Measuring the CPE Experience Among Chaplains in the *Presbyterian Church in America* and the *Orthodox Presbyterian Church*

HUP CPE Residency
Spring Project

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I. Introduction

It is a tribute to the size and diversity of the American religious community that one can function for years in part of that community and be wholly unaware of what is happening in another part. Unless someone intentionally crosses not only denominational but theological lines to meet and interact with her/his counterparts, ignorance is the default position toward our religious neighbors. We may live a few blocks apart, but we operate in different worlds in terms of ministry. This was my position for most of my adult ministry life. Although for many years I have worked inter-denominationally and at one time pastored a non-denominational church, my context was always within the general pale of conservative Christianity. The church diversity I experienced was real as far as it went, but it seldom included mainline Protestants or Roman Catholics, much less members of other religious traditions. This changed for me when I entered the CPE world. My ministry experience was now being shared by people whose faith was not exactly like my own, sometimes not even close. But it was good and fruitful for me personally to be in this new setting. I learned and grew and made progress as a minister and a person. I began to wonder whether some of my fellow chaplains in my conservative denomination have also had this experience and what it had been like for them. Had they found CPE useful and beneficial? Had they long ago written it off over theological concerns? Was there a consensus about the Clinical Pastoral Education movement within my ecclesiastical world that I needed to be aware of if I was to continue in the chaplaincy? These are the kinds of questions that moved me to develop this project. Thus, the aim of the project is to discover how many chaplains in the PCA and OPC have taken any CPE units, to measure their response to CPE as an effective tool for pastoral education and to discern what the theological impact has been upon this group of chaplains.

II. Method

I developed a simple 10 question survey that measures:

- Number of units, where taken and program type (questions 1-3).
- Usefulness of CPE overall (question 4)
- Helpfulness of CPE goals and program components (questions 5-6)
- Theological tensions and/or growth (question 7)
- Pre CPE information (questions 8-9)
- Value of CPE for others in their denomination (question 10)

I also provided a place for them to write a comment.

The survey was emailed to all of the military and civilian chaplains listed as such in the PCA denominational office responsible for chaplaincy. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church is a small sister denomination that I decided to include when I found their chaplains on the list. Recipients of the survey were told that it was a CPE Resident's project at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. As an attempt to increase the likelihood of a response, they were also told on the subject line and in the body of the email that the CPE Resident is an ordained minister in the PCA. Recipients were given

two options for response: They could either fill out the survey by sending a reply email, or they could do so anonymously by clicking on a link that would take them to the survey on the HUP Pastoral Care website. Results from surveys done via the website were automatically emailed to me. I wish to thank John Ehman for suggesting and setting up this remote survey option for me and Ralph Ciampa for allowing the Department website to house the survey for these weeks. In addition, John gave helpful suggestions for refining my survey questions, for which I am also grateful.

II. Distribution and Response

The survey was sent to 160 PCA chaplains and 29 OPC chaplains. Most of these were military chaplains but it is not easy to give hard numbers to the military or civilian designation. For example, some reserve chaplains are also pastors and community chaplains. Some military chaplains are retired and are doing civilian chaplaincy. In the end I felt it was not crucial to my purposes to distinguish between military or civilian respondents.

Sixty people responded to the survey, giving a response rate of nearly 32%. Of the 60 respondents, 24 never took CPE. Thus, the reported data represents 36 persons who took at least one unit of CPE. Of these, 21 took the online version of the survey and 15 chose to respond via return email directly to me. Interestingly, anonymity was not a strong motivation to use the online version as only 3 of the 21 using this method did *not* give their personal contact details giving permission for further contact.

III. Reporting on the Data

Just less than 60% of the respondents completed 4 or more units of CPE. Only 25% have taken only a single unit. Thus, the survey results reflect a significant exposure to CPE and a therefore a more informed response to the CPE approach. Put differently, the 36 respondents have taken at least 111 units of CPE among them, an average of 3 units per person. Furthermore, 19 of the 36 completed a residency. Again, this deeper engagement with the CPE program adds weight to the overall results.

Thirty-one found the "overall CPE experience" to be at least quite useful, with 15 of these willing to say it was indispensable. Only a single person said it was not useful (one other did not respond). This finding is deeply significant both for those on the inside of the CPE movement and for those in conservative denominations who may have concerns about the multi-faith nature of the training. In overwhelming numbers, this group of conservative (largely male) clergy endorsed the training as very meaningful.

