

REPORT OF RESEARCH: ADULT LEARNING STRATEGIES AND SETTINGS USED TO ACQUIRE SPECIALIZED PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the context, setting, and learning strategies employed by both novice and experienced clergy seeking to develop pastoral capabilities. Using a case study method, a thorough description of the learning processes occurring within an organizational social group was described. The case focused on a group of African- American clergy from the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC).

The findings confirm that AMEC clergy have identifiable and describable strategies for learning the professional capabilities to pastor, both prior to and during service in the role. Other findings include:

- The organizational context defines expectations for AMEC clergy;
- Learning strategy is constructed after one's personal expectations and organizational/local church expectations have been considered;
- AMEC clergy develop capabilities in either formal, nonformal, or informal settings;
- AMEC clergy learn from personal experiences with people and learning from accomplishments as well as mistakes made.

A conclusion drawn from this study is that learners do have individual strategy preferences, but it is the organization that strongly influences the strategy choice. In other words, the learner must modify his or her learning approach to fit the learning approaches valued by the organization.

Introduction

Members of the clergy may be characterized as professionals (Schon, 1983). Among the various professional roles that clergy serve includes the leadership role of pastor. A pastor can be described as the leader of a church organization who is responsible for the operation of a church or church organization. Clergy serving as pastors have specialized knowledge that distinguishes their work from other clergy professions found in the church organization. Learning to perform proficiently in these roles represents a challenge for clergy seeking the specialized knowledge associated with the role.

African-American clergy, like other clergy, face the challenge of developing professional capabilities necessary to serve in the pastoral role. Due to various historical, cultural, and social factors, this challenge may be different from those in other ethnic groups. This difference is even more pronounced if a pastor serves in an African-American controlled church organization as a result of historical and cultural factors. One example of an African-American controlled church organization is the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC). The AMEC's rich tradition and history make it one of the truly unique institutions in African-American culture. A problem experienced by AMEC clergy and the subject of this study was how do clergy develop capabilities for the pastoral role without guidelines for preparation for the role. It is within this context we examine how clergy professionals acquire knowledge for the role of pastor.

Purpose and Research Method

The purpose of this study was to describe the context, setting, and learning strategies employed by both novice and experienced AMEC clergy seeking to develop pastoral capabilities. Using the descriptive data as a support, suggestions are made to enhance the learning environment for AMEC. The goal was not to create generalizable data but to generate information about an under-researched learning context.

The research design uses a case study method to examine the process of how clergy acquire needed knowledge for the professional role of pastor. The case under study is the organizational and learning context in one AMEC annual conference, within a single AMEC episcopal district, located in a large metropolitan United States city. Three case study methods were used to collect information: observation, interviews, and document reviews. The researcher served as a participant observer, collecting the data qualitatively through interviews, observation, and document review.

Findings

This investigation sought to understand the learning strategy used by clergy. The term learning strategy is operationalized as intentional, conscious efforts to attain information perceived by the learner as desired or needed. It is used to describe the process used by a learner to acquire information. These efforts include learning-to-learn and self-directed efforts across various formal, informal, and nonformal settings. The findings confirm that AMEC clergy do have strategies for learning the professional capabilities to pastor, both prior to serving in the role and while in the role. Further, within the AMEC, there is a process for learning that is identifiable and describable.

Expectations and Knowledge Areas

The finding from observations, interviews, and document reviews is that the organizational context that defines expectations for AMEC clergy. These expectations influence and subsequently impact choices for learning strategy. Expectations while communicated in various ways are sometimes not clearly communicated. The expectations communicated or not communicated from the organizational context affect every aspect of the clergy's participation within the organization, hence influencing the learning strategy selected. These expectations are given through direct communication and indirect communication.

Direct communication of expectations comes from various sources including the clergy's supervising pastor, congregational members, peer clergy, family members, and AMEC leadership (e.g., bishops and presiding elders). Direct communication is given on every aspect of the clergy's ministry. This communication may come in the form of counseling, feedback, or direct criticism. Frequently, constructive feedback, developmental feedback, or simple criticism is given privately from multiple sources. This feedback seems to influence choice of learning strategy.

Indirect communication comes from the models observed and publications that communicate general information about the AMEC context. For example, a non-pastoral ordained elder is exposed to many pastors performing the pastoral role. These repeated observations directly communicate the "right way" to perform. Indirect communication is a result of exposure to communication that may not be targeted directly at the clergy learner.

Another area that is influential on strategy choice and is related to organizational expectations is explicit and implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge refers to information about the organization that is clearly stated or observable. Information found in the AMEC published "Doctrine and Discipline" would be an example of explicit knowledge. Clergy are expected to be aware of this information. Implicit knowledge is information that is not plainly seen or understood. For example, being a "good follower" is implicit knowledge that can make or make one's clergy career. Understanding both the explicit and the implicit information is essential for developing pastoral role capabilities. The challenge for clergy seeking pastoral professional knowledge is understanding how to acquire the explicit and implicit knowledge necessary to successfully perform in the role.

Clergy Proficiency Areas

Another key finding is that the AMEC organization has definable expectations for novice and experienced clergy to demonstrate if they are to serve in the role of pastor. The organizational capability expectation influences the priority and focus of a clergy's learning strategy. The organizational expectation is articulated through AMEC leadership and the local church congregation. Interviews with pastors and elders support there are core capabilities that clergy seek to develop for the pastoral role.

Core capabilities may include preaching, education, administration, and pastoral care (Champion, 1992; Sawchuck & Heuser, 1993). While there are numerous capabilities and categorizations that can be considered, this study identified several categories of capabilities from observations, interviews and literature review: These capabilities observed are described in Table 1. In essence, these capabilities represent the professional knowledge expectation for the AMEC pastoral role.

