

# Pulpit & Pew

Research on Pastoral Leadership

## ASSESSING THE CLERGY SUPPLY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Patricia M. Y. Chang



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# FOREWORD

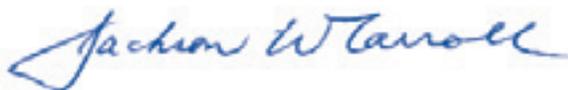
In 1980, Robert Wilson and I published *Too Many Pastors? The Clergy Job Market*. The book described what, at the time, appeared to be a surplus of Protestant clergy. Supply had outstripped demand. In the book, we expressed our frustration over the lack of adequate data that would allow us to assess the situation with any degree of accuracy. Many denominations did not have adequate data about their clergy: which ones were serving congregations, which were in non-parish ministries, and which had actually left ministry for a secular occupation without surrendering their ministerial credentials. Few denominations had adequate information about the age of their pastors. On the demand side, it was difficult to assess what was the minimum size congregation that could afford a full-time pastor, especially in light of growing inflation in the economy that was having an impact on congregational finances. Inflation was an especially important issue, given the large percentage of small congregations in most Protestant denominations. We concluded our work with a plea for better record keeping that would make it possible for denominations to have a clearer picture of the relation of pastoral supply to congregational demand.

Patricia Chang's important new study of the supply and demand for clergy, done for Pulpit & Pew, proves the old adage: "the more things change, the more they remain the same." Much has happened to affect churches and clergy in the past quarter of a century, but many Protestant denominations still do not keep adequate records to gain a clear supply and demand picture. Is there an over- or under-supply? Chang's study provides some helpful answers and policy recommendations, including the need for better data from the denominations. The study concludes with thoughtful commentaries by four observers of the clergy job market. I commend her work and the commentaries to you.

Pulpit & Pew is a multifaceted study of pastoral leadership, both Catholic and Protestant, being undertaken at Duke University's Divinity School with funding from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Its purpose is to provide credible research findings about pastoral leadership today and the changes impacting it. Three central sets of questions guide the various studies, including this one:

What is the state of pastoral leadership at the new century's beginning, and what do current trends portend for the next generation?

What is "good ministry?" Can we describe it? How does it come into being? Do its characteristics vary by denominational tradition? By congregational context? What can be done to help "good ministry" to come into being more frequently, and how can it be nurtured and supported more directly?



Jackson W. Carroll, Director  
Pulpit & Pew  
Williams Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In “Assessing the Clergy Supply in the 21st Century,” Patricia M. Y. Chang sets out to examine the current state of supply and demand for clergy in U.S. churches. Good, reliable information about clergy supply and demand, she contends, is vital to the church and its ability to provide ministry and shape a prophetic vision. But such information, in turn, requires accurate data, a clear vision about the kinds of ministry denominations need and a clear understanding of what denominations can do to attract and retain pastors.

Unfortunately, very little consistent, reliable information on clergy supply and demand currently exists. More reliable and consistent forms of data collection are essential if the church is to have the accurate analyses of clergy supply and demand that it needs.

Information from the *Yearbook for American and Canadian Churches*, for example, suggests at first glance that U.S. churches may have an oversupply of clergy. Some denominations, the Yearbook figures indicate, have twice as many clergy as they do congregations.

But such “total clergy” figures are misleading and at odds with the experiences of denominational officials who report having severe clergy shortages that leave many pulpits unfilled. Indeed, other data from the *Yearbook* support those anecdotal accounts. Data on the number of clergy actually serving in congregations indicates that most denominations do not have enough clergy to fill available positions.

To some extent, these different views of the clergy labor supply may reflect poor record keeping. “Total clergy” reported by individual denominations may include all ordained clergy, with no adjustments for retirements, deaths or withdrawals from ministry.

Evidence suggests that the congregations most vulnerable to pastoral vacancies are smaller or rural congregations, which lack the financial resources to attract and retain full-time ordained clergy. These smaller congregations account for the vast majority of Protestant churches in the U.S. Most U.S. congregations are small, with fewer than 100 regular participants, and cannot typically afford their own full-time pastor. Most churchgoers, however, attend the 10 per cent of churches that have medium to large congregations, those with more than 350 participants.

Chang suggests the real problem denominations face is not a clergy shortage generally, but a shortage of pastors who are willing and able to serve small congregations. Current incentive structures, including compensation and pension plans, contribute to this shortage, she finds. As long as denominations rely upon a system of independently financed pastorates, finding sufficient clergy to staff small congregations will continue to be a problem.

Meanwhile, as viable employment opportunities for full-time, fully ordained pastors shrink, clergy exits may increase as clergy are driven from the market to find other ways to make a living. As a result, a growing number of (primarily small) congregations are relying upon lay pastors, local pastors, part-time tent-maker pastors, yoked pastors, and pastors with other means of support such as a partner’s income or retirement benefits from previous careers.

To better support small congregations, denominations should consider restructuring their compensation and pension benefits so as to redirect resources and expertise more widely among small and large churches. The report also suggests that denominations could do much to better match pastors and available churches, taking greater advantage, for example, of national computerized databases.

In addition, denominations also need to track the career trajectories of their clergy following ordination. Accounting systems should be created to track active clergy, number of congregations, and characteristics of difficult-to-fill congregations so as to provide greater insight about the kinds of candidates denominations need to recruit and train. Denominations also need to better understand how many clergy leave ministry each year and why they leave.

The report concludes with a call for better training and support for regional church officials so they can better work with small congregations in recruiting clergy and the creation of new incentives to attract clergy to difficult-to-fill pulpits.

The report also includes commentaries by four persons who reflect on the report from their particular perspectives.

# ASSESSING THE CLERGY SUPPLY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

## INTRODUCTION

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The latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have been marked by a period of change and transition for institutional religion. A widespread boom in religious attendance after World War II was followed by sharp declines in the liberal mainline, and rising memberships in more conservative denominations. Religion and spirituality have entered the American consciousness in new ways, both politically and culturally. This awareness of religion has placed new demands upon the national institutions of religion to provide religious leadership in the local congregations that inspires, guides, and nurtures.

In this context, issues of clergy supply and demand loom at the forefront of every national denominational leader's agenda. They impact directly upon the present and future leadership of the congregation and its ability to shape a prophetic vision for its members. Denominations need to be able to assess the kinds of leaders they have, where they are losing valuable pastors, and how they can nurture and support those who are struggling in their ministries. Beyond this they need to step back and imagine what characteristics they envision as part of an ideal ministry for their denomination and create long-term plans to ensure that they can develop this kind of ministry.

In order to take these steps, every denomination must be able to provide the following: 1) accurate data on their pool of clergy leaders, both lay and ordained; 2) a clear vision about the kind of ministry the denomination needs and desires for their congregation; and 3) a clear understanding of what the denomination is willing to do, and what it can do, as an institution to attract and retain these kinds of leaders to ministry.

The challenge in writing this report has been that none of these three elements has been fully present in the denominations studied, and, further, that the data, visions, and understandings of denominational responsibilities have varied across denominations. Consequently, this report recommends that denominations establish more reliable forms of data collection to get a more accurate portrait of the current deployment of clergy across the church and the work that needs to be done to meet members' needs.

## ASSUMPTIONS OF THIS STUDY:

The absence of consistent and reliable information directly affects the conclusions that this report can make. Denominations with centralized bureaucracies and those that are more active in the oversight of their clergy tend to have a greater interest in keeping track of their clergy labor supply and thus have better records. Consequently, the findings tend to be more reflective of these denominations than those in the Free Church tradition. Being aware of this bias, I sought whenever possible to confirm these conclusions with denominational leaders in the Free Church tradition and have indicated throughout the report when this information was available. Like the blind man describing the elephant, I have tried to draw conclusions about the whole animal from incomplete bits and pieces.

In addition, my conclusions are also necessarily influenced by a set of starting assumptions. First, I am a sociologist who has spent the last decade investigating the conditions male and female clergy have faced in the ministerial workplace. As part of this pursuit I have collected mountains of quantitative data across 15 Protestant denominations, gathered information from hundreds of interviews with clergy, and studied the ministerial placement systems of over a dozen denominations. Analytically, I have focused mostly on the structural aspects that shape ministry, the effect of denominational policies upon placements, the performance of denominational labor markets, and the effect of various factors upon the career paths of male and female clergy. As a sociologist, I have tried in this report to confirm opinions with statistics and to support conclusions with different sources of data.

Second, when approached to write a report for this project I was specifically asked to write on trends affecting the "labor supply and demand for clergy." Focusing on these two trends implicitly suggests that one will take an approach to the problem of clergy leadership that is grounded in sociological and economic literature on labor markets. Most scholars who are interested in how organizations perform are interested in their staffing and personnel. They are concerned about whether there will be enough workers for the organization to perform efficiently and to support the growth or change in direction of the organization.

This underlying theoretical model treats clergy as valuable human resources and pastoral positions as labor opportunities. The goal in such a model is to have full employment where persons and jobs have particular qualities and the marketplace performs an optimal matching of person to job. Yet in fulfilling this request for a report on the “labor supply and demand” of Protestant denominations, I am aware that the economic language and concepts that I will employ make certain assumptions about the relationship of clergy to their denominations that are inconsistent with, and conceivably offensive to, the ways that some traditions view the ministry. It is worthwhile to examine the clash between these two models of ministry and the values they imply.

Most Protestant denominations begin with the view that the ministry is a particular calling. God calls individuals, who may or may not choose to listen, to certain roles in life. The ministry is one such role. The decision to enter the ministry is based on the individual’s relationship with God. In pursuit of a call, the individual may seek to lead a congregation, but he or she does so as a free agent. In the Free Church model, the denomination as an organization is simply a secular structure that facilitates this pursuit. If one holds this view then there is no need to assess, measure, or worry about whether or not there are enough leaders to serve a denomination, nor is there any need to worry about the health, happiness, or material welfare of clergy and their families. In this view the denomination is simply a neutral structure that facilitates the ability of people to pursue their ministry as clergy. The denomination does not take responsibility for that call nor for the welfare of that clergyperson. One’s ministry is wholly based on his or her relationship to God. This, however, overstates the case, since most Free Church denominations are not as “hands off” as the description implies.

A second view is that the denomination is not simply a neutral organization, but is in fact an institution that is invested with spiritual authority and responsibility for its clergy and congregations. While God calls individuals to the ministry, that ministry is defined and sanctioned by the denominational hierarchy and structure. These denominations tend to supervise clergy more directly; the denomination is more likely to see clergy as professionals who are a part of the organization and to take greater responsibility for their welfare in the form of training and benefits. Such denominations are also more likely to keep accurate records of clergy move-

ments and numbers. They likely view the clergyperson in the model of a modern-day, white-collar professional. The denominations are more likely to view themselves as rational structures, and clergy are more likely to view themselves as professionals, preparing themselves for ministry through higher education and identifying the ministry with the status of a middle-class profession. In this view denominations see themselves as partially responsible for, and perhaps even accountable to, the clergy who serve the denomination.

These two views can be thought of as ideal types or models. While a range of views exists between these two extremes, the values implicit in the poles cover much of the existing variation.

This report primarily addresses denominations that are closer to the second model of ministry. It assesses the supply of available clergy and the kinds of job opportunities that are available to them. It expects the denomination to take responsibility for the health, happiness, and welfare of its employees, and to be interested in strategically planning for its own future as well as the future of its employees. The report also assumes that clergy see themselves as professionals who wish to pursue the ministry as a full-time occupation and to sustain a middle-class lifestyle while doing so. These expectations and assumptions may be out of sync with the normative expectations of some denominations, but they tend to be the normative aspirations of typical Americans, which offers some justification for using them as the basis for this report.

## OUTLINE OF REPORT

In the following pages I will present two views of the clergy labor supply. The first view, based on data reported by denominations to the *Yearbook for American and Canadian Churches*, compares the total number of clergy relative to the number of congregations in each denomination from 1950-2000. These figures suggest that, over time, the supply of clergy has been increasing. In some denominations there are almost twice as many clergy than available senior congregation positions. While at least some, if not many, clergy also fill associate positions, and others are retired or in non-congregational positions such as chaplains, campus ministers, and so forth, the large ratios of clergy to congregations suggest at least the possibility of an oversupply of clergy.

Yet the idea of a surplus of clergy is at strong odds with the experiences of many denominational leaders who see a severe clergy shortage. They have trouble filling pulpits and are exploring a variety of solutions to this dilemma – from making greater use of lay ministers to recruiting more clergy into the seminaries. Another set of figures in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* supports this view. Comparing the number of clergy serving in congregations with the number of congregations reveals quite an opposite situation: that in fact a relatively large number of congregations do not have a pastor. How can these two statistical images – one of a clergy surplus and the other of a clergy shortage – be reconciled?

One explanation might be poor recordkeeping. Many denominations do not remove retired clergy from their rolls when reporting information to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. However, our interviews revealed that some denominations were unclear about whether or not they were including retired persons in their data. Also, as noted above, the total clergy figure of the *Yearbook* contains non-parish clergy as well as those serving congregations.

A second explanation might be called an imbalance between the kinds of ministerial positions that existing clergy desire or feel called to and the kinds of positions that are available. I address this imbalance in sections V through VI, where I cover a number of reasons for the simultaneous increase in the number of small congregations and decrease in the number of pastors willing to serve in these congregations. These chapters include demographic information that suggests that the majority of denominations in America today have small congregations.

The next section describes alternatives for changing the incentive structures within denominations to make small congregations more attractive. While these suggestions may only be viable in a small number of denominations, I make the argument in part to surface some of the hidden assumptions that we have about the ministry, and to focus attention on the consequences that these assumptions have for the future of clergy leadership. I also discuss ways in which placement strategies in denominations can be improved to allow better matches between clergy and available jobs.

Finally, I discuss a topic which is widely discussed but poorly understood, namely the loss of clergy through

the withdrawal of ordained ministers from the professional ministry. Existing studies suggest the severity of this problem, but little research exists to explain why clergy leave, where they go, and the rates of exit. In addition to the analysis contained in this report, readers interested in this topic may wish to read Dean Hoge's study of the Protestant drop-out phenomenon, which will be forthcoming from the Pulpit & Pew project.

