Vice President Interviews
A Report by Robert Bacher
August 31, 2012

Summary

These interviews demonstrate a very active, involved group of "stirred up saints" (2 Cor. 9:1-2), fully engaged in the use of their talents, very satisfied with the relationships with their bishops, and treating their role as a call from God. The data implies a revision is in order if understanding their role is tied only to chairing the Synod Council. Instead, all the constitutional references S8.21, 8.22, 8.23, shape a robust leadership role which already is being lived out by those interviewed.

Process

Between August 4 and August 28, 2012, thirteen synod vice presidents were interviewed by phone. The length of time for an interview varied from twenty-five minutes to fifty-five minutes. Names were suggested by the LIFT Advisory Committee, other vice presidents, and staff. The intent was not to be representative of all ELCA synods, but to hear from vice presidents who others saw as "doing something significant." The terms of office range from one year to seventeen years, and roughly reflect the gender ratio (interviews: 60% female, 40% male; all synods: 67% female, 33% male). Seven starter questions were emailed to each person before the interview took place. The limit of this study is that its results cannot be generalized to all synods. The strength is that it provides vivid and specific findings in the words of the vice presidents themselves.

Responses

The responses are listed and summarized here in the order of the seven questions:

1. How do you describe your responsibility as vice president to someone who says, "What is a vice president anyway?"
The most frequent response was, "It depends on who is asking." For someone not familiar with church life or structures, the answer used familiar language, like chair of a board of directors of a regional organization, but not being the CEO.

To a person acquainted with church affairs, the comparison to a congregation lay president is used where the president chairs the council, the difference being in title (vice president not president). The conversation gives an occasion to speak of the church as clergy and lay (and rostered persons), including the nature of leadership in the ELCA (Constitution 5.01.h).

A third type of answer is: a vice president is the highest elected lay person being elected by the synod assembly. The other officers elected by the assembly are the bishop, secretary, and treasurer. It is important to lift up the role of lay leadership, and in a very real sense, the vice president becomes a model of the nature of lay leadership in the church.

2. What do you actually do?

While specific to each synod, the responsibilities seem to fall into six categories:

a) Synod Council Chair includes developing or co-developing the agenda and by extension, serving as ex-officio member of synod committees and task forces. The chair role leads to involvement with many other activities of the synod which puts the vice president in touch with just about everything going on. Most of those interviewed co-chair the synod assembly with the bishop, some give a report or a speech.

b) Support of the bishop involves both regular and frequent contact with the bishop in synod matters, sometimes including advice or opinion sharing on personnel appointments, and mutual conversation on problems, issues, and policies. All those interviewed spoke highly of the relationship with the bishop and expressed strong satisfaction with the ways decisions are made about what the vice president should be doing.

c) Visitations of congregations, both alone and with the bishop, staff, or other council members for relationship building, conflict situations, closings, new starts, and dealing with the aftermath of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly sexuality decision.

d) Reorganization of synod structure and strategic planning for the future, sometimes in a leadership role or as a member of a task force. These activities vary according to the skills and interest of the vice president. Those with considerable non-profit and business experience are playing major roles in organizational matters.
e) LIFT mission planning and assessment, again in proportion to individual gifts. Almost all of these vice presidents were present at the 2011 Churchwide Assembly and took away a very favorable impression of the LIFT recommendations and discussion. Also, there has been collaboration among the vice presidents on ways to apply LIFT principles and activities to synod life and mission.

f) Election of a bishop both when changes in the process are being made or only to set up a process. In the case of the election of a new synod bishop, three of these vice presidents are chairing the task force and making the arrangements. Note: This development may be an example of the trust bestowed on the person and in the “neutrality” of the role.

3. Has the role or job content changed since you started?

The interviewees report three kinds of changes or evolution in their roles. The first is personal, that is, gains in confidence to lead, ability to speak in public, new skills related to the governance process, closeness to God, better fit of talent and task, willingness to speak up, and learning collaboration with others.

A second type of response is that along with the longevity of serving comes greater responsibility if trust has also grown. This trust comes from the bishop, synod council members, staff, deans, and other synod leaders.

Third, more opportunities become available in the region and churchwide organization. Greater visibility leads to increased involvement within the synod and also with institutional and ecumenical partners (seminaries, colleges, etc.) and churchwide task forces like LIFT. Especially influential has been international travel and experiences with global partners such as companion synods.

4. What one word captures your role?

There was some difficulty in choosing one word, thus two or three were used, and in some cases, more than one answer was offered, which accounts for the list being longer than the number of interviewees.

   Servant leader (3)
   Powerful servant leader
Encourager (2)
Storyteller
Facilitator
Relationship builder
Coordinator
Overseer
Support
Cheerleader
Lay leader
Grateful ambassador
"No," one word won't do it
Advocate
Connector

5. What skills or qualities are involved in being a vice president?

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<th>Skills:</th>
<th>Planning (2)</th>
<th>Follow-up (2)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration (3)</td>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>Lead worship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attention to detail (2)</td>
<td>Delegate</td>
<td>Group work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship building (3)</td>
<td>Knowledge of the ELCA</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Knowledge of synod demographics</td>
<td>Sense of church's mission</td>
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<td>Congregational experience</td>
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<tr>
<th>Qualities:</th>
<th>Respect others</th>
<th>Approachable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Like people</td>
<td>Love the church</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
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<td>Faith in action</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Having the time</td>
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<td>Appreciate gifts of others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love, kindness</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Trustworthy (3)</td>
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<td>Welcoming</td>
<td>Humor</td>
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6. What has been the most satisfying experience you have had as a vice president?

