

MINISTERIAL DEVELOPMENT

When I was a child growing up in eastern Lancaster County, I was contracted as free labor to help cultivate a sizable garden on my parents' eleven-acre farm 😊. My duties included removing stones after the first plowing, planting seeds, weeding the garden, and nurturing the growth of the various patches of vegetables. During the summer, I would pick, husk, and shell vegetables with my family. I quickly learned that the enjoyment of the good fruits of that garden began only after the arduous, lengthy tasks that involved the sweat of my brow. I think that many of us can easily relate to the connection between these toilsome tasks and the flourishing benefits of gardening.

In many ways, the Ministerial Development Community (MDC) is a garden. There are seeds planted, weeds are removed, shoots burst forth, seedlings grow, and fruit is produced. In the Gospels, Jesus provides us with a multitude of lessons (and parables) that describe this idea of cultivation in an agricultural setting. We are generally aware of the many things necessary to bring flourishing to our gardens. And through this metaphor, we become aware of things necessary to bring flourishing to our lives. I would maintain that the MDC nurtures and develops the many things necessary to bring flourishing to our churches as well.

Today we look out over a garden that is healthier, and more vibrant, and I will say, revealing her beauty and health toward flourishing.

Cultivating the Soil: Last Fall, when the core team leaders (Bishop-Executive Director-Associates-Secretary, aka BEDAS) of the denomination met, we reviewed the intended outcomes of the Covenant Implementation Plan. We were encouraged to see that most of the objectives from the proposed plan were being accomplished within the MDC. One of the most significant challenges that we had to confront was the concept of organizational siloes.

Problems emerge when groups within a process operate in isolation from other groups within the process. In other words, groups can often operate independently from one another, and often assume that critical information gets communicated along and throughout the process. This was the case in the former structure. Many times, objectives from the Pastoral Assessment Center, the Conference Relations Committee, Coaching, and Conference Ministers were not in sync with one another. This issue occurred not as a result of any group's or individual's weaknesses, but rather as a result of the structural isolation between these processes. However, now we can state that this chief agenda item has been corrected within the new integrated structure and is working very effectively.

Planting the Seed: With each new Pastoral Assessment Center (PAC) season, we continue to modify and improve our team's objectives. As we prepare couples for assessment, we are equipping them to realize the tension between traditional and missional paradigms for ministry. Rev. Al Giles and his team apply a disciple-making model that guides these applicants to gauge their personal and congregational experiences in ministry in order to understand and follow God's work in their development and ministry settings.

As each applicant enters PAC, he has been nurtured to better understand his own gifts and how God uses him. By the conclusion of PAC, applicants and their spouses have not only been assessed, but have learned what it means to be part of the Evangelical Congregational Church and the direction that we are journeying on together. They are equipped with some helpful resources for understanding themselves and their ministry contexts.

Weeding the Garden: The standard for pastoral ministry continues to be raised. Over these past three years, the MDC has been helping men and women realize the importance of holding a credential within the EC Church. In the past, people were able to hold a credential without significant accountability after their initial interview. It was no one's fault really; it was simply that the former process was broken in some places, siloed in others, and sometimes circumvented by a tyranny of the urgent.

Many individuals were provided with little guidance about their next steps. Others were given guidance, but it may not have conformed to the overall expectations beyond their region. Other individuals struck out on their own and developed their own plan for their education, which lacked conformity to our requirements. Additionally, people transferring into our denomination often did not possess similar educational experiences. Quite frankly, this confusion had frustrated us for the past two years, as we sought to provide clear paths which honored the expectations that were communicated to them, as well as reaching the principles that are representative of our educational standards.

We have made a significant breakthrough in two areas. First, the Examiners have adopted a rubric that guides them in providing clear and fair objectives for new applicants that come to us from within or from outside our system. As a result, we are now able to tell an applicant up front clearly what will be required of them.

Secondly, we now provide every new applicant with a General Education Plan (GEP), and if necessary, an Individual Education Plan (IEP). These IEPs are designed to review an applicant's educational degrees and courses and formulate the supplemental education that equates to a Master of Divinity degree. We have addressed this need for supplemental certificates with Evangelical Seminary, and they are working with us to create these IEPs for each new EC student. In this way, we will be able to provide an actual course-by-course IEP according to the rubric. This standardization is now being applied to all new applicants going forward. As a result, we have already been making headway by applying this rubric with some individuals, who had remained stuck in their progress and needed to understand their next steps to reach their terminal credential. Our expectation is that these changes will allow individuals to move forward with clear direction.

