of “pastor” or “teacher” to its current challenge to present itself as a viable long-term career for those who feel called to serve as Directors of Christian Education, this ministry has experienced numerous challenges along the way. These challenges have shaped and refined it into a vital member of the group of recognized professional positions within the church that seek to equip the saints for greater service to the Lord.

### **Beginnings of DCE Ministry**

DCE ministry had a somewhat haphazard birth in the waning days of the tremendously successful Walther League movement which had been the jewel of the LCMS effort to minister to youth since the latter part of the 19th Century. Walther League did two things with great success. First, it trained young men and young women in the rules of engagement for participation in the structural organizations of the church; and second, it prepared them for the church leadership roles they would assume as they matured into adulthood. The rubrics of organizational activity, that is, the election of officers, the function of working committees, and the decisive planning strategies for developing programs and activities were skills that were well honed among those who participated in this youth organization. The adult leaders for the Walther League were mainly older adults who had already gone through the indoctrination of the organization and served as chaperones

for activities planned by the younger participants. Consequently, there wasn't a perceived need for professional leaders similar to what DCEs would provide in later years.

As the Walther League movement came to a grinding halt in the late 1960s, a new day of youth ministry was born—the youth group. This new phenomenon was not so different from its predecessor; it just no longer bore that awkward name and long-term organizational identity. Larger congregations began to realize that to keep their teenagers engaged in the life of the congregation there needed to be a focused programmatic effort, preferably led by someone who could be held accountable, such as a professional youth ministry leader. For many years teachers from Lutheran day schools had often served in this capacity, and they were paid an extra stipend for this added responsibility. In some cases youth ministry was assigned to a vicar from the seminary, and he would do his best to keep the youth involved during his one-year stint in the congregation as a pastoral intern. Often the primary skill qualifying him to serve in this capacity was his own youthfulness.

The distraction of the emerging drug culture, the discontent with the war in Vietnam, and the general “loosening” of social mores were just a few of the factors that made the teenagers of the late 1960s and early 1970s just a bit frightening to the local congregational leadership. If a professional leader could be trained to keep the youth “safe” and “connected” to the congregation, and at the same time bring new enthusiasm and organization to the parish institutions of Sunday school, adult education and Vacation Bible School, there would certainly be hope for the future.

The earliest candidates for serving in this new role, which was not quite yet defined as Director of Christian Education, were sometimes day school principals or other mature teachers, most of whom were male and possessed effective relational skills. Their training had not been specific to the role, but the feeling was that the classroom

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DAVID WEIDNER, DCE,  
IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR  
CONGREGATIONAL SERVICES IN THE  
FLORIDA-GEORGIA DISTRICT OF THE  
LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD.  
DWEIDNER@FLGA-LCMS.ORG

management skills they possessed, their knowledge of Scripture and the doctrines of the church and grasp of theories of Christian education best equipped them for this new role as a Director of Christian Education and Youth Ministry. Soon, a title was coined (DCE), and it became apparent that the Concordia colleges could begin to train individuals to serve in this new role which was still being defined by those pioneers of ministry who were engaged in it daily.

This somewhat “evolutionary” beginning of DCE ministry laid a fertile groundwork for the early challenges of the ministry, specifically, definition and identity. Who were these DCEs that were popping up in congregations across the Synod, and what were they to do? They were not teachers necessarily, but the core of their training was in Christian education. Youth ministry and sometimes music ministry quickly became primary specialties that separated them from the role of classroom teachers. For those with more maturity and experience in ministry, there was sometimes confusion with the pastoral role. They would be called upon to assist the pastor in a variety of functions, such as assisting in worship leadership and filling in on the shut-in visitation schedule. Their days were not spent in a classroom like a teacher, and they didn’t spend significant hours in their offices preparing a weekly sermon like the pastor. What exactly did they do? Their office hours were sporadic and unpredictable. They spent extensive time with junior high and senior high school students engaged in relational activities and sports. They went to the after-school sporting events that involved their students, led weekend retreats, met with the Board of Christian Education to strategize for Sunday school and adult Bible classes, took youth on trips to the ski slopes or the beach, reviewed curriculum choices, became involved in district youth ministry committees, and engaged in a host of other activities that filled their calendars.