This strong endorsement was largely borne out when the survey turned to the specific components (teaching aims) and program areas of CPE. Not a single category in the components (Q 5) and program areas (Q 6) questions received a majority *not helpful* or *harmful* rating. Indeed, only one person rated any aspect as *harmful.* Looking more closely at the data, the lowest scores (combining *very helpful* and *helpful*) were for "formulating pastoral identity" (n=27) and "learning about multi-faith ministry" (n=27).

Also, more were explicit in saying that "formulating pastoral identity" aim of CPE was *not helpful* (n=9) than in any other category. This last place finish for "formulating pastoral identity" could reflect that many of the respondents had done their CPE as a later educational event in their ministry careers, after their pastoral formulation was more defined. The relatively lower score for "learning about multi-faith ministries" may be an instance where the more conservative side of the respondents is in view. But again, it is important to remember that even in these two categories that achieved the lowest scores, a strong majority of respondents report a benefit.

The category in questions 5 and 6 reporting the largest positive response (combining *very helpful* and *helpful*) was "receiving critique about your ministry practice". This is an important finding inasmuch as it seems to say that a multi-faith setting does not impede openness to criticism even among students with a more narrowly defined theological background. Put another way, something about the handling of the groups made these students amenable to receiving critique about their practice.

This may have been due to the skill of the supervisors, for 21 of 36 persons said that their "individual supervision" was *very helpful*, the category receiving the largest number of this kind of response. As we will find out later when we report the comments, this had little to do with theological identification between student and supervisor. Thus, taken from the students' side, theological diversity is not a deterrent to constructive and beneficial supervision.

In the theology question (Q 7) 30 *agreed strongly* with the statement "I was comfortable with my own theology in my peer group" and another 3 *agreed somewhat.* This could reflect a theological certainty that the students had upon entry that was not shaken during the theological processing that took place. Far fewer (n=17) *agreed strongly* that they were "comfortable with the group discussion of theology". And 6 expressed their uneasiness by an indication of *disagree somewhat* or *disagree strongly* with the above statement about group discussion of theology. But this finding should be balanced by noting that 13 were willing to *agree somewhat* with the statement, thus bringing the cumulative positive response to a very strong 30 of 36.

Very significant for me personally is the large number of PCA/OPC chaplains who used their CPE time to do some helpful theological reflection. Thirty-three said they agreed with the statement "I found it helpful to reflect upon my own theology during CPE", 26 of them saying they *agreed strongly.* This result should be read with the response to the statement "my CPE experience was an overall positive experience for me theologically". Again, 33 said that they could agree with this statement as a reflection of their own experience. While it is important to note that the numbers are more evenly balanced between the *agree strongly* (n=19) and the *agree somewhat* (n=14) but it still is a strong statement. It indicates to this researcher that theological dissimilarity is not an impediment to a positive theological experience in the CPE setting, even for those whose theological views are relatively static.

It was important for this survey to measure whether the PCA/OPC chaplains who had taken CPE felt positive enough about their experience that they thought it could be of use to others within the denominational fold. All of the expressed positives of their CPE learning time could conceivably be seen by them as a good result from a bad instrument. I needed to measure whether this was the case. The tenth survey question was worded in a deliberately expansive way: "Do you think that other PCA/OPC members/ministers would benefit from taking CPE?" The replacing of "chaplain" with "members/ministers" was intended to cause the respondent to attempt to make a broader estimate of the usefulness of CPE, but still within his ecclesiastical and theological world. The results were significant. Thirty-two of 36 said *yes*. Only one explicitly said *no* (but did so in a softened fashion: *not really*) and one other left the question blank. Two chaplains gave an ambivalent or mixed answer, saying it depended upon where the supervisor was theologically (n=2) and whether the prospective student was experienced in ministry (n=1). This figure 32 of 36 is an overwhelming endorsement of CPE usefulness from the one group in the denominations having significant experience with it. Taken together with the strong statement of the personal usefulness of CPE for the respondent (Q 4 reported above) it is reasonable to say that those within these denominations who have had experience with CPE have been helped in their ministry to the point that they reckon others would have the same experience if they took one or more units. A more conservative theology is clearly compatible with CPE.

IV. Comments by Respondents

The raw data of the survey was enriched by the comments that many added to their survey response. Of the 36 who had taken CPE, 24 added comments of varying lengths. (A significant number of those with no CPE also chose to add commentary, rather than simply say they had not done any units. Though illuminating, they take us in a different direction and I have not included them below.) I have grouped the comments by general subject matter.