The final sections of this report summarize its conclusions and make recommendations for policy initiatives as well as areas for further research. The main findings are highlighted below:

## MAIN FINDINGS

1. Data about “total clergy” suggest, misleadingly, that there is a surplus of ordained clergy.
2. Data about total number of clergy serving congregations and total number of congregations more accurately suggest that there is a significant percentage of congregation vacancies.
3. Vacancies tend to be most severe in small congregations, although there are also difficulties in staffing ethnic and rural congregations.
4. Demographic trends indicate that the majority of denominations in the United States today have a large number of small congregations, but the majority of churchgoers belong to large congregations. The number of large congregations overall is declining.
5. Small congregations do not have adequate financial resources to support a full-time pastor.
6. Taken together, these factors would seem to indicate that a declining number of clergy are able to make a living serving as full-time pastors of congregations.
7. As employment opportunities for full-time, fully ordained pastors shrink, clergy exits may be increasing, as clergy may be driven from the market to find other ways to make a living.
8. As employment opportunities for full-time, fully ordained pastors shrink, the future leaders of many congregations will be lay pastors, local pastors, part-time tentmaker pastors, yoked pastors, and pastors with alternative means of support (partner income or retirement benefits from previous careers).

## EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ANSWERED WITH CONSISTENT, HIGH-QUALITY DATA:

1. How many clergy are ordained each year, and at what levels of ordination (where applicable)?
2. What happens to these clergy after ordination?
3. How many clergy leave the ministry each year due to retirement/career change/other?
4. What kinds of salary and benefits do clergy receive?
5. How many clergy do not receive a living or family wage?
6. What is the current supply of jobs and how is this supply changing?

## QUESTIONS FOR DENOMINATIONS TO PONDER:

1. What kinds of qualifications should your clergy have?
2. What roles and responsibilities are appropriate for the denomination to have in
  - i. finding employment for clergy?
  - ii. providing a living wage for full-time clergy?
  - iii. providing health benefits for clergy and their families?
  - iv. providing retirement benefits for clergy?
3. How important is it to have full-time, professionally trained clergy?
4. How will denominations distribute the collective responsibility for the provision of clergy among the national denomination, regional judicatories, and local congregations?
5. How will denominations hold themselves accountable to these responsibilities?
6. What can responsible leaders do to protect the clergy as a profession or as a lay position?

## AT FIRST GLANCE: A SURPLUS OF CLERGY

The *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* publishes denominationally reported statistics on the numbers of congregations and ordained clergy in each denomination between the years 1950 and 2000. A close look at the number of clergy (supply) relative to the number of congregations (demand) suggests how the balance between clergy and congregations has shifted over time and whether denominations appear to be experiencing greater shortages or surpluses of clergy. The *Yearbook* represents the most comprehensive collection of these kinds of statistics that has been consistently collected over a long period of time. However, because the data are self-reported by each denomination, there is ambiguity as to whether the number of clergy includes only those clergy who have been ordained at each denomination's highest level of ordination (a definition which the long-time editor of the yearbook, Constant Jacquet, specifically used in other sections of the *Yearbook*) or clergy at all levels of ordination.

While some denominations have only one kind of ordination, some ordain or commission clergy to serve only in a specific congregation or for the purpose of performing limited functions. These clergy may be called licensed or commissioned pastors, lay pastors, or local pastors, depending upon the denominational tradition. These distinctions have substantive consequences for the conclusions drawn in this study. Unfortunately there is no way of knowing positively that the numbers reported in the *Yearbook* are for "fully ordained clergy," that is, those with the full degree of clerical rights and responsibilities offered within a denomination. However, this report assumes that the definitions used by Jacquet have remained consistent, that the numbers reflect the denomination's best estimate of fully ordained clergy in their denomination, and that this convention has been applied consistently over time.

Another simplifying assumption in these analyses is that one position exists per congregation. The validity of this assumption is challenged on the one hand by the proportion of congregations that have several clergy on staff, and on the other by the number of congregations that share a pastor, which is a common pattern among small congregations. Nonetheless, the assumption provides a simple and consistent indicator over time.

The data suggest that the total supply of ordained clergy relative to the number of congregations has shifted between 1950 and 2000. Within each denomination, the labor supply at any given moment is affected positively by the number of pastors who become ordained each year and negatively by the number of clergy who retire or resign. The labor demand is affected by the number of congregations and the growth of existing congregations. When congregations close, the demand for clergy is lower. The figures in Table 1 on page 9 represent the balance of supply and demand between 1950 and 2000. Monitoring the patterns of supply and demand is an important focus for ministry officials because they ultimately affect career issues such as whether or not enough jobs are available for newly ordained pastors or for those who wish to be promoted into positions of more responsibility.

Within each denomination, the clergy job market can be described as a chain of opportunity (White 1970). As a pastor retires, he or she leaves a vacancy that can be filled by a qualified applicant from below. As that person moves up, he or she leaves another vacancy which can be filled. If the number of new entries equals the number of retirements, then the chain of opportunity can always be filled. If, however, there are more new entrants than retirements or exits, a surplus of clergy exists in which a queue of clergy wait for available jobs.

The classic economic approach to interpreting a labor surplus assumes that a labor surplus creates increased competition for jobs. This competition might allow congregations to offer lower salaries and still fill their pulpits. Lower salaries and fewer opportunities might also create greater incentives for clergy to switch careers or leave the ministry altogether. Similarly, a clergy shortage could drive up salaries since congregations would have to offer more incentives to fill their pulpits.

In 1980, Jackson Carroll and Robert Wilson (Carroll and Wilson 1980) looked at the supply of clergy relative to the number of congregations to calculate the relative supply and demand for parish positions within a number of mainline Protestant denominations between 1950 and 1977. They found a surplus of ordained clergy relative to the number of members and congregations. Using the same method, I have extended this data collection and analysis to the period 1950-2000 (Chang and Bompadre 1999). The table on the page 9 reflects the findings of this extension.

## RATIO OF CLERGY TO CONGREGATIONS

Table 1 shows the ratio of total clergy to congregations for the years 1950-2000. It is important to repeat what was said previously about the clergy figures. They represent the *total* number of clergy in each denomination, including pastors and associate pastors of congregations, chaplains in various institutions, campus ministers, faculty in colleges and seminaries, denominational officials, as well as retired clergy. While some clergy in non-parish positions are in those positions because they are unable to obtain a parish ministry position, most are in other types of ministry because they chose to do so. Thus, strictly speaking, the ratios of Table 1 are artificial in that they overstate the supply of clergy available to serve congregations, and they cannot be used to assess the current supply and demand for parish clergy. It is nevertheless instructive to consider these ratios, because they show us some important denominational labor-market trends, especially the overall growth in the number of all types of clergy relative to the number of congregations and denominational members. These are important trends for denominations to consider, since they show expanding opportunities for ordained clergy beyond serving as pastors of congregations. At the same time, the trends also raise a question about the attractiveness of serving as pastor of a congregation. Does the total ratio of clergy to congregations increase because a growing number of ordained clergy are not attracted to being pastors? I address this in part later as I look at the issue of imbalance being experienced by some denominations. But first, I want to look at what Table 1 tells us about trends.

Assuming that one congregation equals one parish job, these figures in Table 1 roughly indicate the number of employment opportunities relative to the labor supply that existed within each denomination between 1950 and 2000. A figure of 1.0 would suggest that the market is in balance, with one pastor for each congregation. A number less than 1.0 indicates a labor shortage, meaning that not enough clergy are available to supply all the congregations in the denomination. A number greater than 1.0 suggests a clergy surplus, meaning that more than one clergy exists for each congregation. Given the recent interest in the decline of the liberal mainline congregations relative to more conservative Protestant denominations, I have grouped

the denominations in this table in terms of theological position according to the well-known classification scheme provided by Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney in *American Mainline Religion* (1980).

The ratios for the liberal denominations show that the average ratio of (total) clergy per congregation has more than doubled from 0.9 to 1.9 between 1950 and 2000, suggesting that there are almost twice as many clergy of all kinds (parish and non-parish) as there are congregations. The labor market situation in the moderate and conservative denominations has also shifted from a labor shortage to a labor surplus, but the shift has been less severe<sup>1</sup>.

Overall, the figures in Table 1 suggest that between 1950 and 2000 the imbalance of the total number of clergy relative to congregations has increased in almost all Protestant denominations. Among the liberal denominations there are almost two ordained pastors for every congregation; the situation is similar in the conservative

denominations and only slightly better in the moderate denominations. Were congregations the only employment opportunities for ordained clergy, all denominations would be significantly oversupplied and clergy would face a highly competitive job situation.

A notable exception to these overall trends is the United Methodist Church, whose reported figures suggest a ratio of 1.2 or 20 percent more clergy than congregations in the year 2000. The clergy:congregation ratio in the United Methodist Church has consistently been among the most closely balanced of the denominations considered in this table. One reason for this may be their appointment system, which seeks to provide lifetime employment for every pastor. This system, whereby the regional conferences control the supply of clergy to local congregations (including the number of pastors ordained) and reappoint clergy every few years, allows the regional conference executives to exercise greater leverage in the clergy job market. Their monopoly over the supply of pastors also



allows them to exert greater leverage in negotiating minimum salaries and benefits for their pastors. The data from 1950 to the present suggest that they have steadily moved from a state of clergy shortage to clergy surplus, when the total number of clergy is considered. Currently reported figures indicate that they now have 20 percent more clergy than congregations. However, a recent article distributed by the United Methodist News Service also reports that 25 percent of their congregations are currently served by “local pastors,” unordained pastors licensed by a bishop to serve only in a specific church (United Methodist News Service 2000).

The appointment system that the Methodists employ originated in a historical organizational blueprint that has become strongly associated with Methodist theological identity. Consequently, these controls are not easily adaptable to denominations with different traditions and beliefs. Denominations with congregational polities, for example, value the authority and freedom of the local congregation to select its own leadership and would resist adopting Methodist strategies of centralized control.

Admittedly, the apparent surplus of clergy that the ratios of Table 1 suggest is artificial, and this is reflected by the experiences of many denominational officials in trying to find clergy to serve as pastors of some of their congregations. Interviews with denominational ministry officials and leaders who monitor clergy placement revealed a strong perception that, despite the overall surplus of clergy relative to congregations, some denominations have a severe clergy shortage. These leaders tell stories of congregations that have been without a full-time pastor for a number of years, and this situation clearly worries them. The interviews suggest that the more difficult labor problem denominations face is not one of having too many clergy or not enough, but rather one of balance.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is also worth noting that many of the conservative denominations have a lower ratio of members to congregations, suggesting that they have many smaller congregations. I will revisit this issue in the companion report on clergy careers.

<sup>2</sup> This perception is one echoed by denominational researchers within the PCUSA. See J. Marcum, “Parsing the Pastor Shortage,” Presbyterian Church USA Research Services, 2001.

*(T)he more difficult labor problem denominations face is not one of having too many clergy or not enough, but rather one of balance.*

**TABLE 1: RATIO OF TOTAL CLERGY TO NUMBER OF CHURCHES**

DENOMINATIONS:	RATIO OF TOTAL CLERGY TO CHURCHES						
	1950	1960	1970	1977	1983	1993	2000
<b>LIBERAL PROTESTANTS</b>							
The Episcopal Church	0.9	1.1	1.6	1.7	1.8	2.0	no report
United Church of Christ <sup>a</sup>	0.8	1.1	1.5	1.1	1.6	1.6	1.7
Presbyterian Church US	0.7	0.9	1.1	1.3	n/a	n/a	n/a
United Presbyterian Church USA	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.6	n/a	n/a	n/a
Presbyterian Church USA <sup>b</sup>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.6	1.8	1.9
<b>Average Ratios</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.8</b>
<b>MODERATE PROTESTANTS</b>							
United Methodist Church <sup>c</sup>	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.2
American Lutheran Church <sup>d</sup>	n/a	1.0	1.3	1.4	1.5	n/a	n/a
Lutheran Church in America <sup>e</sup>	n/a	1.1	1.3	1.3	1.4	n/a	n/a
Evangelical Lutheran Church US <sup>f</sup>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.6	1.6
Christians (Disciples of Christ) <sup>g</sup>	1.1	0.9	1.4	1.5	1.2	1.8	1.6
American Baptist Churches <sup>h</sup>	0.9	1.1	1.0	1.0	1.2	1.3	1.6
Reformed Church in America	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.7	1.7	1.9	2.1
<b>Average Ratios</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.6</b>
<b>CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTS</b>							
Southern Baptist Convention	0.8	1.1	no report	1.6	1.5	1.6	2.4
Church of the Nazarene	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.6	1.7	no report	2.0
Assemblies of God	1.0	1.2	1.4	1.5	2.4	2.6	2.7
Church of God (Anderson)	1.3	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.7
<b>Average Ratios</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>2.2</b>
<b>Overall Average Per Year</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.9</b>

These denominations have been classified in three groups following Roof and McKinney: American Mainline Religion

- a Unofficial totals which are a composite of statistics for the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church which merged to form the United Church of Christ
- b Unofficial totals which are a composite of statistics for the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, which merged in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church USA.
- c Unofficial totals which are a composite of statistics for The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church which merged in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church.
- d American Evangelical Church existed from 1960-'87 as a combination of itself, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Lutheran Church in America.
- e Lutheran Church in America existed from 1962-'87 as a combination of American Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Finnish Evangelical Church, and the United Lutheran Church in America.
- f In 1987 the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America merged to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- g For 2000 the data is given for both United States and Canada combined.
- h American Baptist Churches for 1950-1970 referred to as American Baptist Convention. Source: Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches: 1951, 1962, 1972, 1979, 1985, 1995, 2000.

Where it was possible the choice of the year of the Yearbook was made so that the year of the data given by the denomination matched the year of the data desired. For example, the 1972 Yearbook was used because it contained data for 1970 as given by the each denomination. This was not possible for 2000.