Another significant change this past year arising from the Examiners focused on those who hold credentials that require annual renewal. Some changes were adopted to help those holding credentials with annual renewals to strongly consider what they are doing with them. Last Fall, the National Ministry Team revised the Rules of Conference to reflect the need for these individuals to provide ministry updates through interviews every five years to the Board of Examiners. Additionally, the questions on these applications were revised to consider the gap between one's intended use of his or her credential and its actual use.

On their own, some individuals have been realizing that they do not have a need for using their credentials. Therefore, they are not renewing them and letting them expire. Likewise, we have recently been meeting with some individuals and holding serious conversations about their need for credentials. Sometimes these conversations are arising from them. We have nothing against someone holding a credential, but if they are holding a credential without using it, then let's talk about this. A lot of these situations squander administrative time of Church Center staff and the MDC personnel.

Nurturing the Garden: The Ministerial Development Community works to nurture its garden in several ways. We provide coaches for each new pastoral candidate. At the conclusion of PAC, as I meet with each couple to explain the next steps in their credentialing journey, Rev. Matt Hill meets with them to discuss the prospect of their coach assignments. As Matt develops this coaching community, he will be offering training and resources that will guide the coaching process for these new pastors.

Rev. Gary Brown continues to develop the culture for understanding pastoral health in the Evangelical Congregational Church. Most recently, he has worked in partnership with Rev. Gene Stevenson and his wife Beth to offer a course for Ministry Self-Care taught through the Center for EC Studies. Rev. Joel Kime and I continue to dialogue about the educational and financial needs for our students at Evangelical Seminary and are thinking of ways to provide opportunities for future training and resources.

Attaining a Flourishing Garden: As we consider these many components of the MDC, the essential guiding document for everything we do is the Profile of an EC Pastor:

Pastors in the EC Church must understand their own identity in Christ, as well as their calling and gifts in relation to the body of believers so that the church is engaged for the work of ministry in the 21st century. They must learn how to interpret their cultural setting and properly communicate kingdom values and instructions from God's Word in order to form and lead a healthy community of believers.

They must be shaped by a character that reflects God's love in their lives through authenticity, patience, compassion, integrity, and spiritual fervor. They must participate in a disciplined lifelong pursuit that reveals teachability, hospitality, forgiveness, and most of all how to disciple others into these same Christ-like character traits. They must be able to effectively communicate the faith—what it looks like and how it works—within and beyond their community of believers, while also recognizing and discerning false claims to the Gospel.

They must demonstrate a disciple's life through their own ways of living the faith—serving, directing, giving, listening, and laughing with others in order to cultivate and empower flourishing among the community of believers and make an impact on the greater community.

They must see God at work around them, enabling others to grasp hold of God's intentional love for them, and each person's own individual potential for ministry. They must not neglect the opportunities and threats in their midst, but rather reveal how God's kingdom intersects with the life of the church and their surrounding community.

This guiding document has helped us to clarify what it means for our pastors to be leaders within the Evangelical Congregational Church. It points our applicants in a direction toward healthy ministry. Additionally, it guides the Board of Examiners in our interviews. When we read this document before each block of interviews, we are reminded about our objectives for pastoral ministry and can easily observe if the person sitting before us is able to pursue this direction. If not, we don't move them forward. Recently, we had such an interview. It was difficult, but the applicant clearly articulated that he was not on the same page with us. This approach helps us consider features of ministry beyond an applicant's articulation of the right theology; it goes to their identity and character and how that

gets expressed within our local church settings. As a result, we are learning better ways to discern how individuals will fit and flourish among us.

Enjoying the Harvest: Today, we look out over a much healthier garden. New seeds are still sprouting, but sometimes it's only after we cultivate the soil, pick some stones, and do some weeding that the garden comes to full bloom. It's arduous work that involves the sweat of our brows. Yet we labor in this field, because we look forward to the fruit that God's Spirit is bearing in our midst. So let's rejoice in a healthier, more vibrant garden, which means healthier, more vibrant local churches, which means a healthier, more vibrant expression of God's kingdom to the world!

Blessings,

Rev. Jeffrey Byerly
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