## Identity and Role

In the early days of DCE ministry the number one question was, "What is a DCE?" followed closely by, "What does he/she do all day?" Mark Borcharding (Carmel Lutheran Church, Carmel, Indiana), a seasoned DCE, shared the following observations concerning challenges in the first two decades of DCE ministry. "In my first decade (30 years ago), the challenges were helping people understand what a DCE is and expanding the role beyond 'Youth Director.' In my second decade the issue was defining and expanding my role as a 'minister' in the church." This sentiment is likely to be echoed by countless DCEs who were a part of those early days of DCE ministry.

Identity and successful job performance are highly connected to the perceptions of the people in the pew. To the average parishioner the hallmarks of job performance that were so well established for pastors and teachers were not present for the DCE. If the pastor baptized, married, buried, delivered a reasonably good sermon, etc., most members were confident that he was doing his job. If a teacher was in the classroom five days a week during school hours teaching his or her students the curriculum of the grade, and was involved in church activities, then there would be no question about job performance. The DCE, however, was a different commodity. Office hours were varied, and the only reliable marks of job performance seemed to be the quantity of youth that were regularly involved in the youth group and its calendar of endless activities. Measuring how well he or she related to the students to whom he or she ministered or developing a planned strategy for life-long Christian education opportunities in the parish were benchmarks of success that were far from the mind of the members and their leaders in those first two decades of DCE ministry's existence.

Outside the congregation the challenges of identity and role were even more pronounced. Should the DCE participate with the pastors in their monthly circuit meetings, or should they gather occasionally at educators' conferences with the teachers who served in

the day schools of the district congregations? For many DCEs forging into those already established professional support groups was daunting. Where did the DCEs seek ongoing professional development and support, and what did that look like? Some DCEs chose to isolate themselves and seek support among other youth workers from non-Lutheran churches in their communities. Others helped shape district-wide conference groups for DCEs and monthly cluster meetings where the issues they faced in ministry could be discussed with confidentiality and understanding.

At the same time, youth ministry was changing across American Protestantism. The youth group was at the core of successful practice, and para-church organizations like Youth Specialties, Young Life, and Campus Crusade for Christ were designing and influencing the focus of youth ministry. Within the LCMS the fathers of post-Walther League youth ministry (Ben Eggers, Leo Symmank, Eldor Kaiser, Dean Dammann, and Rich Bimler) were responding to the times by creating resources for Bible study, group activities, and folk worship. They traveled around the country leading seminars and workshops on youth ministry. In the informal after-hours of these conferences they began to shape, influence, and create an identity and a sense of camaraderie among those who were serving as DCEs.

DCEs sought each other out for support, encouragement and the shaping of a sense of solidarity that they could not find in gatherings of other church professionals. Often these moments of coming together as DCEs would be marked by long discussions of the role of the DCE, misunderstanding by coworkers, and the incessant cry of "How can I get my pastor to be in team ministry with me?" No one had trod this ground before, so there were no directional signs along the way to lead these young church professionals forward.

The early pioneers of the ministry who served as directors of the DCE training programs at the Concordia colleges that offered this training were creating it as they

moved forward. Dr. William Karpenko, Dr. Lyle Kurth, and Dr. LeRoy Wilke were courageous innovators who tested the patience of college deans and department chairs as they gave birth to these new programs. Dr. Wilke shares his reflection on those early days:

In the early development of DCE training, congregations that were experiencing numerical growth in the area of children, youth and young adults were expressing a strong need for individuals to work in the areas of youth ministry, part-time Christian education agencies, such as the Sunday school, VBS, and after-school programs, and mobilization of volunteers. By and large, the early (1960s and 70s) DCE training curriculum and field work experiences reflected this need.

DCE ministry had been created in response to a critical need that had developed because of the increasing numbers of children and youth among the congregations of the LCMS, but exactly what was it and how would it continue to grow and evolve in its effort of serving the Christian educational needs of the congregations were questions. Wilke goes on to say,

Professional identity and formation were centered on shaping the DCE as a teacher of the faith for all age levels—child through adult. A DCE would be the 'educator' in the congregation who equipped and nurtured individuals in their faith walk to serve others. As a member of the congregation's professional staff, the DCE was to teach, recruit, and equip others (volunteers) to serve in leadership roles, especially the congregation's ministry of Christian education.