**TABLE 2: RATIO OF CLERGY SERVING CHURCHES TO NUMBER OF CHURCHES**

DENOMINATIONS:	RATIO OF CLERGY SERVING TO CHURCHES						
	1950	1960	1970	1977	1983	1993	2000
<b>LIBERAL PROTESTANTS</b>							
The Episcopal Church	0.6	no data	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.1	n/a
United Church of Christ <sup>a</sup>	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.7
Presbyterian Church U.S.	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.7	n/a	n/a	n/a
United Presbyterian Church USA	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.9	n/a	n/a	n/a
Presbyterian Church USA <sup>b</sup>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.9	0.9	0.8
<b>Average Ratios</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.8</b>
<b>MODERATE PROTESTANTS</b>							
United Methodist Church <sup>c</sup>	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.7
American Lutheran Church <sup>d</sup>	n/a	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.9	n/a	n/a
Lutheran Church in America <sup>e</sup>	n/a	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9	n/a	n/a
Evangelical Lutheran Church US <sup>f</sup>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.9	0.9
Christians (Disciples of Christ)	0.5	0.5	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0	0.9
American Baptist Churches <sup>g</sup>	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8
Reformed Church in America	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.0
<b>Average Ratios</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.9</b>
<b>CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTS</b>							
Southern Baptist Convention	0.6	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.9
Church of the Nazarene	no data	0.9	0.7	n/r	0.8	0.9	0.9
Assemblies of God	no data	0.9	0.9	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.5
Church of God (Anderson)	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.3
<b>Average Ratios</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.4</b>
<b>Overall Average Per Year</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>1.0</b>

These denominations have been classified in three groups following Roof and McKinney: American Mainline Religion

- a Unofficial totals which are a composite of statistics for the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church which merged to form the United Church of Christ
- b Unofficial totals which are a composite of statistics for the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, which merged in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church USA.
- c Unofficial totals which are a composite of statistics for The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church which merged in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church.
- d American Evangelical Church existed from 1960-'87 as a combination of itself, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Lutheran Church in America.
- e Lutheran Church in America existed from 1962-'87 as a combination of American Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Finnish Evangelical Church, and the United Lutheran Church in America.
- f In 1987 the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America merged to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- g For 2000 the data is given for both United States and Canada combined.
- h American Baptist Churches for 1950-1970 referred to as American Baptist Convention. Source: Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches: 1951, 1962, 1972, 1979, 1985, 1995, 2000.

Where it was possible the choice of the year of the Yearbook was made so that the year of the data given by the denomination matched the year of the data desired. For example, the 1972 Yearbook was used because it contained data for 1970 as given by the each denomination. This was not possible for 2000.

## AT SECOND GLANCE: A CLERGY SHORTAGE

Table 2 shows the balance between the labor supply and labor demand as it has changed from 1950 to 2000 by portraying the ratio of clergy serving in congregations to the number of congregations. This comparison selects only those clergy who are actually employed in congregations; it does not include clergy who may be unemployed, who are serving in non-congregation positions, or who have left the ministry. These figures show a very different perspective of the clergy supply problem. Most denominations reflect a situation in which there are not enough clergy serving in congregations to fill all of the available positions. In the liberal Protestant denominations, the average vacancy rate is 20 percent in 2000, increasing from a 10 percent vacancy rate in 1990. Among moderate Protestant denominations, the vacancy rate is 10 percent, an improvement over the 20 percent vacancy rate a decade earlier.

Among conservative Protestants, a heavy surplus of clergy still exists, but it is not as severe as in Table 1. In fact, considering that these figures reflect employed clergy, it is remarkable that conservative denominations, which tend to be smaller in size, have such a high proportion of clergy serving in congregations. This is probably partly explained by a smaller number of non-congregational clergy positions in these denominations when compared with larger mainline denominations.



## HOW MANY CLERGY? RECORDKEEPING & RETIREMENTS

What accounts for these two very different views of the clergy labor supply? Sadly, one reason may simply be poor recordkeeping. There tends to be weak support for centralization of resources and information in Protestant denominations for both theological and organizational reasons. As I noted, the “total clergy” reported in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* includes for most denominations all ordained clergy, with no adjustments made for retirements, deaths, or withdrawals from ministry. The “clergy serving congregations” figure does not distinguish between those who are paid, full-time, part-time, or volunteer. Neither of these figures distinguishes between what are sometimes called “fully ordained clergy” and those who may be lay or licensed ministers in denominations with different types of clergy ordination. Clarification of these issues would produce more accurate clergy statistics and a clearer picture of clergy trends.

One issue that we tried to address in the data was that of clergy retirements. We queried a number of denominations on whether the figures reported in the *Yearbook* were limited to active clergy or included retired clergy (or even deceased clergy). Unfortunately, the majority of denominations could not answer this question decisively. The Assemblies of God is a notable exception. While their reported figures include all three levels of ordination, they require their clergy to renew their licenses yearly and therefore are able to provide figures that only reflect active clergy.

In follow-up calls to various denominations, the Church of the Nazarene provided what seemed to be reliable data on retirements. A denominational official from that denomination reported statistics for 2000 that were close to but not exactly the same as the figures reported in the *Yearbook*<sup>3</sup>. He also reported that roughly 1 percent of their total clergy retired each year and that, overall, 20 percent of their clergy were retired. These figures had been kept for at least the past 10 years and showed consistency, and thus were assumed to be reliable.

If we were to take these numbers as a standard and apply them across all denominations, that is, assume

<sup>3</sup> In 2000 the *Yearbook* reported data from 1998 which listed 9,998 as the total number of clergy; in an e-mail correspondence the official listed total clergy being 12,789, from which we subtracted 2,663 (which he reported as the number of retired), leaving 10,126. The discrepancy represents a relatively small margin of error.

that all the statistics reported in the “total clergy” column were inflated by a factor of 20 percent, the figures would still reflect a significant number of non-retired clergy who are not serving as pastors of congregations (and we would be subtracting twice as many retired clergy for those denominations that did not include retired clergy in their total clergy figures). Whether these non-retired clergy are unemployed or are serving in denominationally recognized ministries cannot be answered from the way the data are reported. As we will suggest later, denominations would have a much better understanding of their supply and demand picture if they would be more precise and consistent in the way they report their data.



## A PROBLEM OF BALANCE

Despite an abundance of qualified, ordained clergy, the problem of congregational vacancies appears to remain persistent. The available evidence suggests that the congregations that are most vulnerable to pastoral vacancies are the smaller or rural ones, because these congregations have the fewest financial resources. Small congregations in rural areas appear to have an even greater problem retaining pastors because the distance between congregations is greater, making the possibility of pastor sharing or yoked congregations more difficult. Rural congregations are also more isolated and have fewer job opportunities for spouses who might otherwise be able to supplement the pastor’s salary and benefits. While pastoring a small congregation has some advantages, such as more intimate relationships with members, greater flexibility of one’s time, and more “hands-on” ministry, the economic needs of full-time clergy and the limited resources of most small congregations make it difficult for these congregations to attract and retain qualified clergy.

How widespread is this problem? The data we have support the argument that the problem is widespread and is becoming increasingly acute among denominations that are experiencing declining memberships. As all religion researchers know, it is difficult to collect comparable statistics from different denominations because the categories used to collect information vary by tradition. Thus, regarding the assignments of clergy, the best information comes from those denominations that are hierarchically organized, and where there are formal administrative linkages between different levels of the denomination.

This section of the report relies chiefly on studies conducted by the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA)<sup>4</sup> and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) (Ministry and Evaluation 2000), because they are among the few denominations with data that can be used to document the targeted shortage in small congregations. Among liberal, moderate, and conservative Protestant denominations, these two organizations are also among the most proactive in guiding their clergy into congregations and in helping them find employment.

In the ELCA, clergy are appointed to a synod after seminary, and the bishop in that synod plays a strong

<sup>4</sup> Information was gathered from the PCUSA Research Service website, [www.pcusa.org/pcusa/cmd/rs/shortg.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/pcusa/cmd/rs/shortg.htm)

role in recommending candidates for available positions, particularly in the first call. In the PCUSA, the denomination administers a national database to which candidates may submit their employment applications or profiles. This service then matches candidates with congregations seeking pastors and also helps candidates find employment through a variety of support services and a monthly employment bulletin. While both of these denominations attempt to mitigate vacancies in small congregations by providing support for matching pastors and congregations, these two denominations also have high educational requirements for their clergy. Severe leadership shortages for small congregations probably occur more readily in such denominations as these, which have high educational requirements for ordination—that is require a seminary degree. Such requirements often result in considerable educational debt encumbrances for pastors and necessitates placement in congregations that can provide higher salaries than many small congregations can afford.

Data from the ELCA and the PCUSA confirm that small congregations are more likely to have problems of pastoral vacancy. The ELCA reports that roughly half of their pastoral vacancies occur in small congregations of 1-175 members. Small congregation vacancies are even more acute in the PCUSA. Table 3 shows how the distribution of congregation size shifted between 1990-2000 in the PCUSA. Within 10 years the percentage of congregations with fewer than 100 members grew from 39 percent of the total number of congregations to 44 percent of the total. The percentage of vacancies in congregations grew in almost every size category, although the vacancy rate grew most in the smaller congregations. In 2000, 77 percent of congregations with 50 or fewer members had no pastor, compared to 71 percent in the previous decade. Forty-seven percent of congregations with 51-100 members had no pastor in 2000 compared to 42 percent in 1990, with the vacancy rate continuing to decline gradually as congregations get larger.

What amplifies this crisis is that both denominations are reporting declining memberships and increasing percentages of smaller congregations. The ELCA reports that synods with a high percentage of small congregations are the synods that have the steepest declines in congregation attendance (Ministry and Evaluation 2000). Taken together, these facts suggest a

**TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF CONGREGATIONAL VACANCIES BY CONGREGATION SIZE (PCUSA)**

CONGREGATION SIZE	1990		2000	
	PERCENT OF ALL CONGREGATIONS	PERCENT THAT HAVE NO PASTOR	PERCENT OF ALL CONGREGATIONS	PERCENT THAT HAVE NO PASTOR
<b>1-50</b>	<b>18.6</b>	<b>70.8</b>	<b>22.8</b>	<b>76.6</b>
<b>51-100</b>	<b>20.4</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>21.2</b>	<b>46.9</b>
<b>101-150</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>24.7</b>
<b>151-200</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>16.3</b>
<b>201-300</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>12.1</b>
<b>301-500</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>9.1</b>
<b>501-800</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>4.5</b>
<b>801+</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>1.0</b>

vicious cycle in which small congregations become even smaller because of their inability to attract pastors.

One complicating factor in looking at data across denominations is that the definition of small congregation varies considerably. Lyle E. Schaller talks about small congregations as having roughly 30 members, because this number corresponds to the number of people who can naturally coexist within an intimate, interpersonal community (Schaller 2001). Yet as we can see above, the ELCA considers a congregation with fewer than 175 members as small.

The definition of small becomes more important when making comparisons across denominations. The ELCA reports that roughly 50 percent of its vacancies are in congregations under 175 members, but in the Assemblies of God, the average congregation size is roughly 125, with average attendance reported as 136. The Assemblies of God estimate (although they could not report actual statistics) that they have an overall vacancy rate of 6 to 7 percent. In the PCUSA, the vacancy rate is 25 percent in congregations with between 101 and 150 members. These numbers raise an intriguing question: Have denominations where small congregations are normative figured out a better way to fill their pulpits? One clue may be found in their salary levels.

A survey of salary information collected from ordained clergy in 15 Protestant denominations in 1994 suggests that despite the small size of their con-

gregations, the Assemblies of God pay salaries that are highly competitive with other denominations. In a ranking of the 15 denominations, AOG salaries ranked in the middle (Zikmund, Lummis et al. 1998). The denomination neither offers a national pension plan nor requires that congregations contribute to medical or dental benefits for their clergy, but this arrangement is not uncommon. Assuming that the problem in filling the vacancies in small congregations can be overcome with financial incentives, perhaps the most direct way of addressing the clergy shortage would be to pay premiums to pastors willing to serve in these hard-to-fill positions.

To summarize, while a surplus of ordained clergy are potentially able to serve in denominational congregations, at the same time there are shortages of pastoral

leaders to serve targeted areas of the population, most notably among the growing number of smaller congregations. High educational requirements may exacerbate the problem of filling pulpits in small congregations. Data from PCUSA show a

direct negative correlation between the size of the congregation and the vacancy rate, despite the fact that between 1991 and 1999 this denomination had roughly 5,000 active clergy (or a third of its available labor force) who were not serving in congregations.

*(T)he current religious landscape is skewed towards a very large number of small congregations and a small number of large congregations.*



## THE FUTURE IS SMALL: THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF CONGREGATION SIZE

Thus far I have argued that the clergy shortage is largely due to the large number of small congregations. Unfortunately, the denominations I surveyed only collect sketchy data on congregation size and its relationship to pastoral vacancies. The data that are available, however, suggest that the number of small congregations is probably growing, and that the current religious landscape is skewed towards a very large number of small congregations and a small number of large congregations. Furthermore, recent research shows that the majority of churchgoing Americans attends a relatively small number of large congregations. This section offers data to support this conclusion, but urges denominations to undertake their own censuses to discover how the size distribution of their congregations is changing.

Few denominations keep track of the size of their congregations, the distribution of different sized congregations over time, or the relationship between congregational size and the rate of pastoral vacancies. Nonetheless, there is a widely held perception that the number of small congregations has increased. Two trends feed the growth in the number of small congregations. The first trend arises from declining memberships in the so-called Protestant mainline-liberal denominations that have been losing members since the mid-1960s. In these denominations a number of factors, including aging populations, communities in transition, and competition for families' time, are contributing to the decline in membership. Although empirically unproven, it seems plausible to hypothesize that the congregations that are losing the most members are not the large congregations that have many resources to marshal against changes in the social environment, but the smaller and more moderately sized congregations that are already struggling.

The second trend arises from the rapid growth of the conservative, Pentecostal, and Holiness denominations that tend to generate relatively small congregations. These congregations, which tend to rely on lay ministers, start out as small, house churches or storefront

congregations and grow from there. Although these congregations are growing, they are still relatively small.

The best evidence of the small congregation phenomenon is gathered from the National Congregational Survey (Chaves, Konieczny et al. 1999) that collected data in 1998 from a national sample of 1,236 congregations from all U.S. denominations. This survey found that 71 percent of U.S. congregations have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults and that the median-sized congregation had only 75 participants. In other words, half the congregations in the national sample had more than 75 participants and half had fewer than 75 participants. Furthermore, this study found that while only 10 percent of American congregations have more than 350 participants, those congregations contain almost half of the religious service attendees in the country.

These results suggest that the skewed size distribution in the Presbyterian data (Table 3) is symptomatic of patterns in the larger landscape of American religion. The majority of the congregations in the United States are small, with fewer than 100 regular members, and cannot typically afford their own pastor. The majority of churchgoers on the other hand, attend medium to large congregations, most of which can afford to hire a full-time pastor, or even a pastoral staff.

The United Methodist Church reports that the number of pastors in full connection (that is, fully ordained members of annual conferences) serving congregations with fewer than 150 members increased from 1,749 in 1990 to 2,219 in 1996. If one counts all types of local church pastors (inclusive of probationary, seminary students, lay pastors, retired, and other pastors who may serve a congregation along with another ministry position), then the number serving small congregations grew from 6,685 in 1990 to 6,907 in 1996, suggesting that most small congregations tend to be served by pastors in less than full connection.

These patterns tell a very important story for the future of the denominations. First, they suggest a sharp stratification between rich congregations that can afford full-time, fully-ordained pastors and poor congregations that employ part-time or less than fully-ordained pastors.

