**Case Study for ANZATFE 2015**

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Larry dropped in on Jan, the field educator. She had the time to meet with him, but found it annoying to accommodate his spontaneous style; she had repeatedly asked him to make an appointment if he wanted to reflect on his field ed placement. Once again, charming Larry grinned and leaned into her office: ‘Got a minute for me?’ She held back her frustration and said, ‘Sure, come on in, I’ve got half an hour.”

Larry was a thirty something recent convert to Christianity. His field education placement was at the non-denominational church in town. Larry was an incredibly good-looking, charismatic, all around great guy. He loved Jesus, he loved people, and the unchurched folks in town were flocking to the church, partly due to his presence. The church was also attracting crowds because it was a church that held upbeat worship services, and made it easy for people to feel comfortable coming “as they are”. In fact, lately the traffic leaving his church was creating a disturbance on the main boulevard through town. Jan actually drives past this church on her way to the United Methodist Church where she serves under appointment. Her position is part time, and the pews are sparsely populated with wise elders. A weak effort at installing a praise band last year ended in disaster. She wonders what Larry wants to tell her now about his exciting ministry experiences.

Larry reports he had recently attended the town’s interfaith clergy meeting, which Jan had to miss due to her faculty responsibilities. At the clergy gathering, the facilitator had invited each participant to share something they were particularly happy about and celebrating in their ministries. Each person shared something, from a satisfying wedding ceremony one rabbi had done, to an increase in attendance at a small, struggling Baptist church. Then it came to Larry. Larry shared that he was temporarily the pastor in charge at his church while the Senior Minister held a week long retreat for married couples at a remote retreat center.

Larry shared with the clergy at the gathering that he had done a wonderful baptism for a couple in the community who had come to him asking him to baptize their grandchild when the whole family was gathered at their home. The couple were well known in town, as the owners of the local hardware store. They said it was going to be a special occasion with all of the extended family. Their children would be visiting from out of town with the grandchild who needed to be baptized. Their other children would be present as well, along with the rest of the grandchildren. They wanted the baptism to be done on a Sunday afternoon, as part of a family barbecue in their back yard. They even had special landscaping done. Larry reported he told the grandparents he would be thrilled to bring the church to their back yard, and hoped they would return the favor by coming to the church. He said that in fact the couple had made a healthy donation to the church, and promised to start coming right away. The parents of the child were obviously deeply moved by the baptism, and pledged to find a church in their hometown as soon as they returned.

Larry dramatically paused in telling his story. He looked into Jan’s eyes with a “puppy dog” look, indicating he would soon report he had done something “bad”. After the clergy gathering, in the parking lot, Joe, the pastor of the nearby Presbyterian church accosted Larry. He said he thought that Larry had a lot to learn about ecumenical respect. He had no business “stealing sheep”. You see, the couple Larry had responded to had told him they were from a Presbyterian background, but had not been to church since a previous pastor had been caught in an affair and asked to leave. That was twenty years ago.

Joe told Larry he had talked to the couple just last week and explained that baptism was a sacrament, meant to be performed as a part of Christian worship. He explained that in baptism, the parents are dedicating themselves to raise the child in the church, and in covenantal response the church pledges to also raise the child and support the parents. Therefore it just could not be done as a back yard baptism. Joe had offered to go and pray with the family at the barbecue, but he insisted that they bring the child into the church, during a regularly scheduled worship service, for a baptism. He even offered to do this on the same Sunday when the children would be visiting from out of town.

The grandparents had sadly shaken their heads and gone away. As they left, Joe sensed they would never be back to his church. He knew that this felt wrong to them, like he was shutting the door on their one effort to come back. And he knew that it had taken real courage for them to come and invite him into their lives. But he also felt that it was not his place to re-shape the church to suit the social needs of persons who were alienated from the church.

It had never occurred to Larry that his “start up” might offend other churches when they functioned without the polity requirements of a denomination. He realized that he had missed the layers in this situation, and perhaps had taken advantage. And yet Larry had to reflect: who is to say that our way is wrong? Why are we criticized for operating free from denominational rules? What is the way that Jesus would respond to requests for pastoral presence? He wants the field ed director to tell him, before the pastor returns, how should he respond to the Presbyterian pastor, Joe? Did he do wrong? Will he be in trouble with the Senior Minister also?

Jan ponders how to respond.