Time moved on and so did DCE ministry. With each passing year, the profession became better established as more and more congregations called DCEs and reaped the many benefits of their leadership and service. Significant changes took place in how the Synod recognized and certified those who

chose to serve in this role. Roster status for the earliest DCEs was achieved with dual certification as a teacher and DCE. The LCMS established the office of DCE by convention resolution in 1959, but it wasn't until 1983 when DCEs were rostered as "Commissioned Ministers of Religion" along with teachers, deaconesses, and lay ministers that the sense of a clearly authorized role in the Church was realized.

## Current Challenges

In these last ten years many of the same challenges continue to exist, especially among churches that have never experienced a DCE before. The question still comes to the surface, "What is a DCE and what can he or she do for our congregation?" It is, once again, a matter of educating the congregations about this vital role.

The DCE training programs at the six Concordia universities which offer these programs have done a great deal to advance DCE ministry. The internship programs have afforded many congregations the opportunity to experience DCE ministry, albeit through the efforts and learning experience of a student intern. The cost of bringing on an intern is considerably less than calling a DCE from the field, so for many congregations this becomes a stepping stone to bringing on a full-time DCE after the internship year. The program directors have worked diligently to prepare their students for these experiences and have provided appropriate supervision of the students along with support systems for the congregations as they host the student intern for a year. Five of the six programs enable the DCE intern to consider a placement call to the congregation in which he or she interned following the completion of his or her internship. Dr. Mark Blanke, current Director of the DCE Program at Concordia University, Nebraska, notes, "About 60 percent of our interns elect to receive a placement call from the congregation where they served their internship."

Some of the other challenges that are being faced in these latest years of DCE ministry include a discussion of the long-



term viability of the profession. Can an individual continue to be effective as a parish DCE as he or she ages? This concern comes out of the reality that most DCEs are responsible for Youth Ministry in their positions, and there is a common misconception that at some point they are no longer able to effectively relate to middle school and high school students or that they even want to relate because of the rigors of the various activities involved in Youth Ministry. This view may be more prominent in situations where the DCE's ministry has been more focused on "doing" the ministry rather than "directing" the ministry. In those congregations where the DCE has responded to the changing needs of the congregation, sought out ongoing professional development in order to be better equipped to meet those needs, and established himself or herself as a professionally competent Christian educator, this concern has not been so great. Training and empowering other congregational members to "do" the ministry is the ultimate goal of an effective DCE.

Another phenomenon impacting the question of longevity is the movement of individuals out of congregationally-based DCE ministry. According to 2008 statistics reported in the *DCE Directory*, of the 1,700-plus individuals that have been certified as DCEs, only 630 remain serving as DCEs in a congregation (*Concordia University System*, 2008, p. 2). There is, of course, natural attrition by retirement and death, but a greater number of DCEs have moved on from the ministry for a variety of reasons. Some have entered the halls of higher education to serve, others have moved on to district and national church office positions, some male DCEs have gone on to seminary to become pastors, a significant number of female DCEs have withdrawn from service to raise a family, and a number have left the ministry entirely to pursue other professions. The DCE Career Path Study that is currently being conducted is an excellent resource for reviewing these trends in the longevity and career movement of DCEs. Dr. Bill Karpenko, lead researcher in the study, shares the following observations:

Among the 800 DCEs who responded to the first phase of the DCE Career Path Project, diversity of career patterns and types was wonderfully evident. Even so, three major findings emerged: 1) 97 percent of these certified DCEs entered some form of full-time church work; 2) congregational ministry was a life-long career for a growing numbers of DCEs; and 3) when individuals left congregational ministry as a DCE it was primarily because they felt pulled (called) to another form of service, whether within or outside the church, rather than pushed out of their ministry.

In this current economic downturn a major challenge facing numerous DCEs is job security. The concept of having a Call to a congregation is no longer a guarantee of employment for the life of the Call. As congregational members face severe financial challenges in their personal lives, the impact is felt in dynamic ways in the congregational budget as members decrease or stop giving their tithes. When money is tight congregational leaders begin to seek out ways to cut costs. In some cases, the solution that is often suggested is to reduce staff.