Second, the distribution of members across these congregations suggests that the large congregations are more likely to command the kinds of resources that they need to grow larger because they are more likely to have the funds and staff required to recruit more members or design the kinds of programs that will attract more members.

More speculatively, one scenario for the future is that in denominations where membership levels are declining due to demographic shifts or declining interest, the number of small and moderate congregations that can afford a full-time pastor will decline, causing the congregation to suffer and possibly fail, or causing members to migrate (when possible) to larger congregations. This would result in an even larger number of small, pastorless congregations that would impact the denomination negatively.

The concentration of members in large congregations should not be interpreted to mean that the number or size of larger congregations is growing. In fact, there is spotty evidence that the large congregations are also shrinking. The ELCA reports that since 1989 the average number of multiple-staff congregational calls has declined, with 24 fewer such calls each year (Ministry and Evaluation 2000). The United Methodist Church reports that the number of pastors in full connection serving large congregations with more than 150 members has declined from 7,247 in 1990 to 6,562 in 1996.

As denominational membership becomes concentrated in large congregations, the character of the denomination itself could also change. In my research on clergy, one tangential observation I have made is that wealthy congregations are more likely to behave autonomously from denominational structures.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the most successful mega-congregations are non-denominational. These congregations owe their success to the entrepreneurship of their leaders, and they orient their services towards members, who are sometimes treated as customers or clients. While not all large congregations operate on this model, larger congregations may be able to act more independently because of their resources, further heightening the qualitative differences between rich and poor congregations.

<sup>5</sup> This is an observation made about hierarchical polity denominations; in congregational polity denominations congregational autonomy is a given.

## A PROBLEM OF INCENTIVES: HOW CURRENT INCENTIVE STRUCTURES MAGNIFY SUPPLY PROBLEMS

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In previous pages I have documented how a number of Protestant denominations are experiencing the paradoxical problem of an overall clergy surplus coupled with targeted shortages, especially in the smaller congregations. The reason for these shortages is fairly clear. Small congregations cannot afford to hire full-time clergy.

Despite the fact that denominations are often thought of as national organizations and clergy as part of the

national body, most clergy are not employees of denominational organizations in a technical and sometimes legal sense. In fact, clergy are employees of individual congregations, and these congregations are, for the most part, locally owned and operated, independent, non-profit, voluntary organizations. As such,

*We heard about the many hardships they faced in their personal and professional lives, the endless demands of their congregations, and their struggle to fulfill their vocation in very difficult circumstances.*

congregations depend largely upon the voluntary contributions of their members to continue their operations. The annual income that is provided through these voluntary contributions goes to pay for the mortgage or rent of the congregation building and grounds, maintenance of the physical plant, electricity, gas, heating, janitorial services, landscaping, office support, newsletters, congregation bulletins, communications, computers, phones, and of course the pastor's salary (and if he or she is lucky, some medical, dental or retirement benefits).

Since much of the budget depends on voluntary contributions, which in turn are subject to a number of variable factors associated with the social background of congregation members, a congregation's ability to attract a qualified pastor to lead it will often be highly correlated with the size of its average worship attendance. This fact is borne out in Table 3 on page 13, which shows that as congregations in the PCUSA get

bigger, congregation vacancies decrease.

Large congregations tend to be wealthy congregations, and wealthy congregations can hire the best, most experienced, and most charismatic pastors that will help them attract more members and help them grow richer and more influential within the community. Meanwhile, the majority of congregations, which are smaller or moderate-sized, may be losing members due to age or community transitions, and the smallest ones will be increasingly likely to hire only part-time pastors, less experienced pastors, or clergy who can supplement their income from outside sources.

In the pages above I have documented what appears, at first glance to be a surplus of ordained clergy in the majority of Protestant denominations and pointed out that the problem denominations face is not necessarily one of overall supply, but rather one of targeted clergy shortages in small congregations. I now argue that the so-called clergy shortage is a misleading label for the real problem facing denominations. There is not a clergy shortage overall; rather, there is a shortage of pastors willing and able to serve small congregations. That is, the number of small congregations that cannot afford a full-time or fully-ordained pastor is increasing and the number of ordained pastors willing to serve in small congregations is decreasing. *As long as denominations rely upon a system of independently financed pastorates, finding the appropriate clergy support to staff small congregations will pose a problem.*

Some denominational leaders have expressed the ideal that the ministry is a calling and that clergy should feel called to serve the congregation wherever needed, regardless of location and situation. This sentiment, while principled, does a great disservice to the many clergy who are struggling in small and underfinanced pastorates. In interviews with over 300 clergy from 15 Protestant denominations, we rarely heard clergy complain about not being paid enough. Rather, we heard about the many hardships they faced in their personal and professional lives, the endless demands of their congregations, and their struggle to fulfill their vocation in very difficult circumstances.

In one interview, a clergyman admitted that he decided to leave the ministry and find secular work when he saw his parents, who had been missionaries all of their lives, practically starve to death because they had no retirement income or medical insurance after devoting

their lives to the denomination. He said the denomination offered them nothing, and the denominational pension fund only supported those clergy who worked for congregations that had made contributions to the pension fund over the course of their careers.

Pensions are a second way that the denominations create an incentive structure that works counter to their needs. While the administration of pension funds across denominations varies, most calculate retirement benefits based on two criteria: the number of years clergy have worked for a congregation (or contributing employer), and the amount they have been paid (since pension contributions are generally calculated as a percentage of the pastor's salary). In the Episcopal Church, for example, congregations are required to contribute 18 percent of a pastor's salary to his or her retirement. One's pension is calculated using a formula that averages the ten highest paid years of a minister's career. More frequently, denominations may recommend a certain percentage be contributed to a pension fund, but do not make congregational contributions mandatory. All allow individuals to make contributions to the pension fund from their own salaries.

Obviously this system assumes that clergy will have a lifetime career of full employment, with the congregational employer making regular contributions to a pension plan. In fact, many congregations do not contribute to the pension fund, at the expense of the pastor. The American Baptist Churches, for example, has 5,300 congregations but only 2,850 participants in the denominational pension fund. Conservatively speaking, this means that 54 percent of their congregations make pension contributions for their staff. Further reducing this number is the fact that of the 2,850 participants, only 65 percent of the participants are clergy, and the rest are laypersons. This suggests that perhaps only 1,852 – or 35 percent — of the 5,300 congregations are making contributions to the pension fund on behalf of their pastors.

Since both salaries and retirement pensions are tied to the wealth of the congregation one works for, even those clergy who may feel called to minister in small congregations can sometimes only do so at great sacrifice both in their day-to-day financial situations and in their future retirement. *One of the most critical flaws in the current structure of clergy support is that it provides strong disincentives for clergy to serve where they are needed most.*

## CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES TO ADDRESS STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS

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At present, the system whereby clergy salaries are independently financed by the local congregation is largely taken for granted. This system has its basis in both theological beliefs in congregational autonomy and financial necessity. Yet the system also lacks a natural defense against the inequalities of wealth that exist among communities and, consequently, among congregations. By emphasizing the individual autonomy of congregations, the system neglects the collective health of the denomination as a whole, along with the plight of its less fortunate members and congregations.

Many denominations view the negative outcomes of this system as a necessary evil that they are willing to accept. Denominations that prioritize the autonomy of the congregation and believe in a priesthood of all believers are likely to continue within the system of the self-financed congregation. These denominations are likely to have a higher proportion of small congregations, but their attitudes towards ordination may also be more open to adopting different leadership strategies. These denominations are more likely to make use of lay pastors, “tentmakers” who work in a secular position to supplement their pastoral position, or itinerant clergy who travel to a number of pulpits every Sunday to deliver their sermons and provide limited pastoral services.

These alternatives to a full-time pastor have their pluses and minuses. In all of these situations the focus of pastoral duty tends to become the Sunday sermon at the expense of the day-to-day management, leadership, and nurture of the life of the congregation and the community. In some cases this has resulted in a more active participation of lay members who form committees to take on the tasks associated with the day-to-day and administrative duties of the congregation. In an interview, one tentmaker reported that his dual role suited him well. He worked as a farmer and a town clerk during the week and preached on Sundays. During the week he would meet with the lay committees at the coffee shop and give them advice on how to run the congregation. For him, the system worked bet-



ter than when he was a full-time pastor, because the administrative and day-to-day part of his job was not something he was good at, nor was it something he enjoyed. He was able to distance himself from the petty squabbles among his parishioners, and congregation members respected his time since he clearly had another job and other responsibilities to tend to.

This bi-vocational pastor felt that congregation members had a greater sense of ownership of their congregation, which he saw as positive. On the other hand, he admitted that he did not have the time or energy to recruit new members and that the congregation remained a small group, which meant that it was sometimes hard to get people to serve on committees and that the operation of the congregation tended to fall upon the shoulders of a small, insular group. Nonetheless, for the right pastor, or for a pastor trained to make a management-sharing arrangement work, this model seems to be viable one.

Yet some denominations have a very different sense of the role of ordained clergy. Those that believe that clergy authority is based upon the apostolic succession or other conceptualizations of being set apart and specially credentialed, believe that the authenticity and authority of the congregation is maintained through the special gifts given to ministers through education and ordination. These denominations tend to be more hierarchical, and some find it more difficult to accept bi-vocational clergy as the normative model of ministry within their denomination.

If such a denomination views its mission as serving and proselytizing among the poorest, as well as the wealthiest within society, then it will likely face difficulties in staffing poorer congregations unless it considers some plan to redistribute resources among its clergy or is willing to make greater use of lay pastors.<sup>6</sup>

All the denominations I have studied have adopted financial reward systems that create disincentives to work in the small congregations, or in the congregations where there is the greatest need. If denominations seriously wish to support these congregations, they will need to restructure the ways that they organize their compensation, benefits, and pension systems.

Strategies to address the supply of pastors to small congregations in these denominations need not encompass a wholesale collectivization of local congregational resources and a complete redistribution of wealth, although such a prospect is in some ways attractive. More moderate strategies could ameliorate the clergy shortage and help small congregations to grow.

The main problem these denominations face is making the small congregation more attractive to fully ordained clergy or making bi-vocational or lay pastors more attractive to the congregations. Denominations and their regional staffs need to work with small congregations to convince them of this necessity and also, in the case of fully ordained clergy, to find ways they can make the position more attractive to the typical job seeker. If additional salary is not an option, then perhaps the compensation package could address another need, such as transportation or housing. Alternatively, the congregation could negotiate a very creative employment contract whereby specific duties are delegated to lay committees and onerous pastoral duties are distributed among the parishioners.

To summarize, I have defined the clergy shortage problem as an issue of small congregations that is twofold. There is often a lack of clergy willing, able, or encouraged to serve small congregations, and there are many small congregations unwilling or unable to provide a financially viable living for clergy and their families (or willing to accept an alternative to a fully ordained, full-time pastor). National data point to the severity of the problem and highlight the implications this has for the gap between rich and poor congregations, where “rich” is modestly defined as those able to afford a full-time, fully-ordained pastor. Two general strategies for addressing the problems that small congregations are posed for denominations. First, use and encourage tentmakers or bi-vocational clergy who support themselves in secular work while working part-time as a pastor. Second, facilitate the redistribution of resources and expertise among groups of related churches.

<sup>6</sup> The United Methodist Church reports that one-quarter of its pastors are local pastors rather than fully ordained elders. Local pastors typically have less education and training, and serve a particular congregation. See T. McAnally (2001), “Is the United Methodist Church Facing a Clergy Shortage?” United Methodist News Service. Nashville, Tenn.

## A PROBLEM OF PLACEMENT: MATCHING THE RIGHT CLERGY TO THE RIGHT JOB

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While clergy shortages in small congregations have captured the attention of researchers, much less attention has been paid to other kinds of congregations that experience lengthy vacancies. A thorough and systematic investigation of the qualitative differences in the congregations that have had vacancies for more than a year might reveal other categories of congregations that are hard to fill. These may include congregations in rural, inclement, or isolated areas of the country (which may or may not also be small), as well as moderate-sized congregations in areas where the cost of living is much higher than the salary that can be made available to a pastor. Difficult-to-fill pastorates may also include congregations in ethnic communities where English is a second language or where members are a cultural minority within the denomination. The United Methodist Church, for example, reports problems in finding trained pastors for their Korean and Hispanic congregations (United Methodist News Service 2000). Difficult-to-fill congregations may also include congregations in inner-city areas or other areas where poverty and/or violence create greater social challenges. The Reverend James G. Wilson, executive director of congregation deployment in the Episcopal Church Center, reports that urban congregations are now experiencing the same shortage typically found in rural locations. What used to be a problem for Wyoming and Montana is now a problem for everybody, Wilson says. Some denominations may find it particularly difficult to fill positions in domestic missions or specialized ministries. For better or worse, most denominations encompass a variety of individuals and communities within their membership, and while many candidates for ministry may hope to find a congregation in a middle- to upper-middle-class suburban community with good schools, homogeneous populations, and low crime rates, the diversity of the church is going to continue to challenge efforts of those who would like to see all the pulpits of all of their congregations filled by qualified ministers.

Because of the diversity of congregational positions and the diversity of clergy, one of the more significant

steps a denomination can take to address the imbalances between areas of shortage and surplus is to improve procedures that match clergy with congregations. Again, this is an area in which polity exerts an important but non-deterministic influence on organizational practices and policies.

Speaking generally, denominations with congregational polities privilege the autonomy of the local congregation and often have the most informal employment-matching procedures. Congregations that need a new pastor find candidates by a variety of means: contacting regional executives, placing ads in regional newsletters, asking other local pastors for recommendations, contacting friends or officials in nearby seminaries, and inviting known pastors of other congregations to apply for the position. These methods of finding pastoral replacements tend to rely upon informal friendships and social networks and may or may not yield positive results. One drawback is that informal networks tend to be slow, cumbersome, and unreliable, because they depend on the responsiveness of a grapevine that is limited to the responsiveness and number of contacts each individual can make. They also tend to produce candidates that strongly resemble the people within the network, which is fine if a congregation is simply trying to replicate its leadership, but problematic if it is looking for someone who might bring new and innovative ideas and experiences. Informal networks also cast the net of recruitment very selectively, and therefore may cause a congregation to overlook or fail to identify a well-qualified candidate seeking a similar position who lies outside the social networks of the congregation members. Resources also limit congregations that seek pastors through social networks. Placing ads in periodicals and gathering information about prospective candidates cost money, so poorer congregations tend to be at a disadvantage in denominations that do not have a structured system for matching clergy to congregations.