Table 1 Pastoral Capabilities

Capabilities	Description	Where the Researcher Observed the Capability Performed
Preaching	Delivering sermons and messages for the congregation. Learning the worship service.	Worship services AMEC organizational meetings
Teaching	Providing various forms of education from the pulpit, in Sunday School, and in other educational venues.	Worship services Local church meetings AMEC organizational meetings
Caring/ Counseling	Helping people to manage various life situations and providing them with care.	Worship services Local church meetings Hospital visitations
Administration/ Business Management	Running the local church organization, including meeting facilitation and management.	Worship services Local church meetings AMEC organizational meetings
Leadership	Serving as the catalyst to accomplish the desired ends of the church and represent the community of faith.	Worship services Local church meetings AMEC organizational meetings

Given the above capability requirements, the novice and experienced clergy turn to various learning strategies to acquire both explicit and implicit knowledge needed to support proficient performance. An interesting finding is that the organization emphasizes certain capabilities over other capabilities. The emphasis means there is direct communication and explicit information made available for learners to develop the capability. For example, preaching is the major capability emphasis while other areas receive less organizational emphasis. In contrast, learning the caring/counseling capability requires a clergy to work with indirect communication and implicit information. Interestingly, the clergy performing in the role of pastor still needs to demonstrate competence in all the capability areas to be considered a proficient pastor.

Learning Strategies Applied

Given the reality that clergy needs to be proficient among the range of salient capabilities, he or she must select from various learning strategies. Based on interviews, observations, and document reviews, several formal, informal, nonformal strategies are found used to acquire necessary knowledge. Table 2 lists the salient strategies identified from the clergy studied.

Table 2 Learning Strategies

Formal Learning Strategies	Nonformal Learning Strategies	Informal Learning Strategies
Seminary/Bible College Attendance	Church-Based Experiential	Mentoring
Undergraduate/Graduate College Attendance		Resourcefulness
External Training Attendance		Developing Relationships
Church-Sponsored Educational		Observation
		Spirituality
		Dialogue

Formal learning is education from an institution that typically occurs under the direction of an educator and may provide credit or degrees (Coombs, Prosser, & Ahmed, 1973; Courtney, 1991; Merriam & Cafferella, 1991, 1999). Formal learning is encouraged by the organization. Explicit information and direct communication support formal learning. In other words, formal learning as a strategy is the most supported strategy by the organization. Clergy are told early in their tenures that they are expected to continuously learn through formal means. The issue that emerges is that both novice and experience clergy do not feel that formal learning fully addresses their learning needs. For example, while seminary is virtually required for clergy seeking to pastor, it is believed by participants in this study that seminary does not prepare for the pastoral role. The perception is that seminary does provide some useful learnings, but does not prepare the clergy for the pastoral role. Given this reality, clergy tend to look toward other means of learning to gain the capabilities needed to perform effectively in the pastoral role.

Informal learning strategies are everyday living experiences from which something is learned that are primarily directed by the learner (Coombs, Prosser, & Ahmed, 1973; Courtney, 1991; Merriam & Cafferella, 1991, 1999). There are many of these strategies used by clergy to gain the required pastoral capabilities. The informal learning strategies are the most useful to both novice and experienced clergy. The best part of informal learning strategies is they are encouraged by the organization and generally accessible to clergy. The problem with informal learning strategies is the inconsistent level of preparation that this strategy provides. Informal learning strategies are dependent on the clergy's learning to learn capability. A proficient learner will derive significant learnings from informal learning. A less proficient learner may be hindered by a setting that requires learning to learn capabilities. An interesting dichotomy is that the AMEC organization seems to emphasize formal learning but the majority of learning strategies used to gain capabilities are informal learning strategies.

Nonformal learning is organized and semi-organized education outside the formal system (Coombs, Prosser, & Ahmed, 1973; Courtney, 1991; Merriam & Cafferella, 1991, 1999). This form of learning is found at the local church where experienced and novice clergy worship and work. Nonformal learning has many different forms within the AMEC. Clergy will have many different experiences depending upon variables including church size, presiding elder expectations, and primary church mission and focus. Virtually all capabilities may be attained through these means

but again the variation in these experiences is significant. This variation means that some will have significant learning experiences while others will have limited learning experiences.

Conclusion

This study identified previously undocumented processes for acquiring capabilities for pastoral ministry. It contributes to the body of knowledge about:

- The settings in which adults learn (e.g., formal, nonformal, informal);
- The learning strategies adults employ to gain capabilities for professional roles.

Using this data, the AMEC can develop enhanced processes to aid clergy in developing needed pastoral capabilities. Further, the findings of this study can help individual AMEC clergy to identify strategies needed to acquire the professional knowledge to serve in the pastoral role. Finally, the information generated can be used by other church organizations to assist their clergy in developing pastoral capabilities.

The findings from this case study show that learning strategy is an identifiable component of clergy learning. In the social unit examined, clergy use multiple strategies to gain desired knowledge for the role of pastor within the various formal, nonformal, and informal settings found within the AMEC district studied. The challenge for this group of clergy is determining the appropriate strategies to develop capabilities necessary for the pastoral professional role.

The findings support the assertion that there is an identifiable process that clergy participate in to learn pastoral capabilities. This process involves multiple steps including individual learning preference, organizational expectation, supervisory expectation, and congregational expectation. The key to the process is the expectations as they influence learning strategy choices. The individual preferences, along with the expectations, direct the learner to the sanctioned professional knowledge that can be described as capabilities. These capabilities are seen as the necessary skills, knowledge, and abilities that clergy must demonstrate to serve in the pastoral role.

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