These responses fell into six groups:

a) Relationship with the bishop being so positive and open was the most frequent response.
b) Enabling someone else (pastor, dean, staff, council member) to increase their ability to accomplish a task, grow in faith, or develop new skills ("learning to fish" rather than providing the fish).

c) To affect a culture change in the council, the deans, a task force, or synod assembly to move toward greater responsibility, participation, less "rubber stamp," collaboration, and deeper analysis of issues.

d) Increase in ecumenical or international contacts and participation leading to a broader perspective on other denominations and the global church.

e) The unity of the 2011 Churchwide Assembly with its positive and joyful tone and mood.

f) Working with a congregation after a failed vote to leave the ELCA to achieve a greater sense of connection to the synod and ELCA, and an ability to move forward past the hurts of the past.

7. Anything else you want to add?

There were several additions. One has to do with appreciation for doing these interviews and looking forward to the report.

Another was the benefit of the interaction among vice presidents as a growing phenomenon, resulting in help with specific challenges and feeling part of a community. "So much better than the 1990s," was one comment.

A third was a new venture in the synod of doing performance appraisals of all the officers by the Executive Committee being seen as very positive and helpful.

Fourth was appreciation for the growing role of the region after several false starts. Three of these vice presidents serve on the regional planning and coordinating body along with the bishops.

Fifth, a desire to highlight the high number of women who serve as vice presidents as a significant example of women in lay leadership positions.

An Interpretation

The preceding responses provide a vivid picture of lay leadership in action. These vice presidents are very aware they are models of lay leadership and welcome the role. They speak
of the visibility of lay leadership at work in the responsibilities they carry, and the importance of it to the nurture and effectiveness of a church like the ELCA, its mission and future. This awareness and the embracing of the role is not couched in anti-clerical rhetoric. Quite the contrary, it accompanies a strong appreciation for the pastors and bishops in their lives. Many attribute their own growth in faith and service to the encouragement and invitations of a parish pastor or a synod bishop.

It may be that the relevant sections of the Constitution for Synods will need to be reread in the light of these vice presidents’ experiences. It has been customary to reference only the assignment of chairing the Synod Council (S8.22) as a minimalist approach to vice president responsibilities. It might be a mistake, however, to conclude that this custom has impeded synods from developing the vice president’s role into what is shown in these interviews. In fact, the claim can be made that these interviews display a set of experiences which have developed the role into what it has always been intended to be – a highly visible, active example of a ministry of lay leadership. It is not likely that the role has become what it is from reading the Constitution for Synods, but is more accurate to say that the practice of being a vice president has, after twenty-four years in the ELCA, caught up with the constitutional understanding and intent.

What are the dimensions of the leadership space called vice president? S8.20 has three sections: elected by the Synod Assembly (S8.21); must be a lay person (S8.21), is the only lay officer as the bishop must be clergy, the secretary and treasurer can be lay or clergy; member of a congregation (S8.21), no “floating” lay leaders not anchored in congregational life; with no salary (S8.21) making for a different kind of leader neither staff nor consultant, free – as much as possible – from political and other entanglements.

Who is the first to act in the event of the disability, death or resignation of a synod bishop? The vice president convenes the Synod Council and, with others, arranges for the “conduct of duties” of an interim bishop (S8.23). At a crucial moment, an essential step is carried out by a lay person. Other churches do it differently. In the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, if a district president cannot serve, the first vice president (clergy) immediately becomes the district president.

An alternate reading of S8.20 is that a full, active, and significant position has already been created in the synods of the ELCA, and now the present group of vice presidents is showing what that means, how it can be done, and its importance to the way the ELCA does its work.
It is also apparent that these thirteen vice presidents are bringing their own special competence to the position. In music, a contrapuntal theme is one supporting or in parallel with the major theme. Theologian Joseph Sittler once suggested to a group of Christian educators, that they develop their contrapuntal competence in service of a major theme – the gospel. Sittler used American literature as his special competence to read the American context of the church. These vice presidents are using their contrapuntal gifts in such a generous fashion that we should all say “Thank you” and “Keep it up.” These competencies seem evident in three ways: relationship building, business skills (finance, personnel), and organizational skills (planning, designing structures, and group work). The ELCA needs these skill sets to effectively and faithfully minister in today's world. Vice presidents are a ready source.

Implications

This report does not contain implications in the hope it will provoke those groups who read it to develop some.

One comment, however, seems appropriate. Perhaps a focus on developing even more opportunities for vice presidents to learn from each other would be warranted. The report shows the results of, and appreciation for, the collaboration that already takes place in regions, in the national gatherings, including joint sessions with the bishops, online and informally. The vice presidents themselves would be the best source of new ideas for co-learning and deepening existing opportunities.

Afterword

The first sentence of this report identified a scriptural reference which seems appropriate to the findings of this report, namely 2 Cor. 9:1-2. Paul is reporting, like this study, on the existence of a group of “stirred up saints” whose number he hopes will increase.

"Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, that is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them."

But like Paul, it is necessary to write (and boast, too) about "stirred up saints" who are eager, ready, full of zeal, to serve. Paul was seeking a "major gift" from the Corinthian congregation for relief work in Jerusalem. The ELCA is and has, for twenty-four years, been seeking (and getting)
major gifts of talent, time, faith, and hope from the stirred up saints called vice presidents. This report of those interviewed attests to the existence of the “stirred up saint” leaders who are ready and willing to step forth and be counted. May their tribe increase.

Thanks to all those who made this report possible, especially those who were interviewed, those who nominated them, and the Research and Evaluation unit of the churchwide organization, especially Kenn Inskeep, Executive Director. A special thanks to Sonia Hayden who typed the report.