The Southern Baptists illustrate a case where local congregations rely largely upon informal social networks and individual congregation resources in hiring clergy for their congregations. In the Baptist tradition the local autonomy of congregations is highly respected, particularly with regard to choosing congregational leaders. Every congregation has the right to hire whomever it wishes, and even to ordain that person if he or she is not already ordained. Although this system seems unrestricted, it actually proves to be a disadvantage to most congregations that lack the

resources of wealthier congregations to conduct an extensive pastoral search and gather information about a large number of candidates across the country.

The American Baptist Churches, on the other hand, hold similar beliefs about the autonomy of the local congregation, but the denomination decided to administer a national employment database to which clergy and congregations can submit applications. Clergy seeking positions can choose to submit a standardized application form or profile that contains information on their qualifications and evaluations. This national database is also available to regional executives who, when a congregation comes to them seeking help in finding a new pastor, can submit a congregational profile to the database, which will then match the congregation with a number of qualified candidates. The regional staff screens these applications from the potential pool and selects viable candidates for the congregation to consider. Having access to a national database of candidates permits congregations to screen more pastoral candidates more cheaply and efficiently on a standardized list of criteria. This in turn allows congregations to make hiring decisions that are better informed and more likely to be based on objective criteria rather than personal preferences.

While we do not directly know whether the differences in these systems of placement reduce the problem of clergy shortages in difficult-to-fill congregations in the American Baptist system, we can observe one area in which the differences in the placement systems appear to make a difference. In research on gender differences in the earnings of male and female clergy in these denominations, the gender wage gap is much narrower among American Baptist congregations than among Southern Baptists. In the American Baptist Churches, the wage gap between full-time, fully ordained clergy is roughly \$5,000, and in the Southern Baptist denomination the wage gap is roughly \$12,500 (Zikmund, Lummis and Chang 1998).

More systematic analysis of how placement systems reduce gender discrimination in wages (and presumably other forms of discrimination as well) shows that even when one adjusts for differences in education, age, training, type of job, years of experience, and theological conservatism, denominations that standardize and centralize hiring information reduce wage inequalities far better than those that rely on informal methods of matching clergy and congregations (Chang 2000). One

lesson to draw from this is that when denominations adopt hiring procedures that improve the distribution of information about potential job candidates, personal biases and prejudices are more likely to be overcome and hiring decisions are more likely to be objective.

Improving the efficiency of denominational placement systems can only improve the chances of small congregations filling their leadership positions. It would give them access to a wider employment pool without additional costs and also provide a way to market their job opportunities to a wider audience. In other words, if denominations can create a hiring system where both congregations and clergy have the widest opportunities to explore one another, then both have better chances of fulfilling their needs and vocations.

While many regional staffs have national databases to help match clergy and congregations in the hiring process, in most of these denominations, regional executives still play a pivotal role in matching clergy with congregations. As we saw in the case of the American Baptist Churches, the regional staff was the main connection in the exchange of information between the local congregation and the national database. They are most likely to be the point of contact between pastors seeking positions and congregations seeking clergy. This is also true in those denominations where hiring is conducted within specific geographic areas, such as in the Episcopal diocese, the Methodist district, or the Lutheran synod. In all of these systems, regional staff play a crucial role and can influence both a congregation's opportunities to find leaders and a clergy's chances to find a job.

Some women clergy have reported that they felt they were unable to get a job because the regional executive in their area did not believe in women preaching from the pulpit. Often, biases are likely to be more subtle, as in the case of a regional executive automatically assuming that a woman might turn down a job because her husband was working in another town, or that a given candidate would not accept a certain position because it paid slightly less than his or her previous salary. On the other hand, regional staff must help address the problems of vacant pulpits. In screening candidates for small congregations, they may help the congregation write its profile in a way that makes it more appealing to a wider group of candidates, or encourage the congregation to explore a wider pool of candidates in trying to find a match.

In denominations with a more explicitly hierarchical system, such as the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Methodist Church, the regional executive can play an even more proactive role in filling vacant pulpits. Because job candidates can only seek employment within a particular diocese, district, or synod, they are far more dependent on the bishop or central regional executive, particularly in the first call. Research suggests, however, that the level of this influence is variable. Denominational officials stress that the pressure a regional executive is able to exert varies widely from executive to executive and situation to situation. A study for the ELCA also found that regional authority was surprisingly limited. Despite the traditional structure of ecclesiastical authority and the professional dependence of clergy on their synodical bishops for job referrals and recommendations, a number of bishops heard the following reasons often or very often from candidates who wished to place limitations upon their employment, even in their first call:

- 71 percent** need or desire of spouse
- 58 percent** desire to be near a large city
- 48 percent** need or desire of dependent children
- 36 percent** opposition to serving in a small congregation
- 32 percent** opposition to serving in a rural setting
- 32 percent** unwillingness to relocate for any reason (Settlage 2000)

This list suggests that despite the surplus of clergy and competitive job markets, even first-call candidates express relatively strong preferences about where they would and would not like to be hired. Nonetheless, the study shows that of those first-call candidates in the ELCA called as sole pastors in February 1998, 50 percent were called to congregations with fewer than 267 baptized members, congregations with fewer than 83 members in average attendance at worship, and congregations that had less than \$63,300 in current operating expenses (of which the pastor's salary is only a percentage). *In other words, first-call pastors with the least amount of experience were also more likely to be directed to the smallest congregations with the greatest need and some of the most difficult pastoral challenges. Forcing young and inexperienced clergy into these difficult positions has its own inherent problems, and perhaps*

*as a result, approximately 25 percent of these first calls end within the first three years, and 45-50 percent end within five years.*

A few denominations have national placement systems that supplement the work of the regional executive. In the Presbyterian Church USA, a national referral service matches all qualified candidates to all available congregations. Each congregation receives the profiles of all the candidates that meet its criteria and contacts the candidates directly, though typically with the assistance of the regional executive. And before a call to a particular pastor becomes final, the Presbtery to which the congregation belongs must give its approval. The Unitarian Universalists have a system whereby employment candidates list all congregations to which they wish to submit a profile, and the congregations receive a list of prospective clergy to consider.

While research shows that the way denominations handle hiring practices has an effect on gender inequality, there is no parallel research on whether differences in placement systems affect a denomination's abilities to supply the hard-to-fill pulpits. As we have already seen, the Presbyterian Church USA, which has one of the most sophisticated and most objective systems for matching clergy and congregations, still has a severe placement problem among its smaller congregations. Nonetheless, while improving denominational placement systems will not provide the total solution to the targeted clergy shortage, it is one of the areas where denominational leaders can potentially have a large impact on hiring practices with relatively little cost and effort. A national database system might also allow denominations to keep better track of difficult-to-fill positions, and perhaps assist congregations that need help advertising their positions and those that need to be more strategic in attracting the right candidate.

In sum, improving the methods by which denominations match clergy to congregations through the creation of computerized databases of congregational vacancies and job candidates is one area where denominational leaders can make a viable investment of resources that will allow them to increase the opportunities of small congregations to attract qualified candidates. Denominations that already have such systems might be able to modify them to detect congregations that have had long-term vacancies. These congregations could then be targeted for consultation to improve their market strategies for filling positions.

## CLERGY EXITS

It is well known that many clergy leave parish ministry some time after their ordination. Yet, surprisingly, few adequate studies have tracked these career trajectories, in part because most denominations do not keep track of their clergy after ordination. In addition, “leaving” turns out to be an ambiguous term that is defined differently by different denominations. Some leaders consider ministers to have left the ministry when they leave parish ministry, yet many clergy still view themselves as ministers if they still work within the denomination as an executive or in a non-parish congregation setting. Other ordained clergy feel as if they have been ordained for life, even if they leave the denomination and work in secular occu-

pations. They believe they pursue the ministry through whatever work they do.

Different definitions of leaving the ministry are important insofar as they may describe different yet related processes and needs

within denominations. For example, different challenges exist to address those who leave parish ministry because they always intended to enter a non-parish ministry versus those who leave parish ministry for other denominational work because they are not suited to the work of the congregation. Finally, there are those who sever all denominational ties because of burnout in the congregation and do not consider non-parish work.

This report defines those who leave the ministry in the more limited sense as those who leave *parish ministry*, since we are concerned with filling vacancies in congregational pulpits. Nonetheless, we must be aware that the data on these processes are sketchy and do not lead to easy conclusions. Ironically, while numerous studies address recruitment and selection of clergy and how they are trained, very few studies address clergy exits – in part because denominations have not developed systems to track or record exiting clergy.

One of the best investigations for why clergy leave the parish ministry was published by Edgar Mills in 1969

(Mills 1969). In this study Mills sampled a total of 60 former and current United Presbyterian pastors within four groups of clergy who had recently made career moves. He examined those who had moved from one parish position to another parish position, those who moved from parish positions to denominational executive positions, those who made the transition from parish ministry to graduate school, and those who moved from parish ministry into secular work. Although the data are dated, the study takes into account the different career strategies that clergy pursue when they leave parish ministry.

Mills found that those who continued in pastoral work did so because they were attracted to parish work, but felt restless in their previous positions. Restlessness was mentioned as the dominant theme for leaving. Those who left ministry for graduate school reported that such a move was part of a long-term plan that they had imagined for themselves earlier in their careers. A second theme that prevailed in graduate student responses was that they decided to leave ministry for further education because of conflicts in their previous pastoral positions.

Those who left parish ministry to become executives most frequently mentioned that they were attracted to the work as their dominant reason for leaving. The attractive elements that were mentioned included salary, the challenges of the job, and the working and living conditions of the new job compared to those in their previous position.

Those who left parish ministry for secular work painted a more depressing picture. Of the 15 clergy in this group, five listed conflicts as the dominant theme in their reason for leaving, followed closely by hopelessness (four) and marital conflicts (four).

In 1994, the Hartford Study on Ordained Men and Women (Zikmund, Lummis et al. 1998) surveyed roughly 4,500 clergy in 15 denominations. Of those who had thought about leaving the ministry in the year prior to the survey, the factors listed as being most influential were poor overall health, weak professional self-concept, insufficient pay, and lack of clergy support. Both the Mills study and the Hartford study indicate that the main reason why clergy leave parish ministry for secular work is that they are discouraged and depressed with their lives and ministries.

The ELCA reports that the number of ordained clergy who leave the ministry each year through resignation

*(T)he main reason why clergy leave parish ministry for secular work is that they are discouraged and depressed with their lives and ministries.*

or removal is roughly one-third the size of the entering cohort of ordinands. Since 1990, they report that roughly 50 ordained ministers resign each year and an average of 82 per year are removed for other reasons. The average size of the ordination cohort between 1990 and 1998 was 323 (Settlage 2000).

Rolf Memming analyzed data on the 7,147 elders within the United Methodist Church who were ordained between 1974 and 1983 (Memming 1998). Using conference records, he tracked the status of these clergy 10 years after their ordination and found that although there was some variation by conference, roughly 58.5 percent of those ordained during this period were still in parish ministry 10 years later, 13.4 percent had moved into non-parish ministry of some sort, and 7.2 percent had left the ministry altogether. Some clergy, 8.3 percent, had transferred into another denomination (and subsequently dropped out of his analysis). While Memming does not calculate an average rate of retirement, disability, and death for this cohort, the percentages are small, as one would predict among those who have only been ordained for 10 years. The death rate ranged from 0.6 percent to 2.1 percent, the retirement rate ranged from 0.4 percent to 1.8 percent, and the disability rate ranged from 0.3 to 0.8 percent. Unfortunately, these figures leave about 10 percent of the cohort unaccounted for, a gap which could possibly affect these numbers and their implications.

The Hartford Study of Ordained Men and Women (Zikmund, Lummis et al. 1998) found that the overall proportion of clergy currently working in secular, non-congregation-related work was roughly 6 percent. While this figure aligns with Memming's report that 7.3 percent left the Methodist Church within 10 years of ordination, these data may not be an accurate measure of the average dropout rate across denominations for a number of reasons.

First, the Memming data only look at the dropout rate in the first 10 years after ordination. In the Hartford study, the dropout rate may have actually been significantly higher since a large proportion of those who left the ministry probably were among those who did not respond to the survey. Further analysis of the career histories of those who reported working in secular positions immediately following seminary graduation reveals that many of these clergy dropped out after seminary but then dropped back in, with 25 percent of the men and 11 percent of the women moving



from secular work into pastoral positions. The longer a person stayed in secular work, the lower his or her chances of moving into a pastoral position. However, the study found that, within its sample, the boundary between secular and congregation work was far more fluid than initially imagined.

Another surprising finding that emerged from the Hartford study was that when clergy were asked whether they had thought of leaving the ministry in the past year, the denominations that had the fewest negative responses were clergy in the Holiness and Pentecostal denominations (Assemblies of God, Church of God Anderson, Church of the Nazarene, Wesleyans, Free Methodists). In other words, by this measure, they seemed to have the highest job satisfaction despite the fact that they were paid the least, had the smallest congregations, and received the fewest benefits. Nonetheless, the Hartford data showed that they were as likely to drop out of parish ministry for secular work as clergy in other denominations.

In the companion Pulpit & Pew report on clergy careers, I explore issues of salary and work environment at greater length, and I hope that readers will consult that document as well. Understanding the factors that impact the supply of clergy requires a clearer understanding of what clergy work is like and what pressures clergy face from their families, their environments, and their congregations.

## SUMMARY

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This report has addressed some of the important issues that denominational leaders must consider when thinking about clergy supply and demand problems. First, while a numerical surplus of fully ordained clergy may exist in a majority of denominations, the number of congregations that do not have a pastor or are served by part-time pastors or those with less than full ordination suggests that denominations face serious staffing problems.

Small congregations and congregations among growing ethnic populations have the most difficulty filling pulpits. These shortages are qualitatively different, however, and therefore require different strategies for resolution. Denominations need to develop a better sense of what their congregations need and how to adapt existing clergy supplies to fill those needs. Ironically, while denominations have devoted relatively significant resources to studying how to recruit more and better-qualified candidates to the ministry, they have spent relatively little time trying to understand the problems that ordained clergy face, the reasons why they are unwilling to fill existing vacancies, and the reasons that some leave ordained ministry. Denominations need to devote more attention to matching the resources and opportunities that already exist, in addition to trying to increase the number of clergy.

Denominations should start, however, by creating accounting systems to track the number of active clergy, the number of empty congregations, and the characteristics of their hard-to-fill congregations. Such systems could offer greater insight about the kinds of candidates denominations need to recruit and train to fulfill their existing needs. At present, they seem to be recruiting and training clergy who aspire to work in large, well-funded congregations. Unfortunately, these are precisely the kinds of congregational opportunities that seem to be decreasing.

