

## PROTAGONIST CORNER

### DCEs as Church Professionals

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For sixty-five years the Presbyterian Church in the United States has been engaged in educating directors of Christian education. Over these years these persons have contributed outstanding leadership to the Church as educational specialists in congregations, presbyteries, and within Assembly boards and agencies. Today 500 or more serve in the PCUS alone and their employment costs the Church more than five million dollars annually in salaries. The intensity of demand for these persons is greater today than for most other Church professionals. While the movement of the DCEs is a 20th century phenomena--dating back to 1910 or so--it is a movement now seeking full recognition as Church professionals. Unfortunately, the Presbyterian Church, U.S. has never adequately recognized the DCE as a professional, preferring instead to treat these persons as those who occupy a lay role at an advanced level.

What DCEs or Church educators are asking for today, quite simply, is to be recognized as the professionals they are and can be. They are quite willing to concede that the ministry of the Word and Sacrament is the first office of the Church, as our Book of Church Order declares. But they are not willing to have the pastoral ministry be the only professional office in the Church.

The dilemma of the DCE today, and the ambiguity of their role in the Church, grows out of the Church's failure to recognize DCEs as a second professional office in the Church. By using DCEs as full-time Church employees, and yet by denying them full participation in the courts of the Church, the Presbyterian Church, U.S. is weakening its effort to mount a strong, denominationwide program in Christian education.

The DCE is treated as neither clergy nor laity. Unlike the clergy, the educator is not ordained. Like the laity, the educator is usually a member of a local church. Unlike the laity, however, the DCE is rarely elected as an officer of the congregation because he/she is employed by one of these boards, the Session. So the educator is discriminated from both sides: neither a lay leader who can serve as an elected leader, nor as the paid professional who can, by virtue of the ordained elder office, be assured of having access to the Session. This ambiguity often renders the DCE powerless to serve as a true second professional in the life of the Presbyterian Church.

### WHAT EDUCATORS WANT IN THE FUTURE

What do DCEs want and need in the future? A consultation held in 1977 and attended by more than 75 DCEs from across the denomination isolated four conditions as goals they wished to achieve and which I wish to comment on in some detail.

1. **STANDARDS.** The DCE lacks a designated place within the Church's order. They are in the working life of the Church in many areas, but not in the Church's ordering of its life, except as they are referred to rather briefly in Chapter 24 (Par. 224-1 to 7) of the Directory of Worship. This section covers only the commissioning of these persons and has nothing to say concerning relationships, accountability, or standards. When we compare this brief section with the detailed provisions for the officers of the Church, we can see better why DCEs have some of the current problems they do. There are no uniform standards that are commonly accepted or even acknowledged by the General Assembly as important enough to put in the BCO, seemingly.

Another facet of the standards issue is that the authority to employ and to terminate the services of the DCE is the prerogative of the Session. As a result, there is no way for the denomination, beyond the local Church, to require any uniform standards of competence for the educator. There is at the present time an excellent certification process at the General Assembly level which is recommended for all Christian educators. Many of the Christian educators are certified. Certification, however, is an optional procedure. The Session, in the words of the BCO, "may employ properly qualified persons to direct the educational program. Such persons shall work under the supervision of the pastor." It is left to the Session to define who is "properly qualified" and it may, as many do, totally ignore the certification procedures and standards of the General Assembly.

The call for standards that can be enforced if a person is to be called a "Director of Christian Education" is a desirable requirement if the role is to have quality and integrity. Imagine, if you will, what chaos would exist in the PCUS if we had no written standards for those serving as ordained ministers. The office would be crowded with a hodge-podge of persons with little uniform competence. The request for standards that really are enforced by the denomination is to remove a rather chaotic situation for DCEs. It would not necessarily prohibit a Session from hiring anyone, but it would insure that if the person is to be called a Director of Christian Education in the PCUS, they have met certain educational standards. It is an irony that often those most critical of DCEs because of their performance are also those who oppose the provision of uniform standards for DCEs.

2. **ACCOUNTABILITY.** Currently the DCE is accountable only to the Pastor and Session. DCEs want to be accountable to these parties certainly, but they also feel the need of some way by which they can have redress of grievances. Their desire would be to have some relationship that provided for Presbytery, through its Commission, to be available to consult when personnel difficulties develop. As a third party, the Commission, or some other designated party of Presbytery, could mediate differences as they occur and be useful in maintaining effective work.

Such a request is understandable and to be expected by persons who are seeking to have a career as professionals. In the academic profession, for example, the rise of tenure procedures protecting faculty was due to the need by professors in the 30's for protection against the vagaries of presidents and trustees who by whim of personality or social view could indiscriminately fire faculty members. Educators are not asking for tenure procedures, but rather some recourse for appeal or assistance when difficulties develop that can be handled by third parties. In this way they can have more job security and function more effectively, free from the fear of being terminated for unjust cause.

3. **MINIMUM COMPENSATION STANDARDS.** DCEs have no fixed compensation standards in our denomination. Some are well paid; many are poorly paid. Minimum compensation standards would serve to hold persons in the role rather than having their services lost when they can gain higher salaries from working in public education or public service enterprises. To have enforced minimum standards for salary and benefits would require the action of Presbyteries, obviously, if the standards were to be followed. As employees now solely accountable to the Session, no such standards can be enforced.

Let me say, parenthetically, that one of my major concerns in this matter is the talent we lose from educational leadership roles because we have no standards. This talent drain is a loss to the Church of many capable, committed, well-trained persons who often find that other organizations and agencies recognize the value of their leadership skills more readily than does the Church.

4. **VOICE AND VOTE.** DCEs have neither voice nor vote in the Session of congregations or in Presbyteries. This is because they are neither elected to a recognized office of the Church nor ordained by the Church. As a result, DCEs feel disenfranchised from decision-making levels. They are forced apart and isolated. This exclusion from the levels of decision making enforces an aura of second-class attitudes and accentuates a sense of powerlessness. It is only natural that DCEs can feel that they have little dignity in our Church.

These four goals, therefore, are the agenda DCEs have set for themselves to achieve in the PCUS in the future. To achieve them will take changes in our Church polity. The issue the Church faces, as I see it, is whether or not it is going to recognize and give support to the needs of DCEs to develop as professionals in the Church. If it does, it will assist the development of a recognized second professional office in the life of the Church in some way that will contribute to the standards of the role. It will put the blessing of the Church behind this role so that salary levels are adequate, routine procedures are followed to keep records of the profession current, and other institutional support structures are maintained. In this way DCEs can continue to serve the Church with self-dignity and with the confidence that they can have careers that are useful and valued.