Personal Growth

- *The major gain for me was a major piece of grief work involving the suicidal death of my father when a Senior in H.S.*
- *It was an uncomfortable and distressing time in many ways, but God used it to shake up my own self-sufficiency and get me to look at things in genuinely new ways.*
- *This learning experience changed my life for the better in being a wounded healer.*

Theological Diversity and Multi-faith Ministry

- *It is unfortunate that CPE is so dominated by liberal ministers. It is a great experience and many more PCA / OPC ministers should know about the benefits.*
- *I was usually the only clearly evangelical in my group. It was in that context that I learned to not see the others as "them" as if they were the enemy. I learned to love them and to speak where I was coming from in a way that I think earned their respect.*

- *No doubt, there was a lot of touchy-feely stuff going on there. Also, my supervisor was a strong theological liberal. But everything was aboveboard. I knew the group's presuppositions and biases and they knew mine. There was a lot of lively give-and-take and I think I'm better for it. Learning from those with very different theological backgrounds challenged and stretched me. It was a positive experience for me. However, I can see how some seminarians who might not be very grounded in Reformed theology might be led astray if they swallow the CPE paradigm hook, line & sinker. Caution is necessary, but for those who can engage with liberals in a pluralistic environment, CPE can prove beneficial.*

- *It was of little value, in my opinion, inasmuch as most of what passed for theology more honestly should have been described as deology, or sentimental religious mush. . . . . (it) depends on who conducts it, what the standards of truth are - or are not, whether intellectual honesty is tolerated or not, whether there is an underlying agenda to "broaden" the theological horizons of narrow minded conservative theologians, etc*

- *CPE provided me an opportunity to expand my ministry horizontally.*

- *I have worked in two prisons and one long-term care facility. It greatly assisted me in learning to work in a pluralistic setting without losing my own identity and theology.*

- *The challenges it gives you in knowing your theology amidst the various and liberal/pagan theologies will strengthen your own theological beliefs. My own theology was strengthened in CPE through the extreme challenges it presented. I did not like the theology of other students, but my experience was positive even though challenging*

- *CPE supervisors were all theological liberals, and so were most of the peers, but generally they accepted me as is, though they frequently expressed surprise at my theology, and thought it made hospital ministry hospital impossible - but I did it for 25 yrs!*

- *CPE was a positive experience for me because it opened my eyes to others - most of whom had poor theology. It is important to understand them a bit - having to work with them.*

- *. . . the CPE units were extremely valuable . . . ministering to Jewish, Muslim, agnostic patients while anchored in my own theology and faith.*

Value of CPE in Learning Ministry Skills

- *CPE was probably the best professional development opportunity afforded to me by the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps.*

- *I found the emphasis on parallel process, non-anxious presence and the didactics pertaining to Bowenian Family Systems to be indispensable and very transferable to the Military Staff environment.*

- *My utilization tour of duty for this training was as a Family Life Chaplain at Fort Stewart, GA. While not having the AAMFT "imprimatur" I felt that the intrapsychic integration (identity formation) was my main vehicle for providing pastoral*

care for distressed marriages and families.

- *(CPE was valuable) from the practical aspects of ministry...learning to listen, to invite response, addressing patients wherever they are or aren't in their own spiritual journey*
- *I took my CPE back in 1972. I used it as an Air Force Theater Hospital chaplain in Balad Iraq in 2005. I was able to bring back . . . all the lessons about working trauma and death and dying.*
- *CPE was also helpful by equipping me with basic tools for hospital ministry - and grief ministry.*

CPE's Reputation and Respondents' Recommendation

- *The negative press I heard was unfounded, and spread by people who lack interest in gaining self awareness. I think CPE is particularly well-suited for PCA or OPC ministers, many of whom (like me) shy away from training in interpersonal skills. Unfortunately it seems that oftentimes the people who avoid CPE are the ones who would benefit most from it.*
- *Personally, I think at least a unit of CPE or its equivalent should be required for every PCA minister. I think we threw "the baby out with the bath water" compared to our mainline denominations.*
- *The PCA and OPC need to know how their ministry is being received.*
- *(I recommend it) absolutely; it is more about yourself, learning how to process the things that are baggage and a hindrance to being a good Chaplain.*

V. Summary

A simple survey was sent to 189 chaplains of the PCA and OPC, with 60 responding and 36 completing the survey. The results indicated a strong appreciation of the role of CPE in contributing significantly to their preparation for effective ministry in a multi-faith environment. While the theological divergence of the movement from the conservative theology of these denominations was widely noted, the respondents overwhelmingly noted the benefits of the program in all of its parts and strongly endorsed its usefulness for others in their denominations.