Denominations also must devote serious attention to understanding the ways in which clergy work has changed. While many denominations track full-time clergy who work as senior pastors, sole pastors, co-pastors, associate pastors, and denominational staff and executives, few track those who work in secular

jobs, work as bi-vocational pastors, work without pay, or work in non-parish ministries. As denominational demographics shift and the number of full-time pastoral positions that pay a living/family wage declines, denominations must gather information on how these clergy are serving or not serving the congregation. Information about how certain positions are expanding and others are contracting is crucial if the denominations wish to create proactive strategies to address future labor needs.

Denominations also need to develop a better understanding of why clergy leave. Although many clergy are ordained, only sketchy data exist on how many leave the ministry. Relatively few denominations update their records on the status of their ordained clergy, so it is impossible to know how many of the surplus clergy on their books are unemployed and actively seeking pastoral work and how many have left the congregation.

Finally, if denominations are increasingly dominated by small congregations, as this and other investigations indicate, then denominational leaders need to think and plan proactively about the implications of such a shift. Without substantial funding, an increase of small congregations may mean that denominations have to adapt to more creative models of ministry. To this end, investigations of non-mainline Protestant denominations might prove instructive. The Mormon church, for example, utilizes a system of lay ministers who serve for a period of five years. Many denominations with small congregations that cannot support a full-time pastor rely heavily on bi-vocational pastors as a norm. The early Methodist denomination relied upon itinerant ministers with relatively little education or prior training.

Institutional religion in the United States remains essentially independent and entrepreneurial. Whether or not denominational leaders wish to acknowledge them, congregations will develop the kinds of ministries they are able to support from the resources they have. This kind of entrepreneurial initiative will most frequently be found in the individually oriented, independent congregations. Keeping track of these ministries as they develop makes sense for both newer and established denominations because they represent the cutting edge in models of ministry.

<sup>33</sup> Greg Hamilton, "For \$29.95, you can marry, baptize, and forgive scams," *St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 11, 2001, p 2.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While denominations clearly need better tracking systems to better inform them about clergy shortages, other practical recommendations might also be implemented. For most denominations, the regional executive will have the greatest impact on filling vacant pulpits. This person has the most direct access to national databases, local networks of information and gossip, and knowledge about the needs of the congregation. The denomination needs to provide these staff persons with better training and support so they can work with local congregations to make more creative offerings to potential job candidates. Periodic gatherings of regional executives would allow them to brainstorm and exchange information on ways they are dealing with clergy shortages in their areas. Furthermore, denominations develop different traditions and practices to deal with staffing problems; some of the most fruitful exchanges of innovative ideas are likely to come from exchanges across denominations rather than within them.

At present, those denominations with clergy shortages in smaller congregations might be viewed as having an incentive problem. Clergy are not attracted to these congregations. Denominations and congregations should ask what they can do to create additional incentives for clergy to apply to hard-to-fill pulpits. Obviously, raising salaries is one direct way. However, when that is not possible, congregations that have other assets might be able to rewrite their job descriptions to attract different kinds of candidates. Denominations need to be more creative in thinking of ways they can attract dynamic candidates to their congregations.

At the least, denominations should consider encouraging or instituting a living/family wage policy. More often than not, clergy depend on a spouse's income to support themselves and their families. Denominations will be unable to attract qualified candidates or retain qualified clergy if those clergy are unable to support their families while they pursue their vocation. The companion report on clergy careers addresses this problem more fully, but additional, systematic research is needed if denominations wish to employ a significant number of full-time professional clergy in their ministries.

## AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This report offers many suggestions for further investigation and research. Most importantly, denominations and congregations need more reliable statistics that clearly and accurately monitor the clergy supply. At the very least, denominations need to keep adequate statistics on the following:

- The number of clergy ordained each year (broken down by important characteristics such as age, gender, race, prior career, education, type of ordination)
- The number of clergy retiring (again broken down by characteristics, including last position).
- The number of clergy employed each year in various positions, i.e., full-time, part-time, senior pastor, sole pastor, secular, non-parish ministry, etc.

Denominations could obtain most of this information by requiring all seminary students and ordained pastors to turn in short reports on their status each year. These statistics could be compiled annually and used to project future trends as well as identify areas of shortage or trouble.

In addition, denominations need to monitor the supply of jobs more closely. Ideally, each denomination would develop a form for congregations to complete annually. Through the form, congregations could report current or prospective vacancies. They could also convey information on their budgets, the cost of living in their local areas, and other information that might be used to calculate fair and livable compensation for pastors.

With this information, denominations could develop a fuller understanding of the factors that influence the supply of clergy for their congregation needs and could be better prepared to plan for the future. Knowing the number and kinds of positions they will need to fill in the next 10 years along with the characteristics of their clergy supply (including each pastor's background, age, experience, and disposition/need to seek a new position) will allow denominations to assess the balance of movement within the system. Consequently, they could predict whether new entrants into the labor supply could expect good jobs after fin-

ishing their training, and whether those currently in the system could expect to be promoted within a reasonable period of time. A smoothly functioning labor market will have all positions filled and people being promoted to higher levels of compensation and responsibility as they gain more experience.

Denominations also need to monitor the kinds of job opportunities that they generate. If leaders observe that the number of desirable positions is decreasing,

they can attempt to generate better job opportunities, make existing positions more desirable, or redirect clergy to new kinds of ministry. They can provide better guidance and mentoring, and candidates can retain greater self-esteem if they realize that their inability to get a job is largely structural, rather than due to an individual failing. Denominations must acquire these kinds of information if they wish to plan for, rather than react to, the leadership needs of the 21st century.



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# CAN THERE BE A LEADERSHIP SHORTAGE IN A PRIESTLY KINGDOM?

A Response by Curtis Freeman, Ph.D., Professor of Theology and Baptist Studies and Director of the Baptist House of Studies, Duke Divinity School, Durham, N.C.

Understanding and managing the dynamics between the supply of available clergy and the demand for ministerial leadership presents one of the most formidable challenges to churches in North America. Congregational leaders and denominational officials frequently express frustration with the difficulty of attracting and placing qualified clergy, especially to positions in rural and inner city congregations. Theological educators point to a declining number of students enrolled in Master of Divinity programs, resulting in a downward trend of graduates preparing for parish (or congregational) ministry. Clergy candidates fresh out of seminary openly describe the struggles they face in finding a ministry position that matches their personal needs and spiritual vision. Just about everyone seems to agree that there is a problem and that the root lies in a leadership shortage. Despite the alarming number of congregational vacancies some data indicates that there may actually be an oversupply of clergy. This should be received as good news because it suggests the problem can be managed by improving placement processes and tweaking compensation packages.

How are we to assess the conflicting interpretations between statistical data which implies that the conventional wisdom is contra-factual and the ecclesiological consensus which holds that the reported figures are counter-intuitive? Professor Chang proposes that one possible explanation for the variance is poor record keeping. This seems plausible. Consider, for example, the Southern Baptist clergy data. The statistics reported in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* from which Chang draws indicate that no group is doing a better job of recruiting new ministers than the SBC. The 50 percent increase in the ratio of total SBC clergy to congregations (from 1.6:1 in 1993 to 2.4:1 in 2000) is the three times higher than any other denomination (See Table 1). During the same period the ratio of clergy serving Southern Baptist congregations reportedly grew by 90 percent (from 1:1 to almost 2:1) which outpaced the next nearest denomination by more than twice the rate of growth (See Table 2). If the available pool of ordained ministers is so high why do so many pulpit committees still face so much difficulty in calling pastors?

One explanation might be that the congregational-call system is less efficient than the connectional-placement systems when it comes to connecting ministers and con-

gregations. While the inefficiency explanation of congregational polity undoubtedly has some merit, it is difficult to believe that, if there really were 2.4 viable candidates for every congregation in the SBC, churches would have such a hard time filling the pulpit. In fact, depending on the size of the congregation it is not uncommon for a pastor search committee to receive 20, 30, or more resumes from candidates. This does not mean that there are 20, 30, or more viable candidates for every congregation. It is understood that these same resumes are also being circulated among other churches, but even with lots of choices, pulpit committees frequently express frustration that so many of the candidates are not good matches. When the search narrows down to the short list, there are only a few names. But as Chang correctly notes, the possibilities are often extremely limited for rural and inner-city congregations that are searching for a seminary educated, happily married, white male, who is willing to accept the call for \$20,000 a year.

To be sure, the problem of balancing clergy supply with congregational demand is a key factor complicating the selection of ministers in churches with a congregational polity and can be more directly managed in Protestant denominations with a connectional system of clergy placement. But the question of how to facilitate better matches between churches and candidates is a separate issue from getting a clear sense of the ratio of available ministers to seeking congregations. Yet the difficulty experienced in matching suitable candidates and seeking congregations suggests that the number of viable ministers is much lower than the reported figure of total clergy and that a more helpful figure would be the ratio of active and viable candidates to each congregation.<sup>1</sup> That there is a clergy shortage is supported by anecdotal reports of churches being forced to look at candidates 10 years younger and with less ministry experience than their previous pastors. These reports suggest that young ministers are leapfrogging over the small congregations in which their predecessors served because there is a shortage of candidates.

The statistics of total SBC clergy (Table 1) are inflated due to the fact that chaplains, teachers, denominational employees, retired ministers, parachurch workers, and other ordained ministers who have left the ministry are counted in the annual church letter from which denominational statistics are drawn. Another

<sup>1</sup> That the ratio of active clergy to congregation is actually much lower is reflected in Table 2, but the SBC figure of almost 2 to 1 still does not actually reflect the difficulties of churches finding pastors.

factor which impacts the increase is the recent practice of ordaining people serving in staff positions. Youth directors, song leaders and Sunday School superintendents have become youth, music, and educational ministers. If ordained they too are counted in the total clergy figure. The practice of ordaining church staff members, while common among conservative bodies, is more unusual among mainline denominations. Moreover, SBC churches and other conservative groups frequently ordain ministers who serve in ethnic mission congregations, whereas many mainline denominations do not. These numbers further skew the statistics of total clergy. Since many of these ordained people are not actually potential congregational leaders the ratio of 2.4 ministers for every congregation in the SBC may be correct, but it does not display very much about the problem of clergy supply.

A better sense of how many Southern Baptist clergy are viable ministry candidates is indicated by two demographic trends. First, the reported sharp increase of SBC clergy overlaps with the decade of divisive conflict between moderates and conservatives which resulted in a mass exodus of students from Southern Baptist seminaries. Although enrollments have reportedly recovered, graduation rates have declined significantly.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that Baptists in the South have always had a tradition of bivocational ministry, it is increasingly the norm that churches that can afford to call a full-time pastor expect a seminary-educated minister. It seems odd that the ranks of SBC clergy would have doubled at a time when the number of seminary

graduates, who make up a sizable pool of future ministers, have so dramatically declined. Second, the reported increase of Southern Baptist ministers is at variance with the overall membership growth in the SBC. During the same period (1993-2001) SBC membership grew from 15.3 to 16 million members, an increase of just over 4 percent.<sup>3</sup> Yet according to the *Yearbook* data, the ranks of total SBC clergy increased by 50 percent. Is it reasonable to believe that the clergy grew at a rate more than 12 times greater than the SBC membership?<sup>4</sup>

A recent press release by Baptist leaders of the newly formed B. H. Carroll Institute reports clergy figures that are more consistent with the Southern Baptist growth pattern and the decline of seminary graduates. The Carroll report indicates that while the number of SBC congregations grew by 17 percent over the past 20 years, the number of ministers only increased by 10 percent. The report further states that the number of Southern Baptist seminary graduates per congregation declined 30 percent and the number of SBC seminary graduates per member of SBC churches decreased 45 percent.<sup>5</sup> Where the *Yearbook* data suggests that SBC clergy growth was 12 times higher than the growth of membership, the Carroll report indicates that SBC clergy numbers were outpaced by the growing number of SBC churches. Moreover, the Carroll report suggests that the growth rate of SBC clergy was 5 times lower than the *Yearbook* statistics. How does one explain this 40 percent variance in counting clergy? Are the *Yearbook* numbers inflated, or is the Carroll data under-reported?

<sup>2</sup> For example, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary reported a full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment in the 2001-2002 academic year of 1,731 which is roughly equivalent to the pre-controversy figure of 1,792. While the FTE enrollment appears to mark a return to the previous level, examination of the graduation rates suggests something different. In the 1992-1993 academic year the seminary awarded 443 masters and doctoral degrees, but in the 2001-2002 academic year the school awarded only 257 masters and doctoral degrees. A graduation rate of 42 percent fewer degrees indicates that Southern Seminary is preparing fewer church leaders than before despite its statements to the contrary. The story is similar at the other SBC seminaries. Based on the statistics reported by four of the SBC seminaries (Southern, Southwestern, Southeastern, and New Orleans) the number of masters and doctoral graduates has fallen off by 440 over the past 15 years, from 1,881 in 1988 to 1,441 in 2002. Golden Gate reported no figures and Midwestern only offered statistics during some years. For data on enrollment figures and graduation rates at the SBC seminaries see the *Southern Baptist Convention Annual* (1993-2002). The above graduation figures for Southwestern and Southeastern seminaries are estimated because their reported statistics include baccalaureate and pre-baccalaureate graduates. The figure was estimated by adding non-masters and doctoral students enrolled, dividing by 3, and subtracting this number from the total graduates. The actual graduates are in all likelihood lower than the estimated figure. For a brief but fair description of the decade of change at Southern Seminary see Peter Smith, "Mohler Remade Baptist Seminary," *The Courier Journal* (10 November 2003), [www.courier-journal.com/localnews/2003/11/10/ky/wir-front-mohler1110-16458.html](http://www.courier-journal.com/localnews/2003/11/10/ky/wir-front-mohler1110-16458.html).

<sup>3</sup> *Yearbook of American and Canadian Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995-2003).

<sup>4</sup> Given that about one-third of 16 million members counted by the SBC are non-resident-inactive, it may suggest that a similar phenomenon exists in the figure of SBC clergy.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Wingfield, "Four Southwestern Faculty Resign to Join New Carroll Institute" *The Baptist Standard* (5 November 2003). My efforts to contact the Carroll Institute faculty and ascertain the statistical source for their data was unsuccessful.

It seems more likely that they are describing two different groups: one, total clergy, and the other, active ministers who are serving or seeking a place of service. Yet the question of the data is not merely academic. As the Carroll report indicates, figures can motivate and justify the need to create new theological schools and to strengthen existing institutions in order to increase the supply of ministers for churches.<sup>6</sup> Simply put, everyone gets concerned if they think that there is a shortage of church leaders, but most lose interest if they are convinced that there is a pastoral surplus.