In many instances the DCE position is one of the first positions to be eliminated in an effort to trim costs and meet the budget. The DCE is dismissed on the grounds that the congregation can no longer afford to fund his or her position. This action is within the rights of the congregation, although some would argue that it severely violates the integrity of the Call. Be that as it may, congregations are making these decisions on a regular basis and are doing it with little outside guidance or direction. The district presidents and their staff members are the most likely source of help and guidance both for the congregation and for the worker in dealing with these situations. Some helpful resources can be made available to congregations that address these issues, including resources for developing effective position descriptions, practices for regular performance review and clarification



of expectations, commitment to regular communication and utilization of resources, guidelines for appropriate severance packages, encouragement for personal and professional counseling, and ongoing support for the worker in the process of seeking another Call or work situation. This challenge has always been present in DCE ministry. However, it seems more pronounced in recent times with the very critical economic challenges being faced worldwide.

When we look to the DCE practicing within the congregation we see more practical challenges of everyday ministry. Master DCE for 2009, Jill Hasstedt (Zion Lutheran Church and School, Belleville, Illinois) shared a list of "nuts and bolts" challenges that she sees as unique to the current times in which she serves as a parish DCE. She points to the growing impact of technology on the lives of families and teens, and learning to use it effectively as a church and as a Christian for Jesus' sake as an important challenge in today's DCE ministry. She notes key areas of focus, including the development and maintenance of an effective website, the explosive use of Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter among the students with whom she ministers, the instant communication connection with cell phones and texting, and

the abuse of these technologies (addiction to gaming, pornography, bullying, sexting, etc.).

Beyond the cyberspace challenges, Jill raises concerns for working within new congregational governance structures, and trying to help members become disciples of Christ who are focused on reaching out to their communities with the Gospel rather than just taking care of the Body of Christ within the walls of the church building. These challenges are not necessarily unique to DCE ministry, and for that reason they may provide a bridge to working more effectively in team ministry with other church professionals who are facing similar challenges.

Team ministry has been a consistent challenge for DCEs throughout the history of their ministry. DCEs are trained and oriented toward working with others in an effective team. They clearly recognize the ecclesiastical authority of the pastoral office and see their role as supporting and enhancing the total ministry as led by the pastor. They seek to be in a supportive and collegial relationship with the pastor and the others on staff through shared Bible study, prayer and collaboration in their ministry focus and plan. When they are faced with a lack of commitment to team ministry or the lack of skills to make it happen, there are often great frustration and discontent which may lead to the DCE moving on to seek a stronger team ministry opportunity elsewhere. Some DCEs manage to adjust their expectations, their work patterns and how they respond to the work style of their team partners much like a husband and wife adjust to each other within marriage. In these situations ministry can become a delightful tapestry of unique gifts and talents being woven together for ministry that God blesses and uses for the building up of His people.

### **Responding to Changing Needs**

DCE ministry, despite its fifty-year history, continues to be on the leading edge of ministry within the church. The DCE brings to the congregational setting a unique

experience in training and preparation for ministry that equips him or her to be responsive to the changing needs of the members and those that the members would reach out to in the community. This flexibility has served DCE ministry well in its brief history by equipping the DCE to respond quickly to new ideas, shifts in the culture, and changing needs of the people he or she serves. At the same time, the DCE's grounding in Scripture, theology, doctrine and Christian education theory and practice allows him or her to maintain the appropriate focus on sharing the Gospel so that more and more people will come to know the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In my role as a district education executive, I have the privilege to work with and support a group of approximately fifty men and women who serve as DCEs or function like DCEs in the parish. From the "greenest" DCE intern to the most "seasoned" veteran, I never cease to be amazed at the quality of service, the commitment to ministry, and the persevering faith that these servant leaders exhibit each and every day. At a recent district high school youth gathering, I watched a young female DCE intern manage the mass events for over 400 youth with a level of maturity and professionalism far beyond her years and experience. Working with amazing confidence and insight into how to create an experience that would be relevant to the high school students in the audience, she tapped the talents of the volunteers working with her and utilized the technical resources available to her to produce a series of events that were truly outstanding as they sought to connect students with God's love and power in their lives.

The future is bright for DCEs. They are staged and ready for the coming waves of ministry in the church, and they are in strategic positions to influence others, both professional and lay leaders, in their view and practice of ministry. Changes in DCE ministry will continue to occur along with new challenges, but these have been foundational for this unique and dynamic role in the Body of Christ!