A quick comparison of the SBC and the Assemblies of God, another fast-growing conservative Protestant denomination, suggests that something is not quite right with the SBC figures. Although the ratio of total clergy to churches in the Assemblies of God has remained relatively constant over the last 20 years, they report a ratio of 2.7 clergy for every congregation, which is even higher than the SBC. Moreover, according to the *Yearbook* data the ratio of 1.5 ministers serving for every Assemblies congregation has not changed since 1977. Yet from 1997 to 1999 there was a net decrease of 63 in the number of total clergy, and from 1999 to 2000 there was a net increase of only 6. Church officials report that they are unable to fill new pulpits with denominationally approved clergy. No doubt the Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals that rocked the Assemblies contributed to the negative perceptions of the clergy. Nevertheless, at a time when the Assemblies membership continued to experience significant growth, the number of Assemblies clergy did not grow as the SBC clergy reportedly did. What accounts for the difference?<sup>7</sup>

Professor Chang contends that one explanation for the variance between the *Yearbook* data on the ratio of total clergy to churches (Table 1) and the ratio of clergy serving to churches (Table 2) is due to an imbalance between clergy supply and congregational demand, but another reason is that many churches have more than one ordained minister. This is especially the case among conservative Protestants such as the SBC where even congregations as small as 100 members may have multiple ordained staff members, although

not all may be “full-time.” She is correct to call attention to the fact that ecclesial polity affects the way this imbalance gets addressed. Church leaders in a connectional-placement system are more likely to try and manage the supply of clergy and demand of congregations by adding economic incentives and tweaking the placement system. The result is a more efficient use of clergy resources, but this system while more efficient in placing clergy does not always make the best match-maker. Denominational officials who operate within a congregational-call polity function more as consultants who advise congregations and candidates. This process tends to do a better job of connecting like-minded pastors and people even if with less efficiency than the connectional systems.

Although churches in the congregational polity tradition are primarily responsible for the call and welfare of their ministers, it is not accurate to infer, as Chang does, that their denominational leaders feel “no need to assess, measure, or worry about whether or not there are enough leaders to serve” churches in the denomination. No evidence is given for this generalization, although it is correct that Free Churches are more inclined than mainline Protestant denominations toward a theology of Lone Ranger individualism and an ecclesiology of free market economics. It is nevertheless a gross perversion to reduce the gathered community to merely another voluntary association of like-minded individuals, or to mistake “the invisible hand” for the work of the Holy Spirit.

Chang echoes frequent recommendations from connectional and congregational denominational leaders in calling attention to the need for more efficient placement systems and networks that connect the pool of active clergy with available ministerial positions. This need is especially acute in the current “survival of the fittest” practice that treats spring seminary graduates like salmon returning to their native streams to spawn. Like the salmon, seminarians are expected to survive on stored resources, travel astounding distances, and leap over obstacles along the way. Yet many die spiritually of exhaustion or are consumed by predators along the way.

<sup>6</sup> Part of the fallout of the controversy between moderates and conservatives in the SBC has been the creation of more than a dozen new Baptist theological seminaries, divinity schools, and houses of study that are loosely connected in an educational consortium and associated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The motivation for moderate Baptists in the pews to support these new institutions was a rejection of the theological agenda of the SBC seminaries and the need to ensure a steady stream of theologically educated leaders that would be better matches for moderate Baptist churches. I address the exponential growth of moderate Baptist theological education in an article “Bossy Preachers and Other Baptists” (<http://www.baptiststandard.com/postnuke/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=420>).

<sup>7</sup> *Yearbook of American and Canadian Congregations*.

The resources for churches and ministers within a congregational-call system are increasing dramatically with the emergence of internet-based search programs and ministerial “head-hunter” agencies.<sup>8</sup> Chang’s recommendation for deeper analysis of the demographic and economic factors that might shed light on the disparity between congregational vacancies and clergy placement seems warranted, but given that this was the purpose of her study it is disappointing that it sheds so little light on the current problem of clergy supply. Finally, a better accounting of clergy who enter the ministerial ranks through the front door as well as a more accurate tracking of those that exit out the back door would also be helpful in assessing the state of the clergy supply.<sup>9</sup>

But more important even than more and better data is wise thinking. What are we to make of the widening gap between younger and older clergy in the churches? Although Chang does not mention this problem, it indi-

cates a distressing future trend. For example, 33 percent of the ministers serving churches in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina are over 55 years old, and only 7 percent are under 35. This means that in the next decade there are likely to be almost five times as many experienced leaders retiring as there will be young leaders to take their place.<sup>10</sup> The request for more data and additional research in view of a problem so conspicuous sounds a little like the story of two men who were camping. In the middle of the night, one woke up and asked his friend: “Look up at the sky, and tell me what you see.” His fellow camper groggily replied, “I see stars.” “What does that tell you?” the first man asked. “Astronomically it tells me that billions of galaxies are in the universe. Meteorologically it suggests that tomorrow will be a beautiful day. Theologically it reminds me that the Lord determines the number of the stars.” “What does it tell you?” he then asked the first man. “It tells me that someone stole our tent.”

<sup>8</sup> Free Church denominational agencies and non-denominational organizations offer opportunities for ministers-seeking-congregations and congregations-seeking-ministers to connect in hopes that a match made in heaven might be conceived in cyberspace. Among Baptists the processes and networks vary widely. While American Baptists have a more denominationally-centralized system for placement, Southern Baptists tend toward a more independent congregational approach that depends on more informal networks. Baptist state conventions in the South are increasingly providing services designed to connect member churches and ministers with one another (e.g., BGCT [www.CPIS.org](http://www.CPIS.org)). The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is developing a nationwide internet-based reference and referral network ([www.cbfonline.org/community/place-ment.cfm](http://www.cbfonline.org/community/place-ment.cfm)). The number and effectiveness of interdenominational cybersearch networks are increasing. For example, [www.ChurchStaffing.com](http://www.ChurchStaffing.com) receives from 2,500 to 3,000 different visitors a week, and they list 400-500 ministry position openings and over 3,000 ministerial resumes. Leadership Network hosts a website ([www.LeadNetChurchStaffing.com](http://www.LeadNetChurchStaffing.com)) which posts job openings for churches with an attendance of more than 1,000. MinisterSearch ([www.ministersearch.com](http://www.ministersearch.com)) is a nondenominational ministerial recruitment firm based in Texas that operates like corporate executive headhunter agencies in business. They provide 3 to 5 candidates that match a congregation’s qualifications, and when one of their candidates is successfully placed the congregation typically pays about 20 percent of the new minister’s first-year compensation. Additional examples of non-denominational internet-based ministry networks include [christianjobsmall.com](http://christianjobsmall.com), [christian-jobs.com](http://christian-jobs.com), [ministryjobs.com](http://ministryjobs.com), [ministrymatch.com](http://ministrymatch.com), [kingdomcareers.com](http://kingdomcareers.com), [pastorsearch.net](http://pastorsearch.net), [ministrycareers.com](http://ministrycareers.com), and many others. Services and fees vary from simply posting positions and resumes to active matching of candidates with positions.

<sup>9</sup> For a brief but insightful look at the problem of clergy exits see Gerald L. Zelizer, “Revolving Clergy Harms Religion,” *USA Today* (21 February 2002). The study “Experiences and Attitudes of Protestant Ministers Who Left Local Church Ministry” by Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger provides excellent data but interestingly two of the largest non-Catholic denominations, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Church of God in Christ, were not included. Two decades ago, a report circulated among Southern Baptists which observed that in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex alone there were 5,000 graduates of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary who were not active in ministry. Many of them had exited the back door. Edward B. Bratcher states that “in the early 1970s Southern Baptists were losing approximately 1,000 ministers a year from the parish ministry. This astounding figure went unnoticed and when publicized received little response.” Bratcher, *The Walk-On-Water Syndrome* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 119. In a 2001 article for Baptist Press, the SBC news service, Charles Willis suggested that the termination of pastors was leveling off in the SBC. He noted that the 987 terminations in 2000 were down from a high of 1,259 in 1996. However, according to reports of LeaderCare, a ministry of LifeWay Christian Resources, the number of annual terminations has remained fairly constant at around 1,000 through the 1980s and 1990s. After over 30 years, the problem of pastoral exits has gotten the attention of the SBC, but the back door is still wide open.

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished study by the Council on Higher Education Theological Task Force of Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (Spring 2001). North Carolina Baptists found that their situation is comparable to the ratio of over 55 to under 35 ministers serving in the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church USA. The ratio was significantly higher in the United Church of Christ (37 percent : 4 percent), Episcopal Church USA (40 percent : 4 percent), and Roman Catholics (69 percent : 6 percent). For a report on the growing gap between younger and older ministers see *Congregations* (April/May 2001) published by the Alban Institute.

As obvious and yet as obscure as the missing tent is the fact that a clergy shortage is coming. When the gap between retiring pastors and entering ministers is combined with other signs such as a declining pool of seminary graduates, a diminishing number of seminarians headed for congregational ministry, the resistance of Gen Xers to mid-life ministry callings, a decline in length of pastoral tenure, and the alarmingly high number of ministerial terminations, it suggests that the problem will get worse in the near future. It is understandable why denominational officials are anxious.<sup>11</sup>

More and better statistical information might improve the understanding of clergy supply and ministry placement, especially among Protestant denominations whose connectional polities are inclined toward centralized and denominational management, but getting a handle on the problem among Free Churches may still prove elusive because their congregational polity and democratic proclivity make them much messier and more diverse subjects to study. To her credit, Professor Chang admits that her findings are more reflective of connectional denominations than groups with congregational polity, yet she makes the questionable assumption that her conclusions about congregational churches may be confirmed by comparing them with the data from connectional denominations. The fact is that the clergy shortage, if it exists (and it surely does), has very different theological and ecclesiological implications for connectional

churches than it does for congregationally governed ones. Taking connectional Protestants to be the *de facto* norm for ministry distorts the fundamental differences between the two ecclesial types as pertains to the ordination, education, and professionalization of the clergy.

The most basic dissimilarity between these two types is that connectional ecclesiologies are committed to a special office of ordained ministry as essential to the church, whereas for congregationally gathered churches, an ordained clergy is not necessary for the church to be the church. Luther to be sure declared that “we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians,”<sup>12</sup> but he also maintained that ministers are one of the visible signs of the true church. “Wherever you find these offices or officers,” he declared, “you may be assured that the holy Christian people are there; for the church cannot be without these bishops, pastors, preachers, priests; and conversely, they cannot be without the church.”<sup>13</sup> For Reformation radicals the priesthood of all believers was seen as the norm for ministry, even though with few exceptions they and their Free Church descendants recognized the need to set apart some for the special ministry of preaching and teaching.<sup>14</sup> The ordination of clergy among most congregational churches is consequently understood as the community’s recognition of the gifts and calling needed to fulfill a particular work, which may be but is not necessarily for a lifetime vocational ministry.<sup>15</sup> This

<sup>11</sup> In a study entitled “Will There be a Clergy Shortage?” Matthew J. Price answers that for Catholics and Episcopalians the answer is yes. For Baptists and other Free Churches the clergy shortage may not yet be the imminent crisis it is among Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants, but the statistical trends suggest that they are headed in the same direction. See also Matthew J. Price, “After the Revolution: A Review of Mainline Protestant Clergy Leadership” *Theology Today* 59 (October 2002): 428-50.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church in Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 36:113. See also *The Misuse of the Mass* in which Luther refers to a “spiritual priesthood, held in common by all Christians, through which we are all priests with Christ,” in *Luther’s Works* 36:138. Although Calvin does not use the phrase “priesthood of all believers” he frequently refers to the spiritual priesthood which all Christians share by virtue of the priestly office of Christ, e.g. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:15.6 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:501-3.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *On the Councils and the Church in Luther’s Works*, 41:164. In the same paragraph of the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* where Luther declares that all Christians by virtue of their baptism participate in a universal priesthood, he continues by stating that “the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us” in *Luther’s Works*, 36:113. The continuity of the priesthood of all believers and the office of ordained ministers softens the Catholic maxim: no bishop, no church.

<sup>14</sup> David C. Steinmetz nicely summarizes the differences between the Protestant and Free Church understandings of ministry in “The Protestant Minister and the Teaching Office of the Church” in *Memory and Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 63-81. George Hunston Williams calls attention to the continuity of Reformation Radicals and Luther, in “‘Congregationalist’ Luther and the Free Churches,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (August 1967): 283-95. Quakers, Plymouth Brethren, and the Salvation Army have the most radicalized understanding of believer priesthood.

<sup>15</sup> For an engagement of Baptists with a sacramental theology of ordination see John E. Colwell, “The Sacramental Nature of Ordination: An Attempt to Re-engage a Catholic Understanding and Practice” and Stephen R. Holmes, “Towards a Baptist Theology of Ordained Ministry,” in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003), 228-62.

radical doctrine teaches that because among Free Churches every Christian is understood to be charismatically endowed, all are equipped for the work of ministry. When the people of God exercise their gifts and callings the church attains the fullness of Christ.<sup>16</sup> The distinction is fundamental: For connectional churches more closely aligned with Luther's ecclesiology an ordained ministry is of the Church's *esse*, but for congregationally oriented churches an ordained ministry serves the *bene esse*.<sup>17</sup>

Yet as one critic observed, there was "a hankering after titles amongst some Baptists."<sup>18</sup> The same "hankering" was undoubtedly true for other Free Church groups. The key to ministerial authority, which in the 18th century lay in charismatic empowerment and popular

*Baptists and others in the Free Church gradually adopted a professional model of ministry as they fought the twin enemies of illiteracy and ignorance.*

appeal, became increasingly tied to education in the 19th century as the ministry became more gentrified and professional. Baptists and others in the Free Church gradually adopted a professional model of ministry as they fought the twin enemies of illiteracy and ignorance. More estab-

lished urban churches began to expect pastors to be college (and later seminary) graduates in order to establish wider fields of influence.<sup>19</sup> Jesse Mercer, a Georgia

Baptist leader in ministerial education, argued: "We consider education to the minister, what clothes are to a man."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, dissident voices within the Free Church tradition resisted professionalization as a sign of unfaithfulness. John Hus accused Catholic priests of being simoniac heretics who had sold their souls to the devil. George Fox ridiculed established church preachers as hirelings who were bound to a corrupt ecclesiastical system with the chains of filthy lucre. Roger Williams heckled Puritan clerics with his derisive slogan, "no longer pay no longer pray."<sup>21</sup> For modern congregational radicals the push toward a professional clergy was in tension with the biblical theology of the priesthood of all believers, the earlier model of the farmer-preacher, and the emerging democratic ideals of popular religion. Indeed, one of the strengths of Southern Baptists and a key to their numerical growth while other denominations declined was a continued inclusion of bivocational ministry. As Finke and Stark have shown, ministerial professionalization correlates with denominational decline as well as decreasing numbers of clergy.<sup>22</sup> The coming clergy shortage may provide strong motivation for Free Churches to return to their roots in a more charismatic understanding of ministry rather than the modern bureaucratic model they have adopted. The evidence suggests that there is an undersupply of clergy that by all indications will become more acute. But if everyone who is called into God's kingdom is a priest and has been charismatically equipped for ministry, can there ever really be a leadership shortage? Dare we find out?

<sup>16</sup> John Howard Yoder, "The Fullness of Christ," chap. in *Body Politics* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2001), 47-60.

<sup>17</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 246-51.

<sup>18</sup> Attributed to restorationist leader Alexander Campbell in Samuel S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 170.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 83-86; and E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> John Hus, "On Simony," in *Advocates of Reform*, ed. Matthew Spinka (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 196-278; Roger Williams, *A Hireling Ministry None of Christs* in *The Complete Works of Roger Williams* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 7:142-87. George Fox and the Quakers often criticized paid clergy as "hirelings," but Williams seems to have coined the phrase "no longer pay no longer pray."

<sup>22</sup> Finke and Stark suggest that the lesson of the increase of Southern Baptist ministers and the decrease of Northern Baptist clergy is due to the ideal of a professionalized and educated ministry in the North in *The Churching of America, 1776-1990* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 170-73. Mainline Protestant denominations with connectional polity designed alternative routes for ordination outside of seminary education, but for Southern Baptists in the rural South an unpaid and uneducated clergy was the norm for most churches until the mid-20th century.

# THE NEED FOR DATA

A Response by William B. Lawrence, Dean, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Tex.

Recently a United Methodist bishop asked the dean of a theological school why the graduates of his seminary seemed to be exiting from pastoral ministry at a rather high rate. The bishop's question apparently was built upon two assumptions—first, that data had been gathered about the clergy who exit from the ministry and had been correlated with the schools of theology where they are educated; and, second, that a high attrition rate demonstrates some deficiencies in a specific school's work of preparing students for ministerial life

The second assumption is certainly plausible. Surely, among the 217<sup>1</sup> institutions in North America that have been accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, there are in fact some deficiencies. Among them are, to be sure, some ineffective methods of preparing graduates for a life in ministry.

However, the first assumption is mistaken. There are no data that connect the rate at which clergy leave the ministry with places where they were educated. In fact there is not much solid information about most of the people who enter, serve, and leave pastoral ministry. The bishop's assumption about the rate at which graduates of certain seminaries leave the ministry can only be based on impressions, anecdotes, or bias. As Patricia M. Y. Chang notes, her ability to reach any useful conclusions about the supply of—or demand for—clergy is severely limited by an “absence of consistent and reliable information.”

This creates a problem for making *quantitative* judgments about the number of clergy in the labor market, of course, and that is the starting point for Dr. Chang's project. It also creates a problem for reaching any *qualitative* judgments about effectiveness in ministry. The absence of reliable data makes it unlikely that theological educators can devise more suitable and successful approaches for preparing women and men to have effective lives in ministry. It limits the church's capacity to articulate any realistic description about levels of satisfaction that can reasonably be expected for those who serve in ministry. It results in the possibility, according to Dr. Chang, that one can read the same data and reach opposing conclusions—that there is a clergy shortage, and that there is a clergy surplus.

Clearly, her paper has exposed the need for better information. It has also shown the multi-faceted complexities that confront any attempt to offer policy recommendations about the practices of ministry.

In addition, the lack of data compelled Dr. Chang to rely on certain assumptions that may, in themselves, further complicate the problem. For example, she distinguishes between two types of denominational structure—one in which a potential pastor operates as a free agent in pursuit of a congregational call to some position in ministry, and in which the denomination functions as a “secular” or “neutral” system for purposes of placement; a *second* in which the denomination “is invested with spiritual authority and responsibility” and may operate with a more “professional” approach to ministry which includes keeping accurate clergy records.

Dr. Chang chose to focus on denominations that are closer to the second model. That choice provides some intellectual clarity for the study.

But uncertainties remain about the ways in which “free agency” affects even the more “professional” and “spiritual” systems of denominational placement.

Congregations in a “call” system could, as part of their professional practice and spiritual discipline, decide to have an “intentional interim” pastor for an extended period. Congregations in a hierarchically and professionally deployed system might be permitted to act with some freedom to have an interim pastor or a hiatus between senior pastors. In either case, the calculations of supply and demand could be affected. These local churches may do so after a long-term pastorate has ended, after a severe conflict has divided the church, because of a need to re-assess the church's financial situation, while confronting the possibility that ministerial priorities must be re-ordered before seeking a new pastor, or simply to save money for a year or so.

Except for the most hierarchical denominational placement patterns, there will likely be some percentage of pulpits that stand empty at any given time even in the more “professional” and “spiritual” denominational orders. Just as the national unemployment statistics tend to assume that there will always be a number of persons who are between or without jobs (not counting those who have simply dropped out of the labor market because they are discouraged or unemployable workers), there may be a reasonably fixed percentage of pastoral openings. And those openings may be disproportionately in small membership churches or difficult-to-fill pastorates.

<sup>1</sup> This is the statistic reported for the fall of 2003 in the *Bulletin* (45, Part 2:B, 2003-2004), The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (Pittsburgh, Pa.)

There is another assumption that may be necessary for clarity of analysis but could simply add to the complications of the study. Dr. Chang's paper "assumes that the definitions used by [Constant] Jacquet have remained consistent." With regard to such terms as "fully ordained clergy," however, this is a flawed assumption.

Between 1950 and 2000, The United Methodist Church (and a predecessor denomination, The Methodist Church) made at least two enormous shifts in definition. In 1956, women were for the first time given full clergy rights. Women who were present in the denomination's clergy labor supply changed in status and increasingly changed in statistics. In 1996, a second shift occurred when the church's ministry of "Deacon" was substantially altered. Historically, it had been a first stage of ordination, normally granted at the time of entry into Probationary (or provisional) clergy status. A second ordination, to the order of Elder, would then normally occur at the time of entry into Full clergy status. With the changes of 1996, a candidate for ordination had to choose a vocational track either to the order of Deacon or to the order of Elder. The two ordinations were now viewed as separate and distinct ministries. No matter which path the candidate pursued, Full clergy status could be conferred through both forms of ministry.

None of these issues challenges the merits of the study by Dr. Chang. They do point to the fact, however, that developing some manageable data on ministry will be an even messier business than she suggests.

There are three areas that will have to be taken into account in any effort to adopt the recommendations that Dr. Chang proposes in the summary section of her study: the *polity* of a denomination, the methods of *preparation* for ministry that a denomination establishes as its norms, and the *practices* of a denomination which may involve many authorized or unauthorized exceptions to the established patterns of the church group.

*First* are the matters of *polity*. Several denominations are currently struggling with official policies regarding homosexuality, and among those policy debates are matters concerning ministry. One peculiar problem emerged in the debate among United Methodists. Denominational polity confers upon the Annual Conference—specifically, the clergy session of the

Annual Conference—authority to determine who is eligible for ordination and who is eligible for appointment to a position of ministry. Denominational polity confers upon a bishop the authority to appoint ministers to their places of service. Denominational polity also prohibits a "self-avowed, practicing homosexual" person from being ordained or appointed.

In effect, Bishops make appointments, but Bishops do not make decisions about who is eligible for appointment. An Annual Conference could vote to confer "full clergy rights" upon a "self-avowed, practicing homosexual" whom the Bishop would be both obligated to appoint and by church law would also be prohibited from appointing.

While such polity conflicts might only affect a few of the 25,000 clergy in The United Methodist Church, those few would be among the number who may or may not be counted among the clergy "supply" when the denomination is asked to produce statistics.

Another, less abstruse, dimension of polity involves the status of retired clergy. When a Lutheran minister retires and, hence, is without a call, that person is presumably removed from the census of an available clergy "supply." But when a United Methodist minister retires, he or she remains a clergy member of the Annual Conference, with the right to vote on matters before the Conference and eligibility to serve in a place of ministry while remaining in the retired relationship with the Conference.

Differences in polity not only lead to a difference in the census of available clergy, they can lead to a different accounting in response to the question about whether there is a clergy shortage or surplus.

Some denominations, including both hierarchical systems of deployment and congregational systems of call, have restrictions on types of ministry that women are permitted to exercise. These restrictions may apply to prohibitions against ordaining women for any form of ministry. Or they may apply to limitations that permit women to hold subordinate positions but not senior pastoral positions. In such groups, there could possibly be both a statistical shortage of ministers *and* a surplus of ministers as a result of gender-based polity regulations.

Still another consideration under various denominational polities will be recent expansions in the defini-

tion of permissible “leaves” from ministry. Among the categories now recognized are family, maternity, paternity, sabbatical, and military leave. When a denomination guarantees that a minister on “leave” will have an appointment when the “leave” concludes, how should denominational data record that person’s place in the labor supply?

*Second*, and linked to polity in some ways, are matters involving denominational decisions about methods of *preparing* for ministry. What some churches once called “lay pastors” were persons who received a license to exercise limited forms of ministry either after having completed a course of study or while concurrently pursuing such a course of study. Now those methods of preparation are increasingly being approved by a number of denominations as paths that will lead to partial clergy status or even full clergy rights. In the Episcopal Church, these include “Canon IX” priests. Among United Methodists, they include “Local Pastors” who may take certain courses under ecclesiastical auspices (but without academic accreditation) and acquire eligibility for full clergy status. At what point in their preparation will a denomination properly count such persons as part of the clergy supply?

The rise in alternate means of preparing for ministry may or may not be related to declines in the numbers of persons who are preparing in traditional ways for entry into the ministry. Among United Methodists, for instance, the last several years have been marked by both a proportional and a real statistical reduction in the number of persons being ordained Elder. From 1997 to 2002, the number of persons ordained Elder declined 24 percent.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, 526 Elders were ordained. In 2003, 483 Elders were ordained.<sup>3</sup> But such statistics only reflect one category of persons preparing for one office of “Full” ministry in the denomination—not an actual supply of ministers.

*Third* among areas to consider are the actual practices of ministry. As Dr. Chang observes in her paper, “wealthy congregations are more likely to behave autonomously from denominational structures.” Hierarchical placement systems, such as that in United Methodism, tend to function as congregational call systems in wealthier churches and in larger churches with multiple staffs of highly specialized positions for clergy. While it is difficult to assess the full impact of

such independence, it is certainly true that the senior minister of a big, rich church could negotiate with an individual pastor of a poorer, small membership church about joining the staff, then ask the Bishop to ratify the “hiring” as an appointment, and leave it to the Bishop to determine how to fill the pastorate of the vacated small membership church pulpit. The hiring practices of denominations with congregational call systems, as Dr. Chang notes, can similarly put the small membership churches at a disadvantage.

Some practices can have a subtle, indeed insidious, effect on a denomination’s capacity to develop reliable data. For example, it is widely believed within churches that officially impose no gender restrictions on candidates for ordination that women have, nevertheless, experienced patterns of discouragement at preliminary stages of the credentialing process and at informal stages of the placement process. Those women might never actually appear as statistics in a profile of clergy labor supply and might not actually appear in tables that enumerate clergy who exit from ministry.

One additional practice that can affect an assessment of clergy supply is the matter of compensation and benefits, which Dr. Chang reviews rather carefully. There are considerations that should be added to the ones she lists, however. For instance, she notes that 54 percent of American Baptist congregations participate in the denominational pension program and that only 35 percent of those congregations are contributing to the pension fund on behalf of their pastors. She concludes that this is a significant disincentive for clergy. But we apparently have no way to know how many of those “non-contributing” churches are operating outside of the denominational pension system and are providing retirement contributions through some independent plans.

All of these matters lead to two broad judgments. One is that Dr. Chang has made an exceptionally fine contribution to the conversation about ecclesiastical needs for good data about ministers and the ministry. The second is that the substantive and subtle issues which have to be examined are even larger than she indicates. At a time when many sources point to the need for more effective pastoral leadership, we need a greater focus on research to generate data that will help pursue such a goal.

<sup>2</sup> The United Methodist Newscope, Vol. 30, No. 33, August 16, 2002

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 31, No. 37, September 12, 2003

# MORE THAN NUMBERS

A Response by Albert J. Meyer, Mennonite Board of Education, Goshen, Ind.

## MEASUREMENT OF CLERGY SUPPLY

Patricia Chang examines two ratios to assess pastoral supply situations and trends quantitatively. First, if the ratio of the number of authenticated (ordained, licensed, or otherwise rostered) candidates actually serving in congregations to the number of congregations is less than one (i.e., if there are fewer candidates than congregations), Dr. Chang suggests that there seems to be evidence of a clergy shortage.

Chang also examines another ratio, the ratio of the *total* clergy on a roster to the number of congregations. Using this index with available data, she finds that there are, in many denominations, more candidates than congregations and that this ratio is increasing over time. This ratio seems to show that there is an oversupply and that the oversupply is increasing. There are ordained candidates who are not currently serving congregations. Small congregations, Chang suggests, sometimes cannot afford to pay full-time pastoral salaries. Pastors who would be ready to serve take other jobs to make livable salaries.

Chang rightly observes that drawing reliable conclusions about the true state of clergy supply from quantitative data would require better data and more careful analysis. As she clearly states, the first ratio assumes for simplicity that there is a one-to-one correspondence of pastors and congregations, that is, that the number of positions available for pastors equals the number of churches. But some larger congregations are served by multi-staff teams of credentialed and rostered clergy leaders, and some smaller congregations are “yoked” together and share one pastor. To arrive at more reliable conclusions, we would need to work in terms of the actual number of pastoral positions for which congregations and denominations are ready to plan and budget.

The second ratio treats retired pastors and ordained persons serving in denominational offices or in ministries beyond the local congregation, such as in chaplaincy, campus ministry, college and seminary faculties, or even those serving in secular positions, as though they were candidates willing and able to serve in local congregations. Chang finds a large pool of authenticated clergy not serving in local congregations and says this could be viewed as evidence of a large clergy oversupply. But, as she notes, in reality this is

not entirely true. While these authenticated persons may be serving outside the local church because there are no positions available in local congregations, often it is the case that they are serving in these positions by choice — or, as some might say, by call.

To arrive at a ratio that would most helpfully indicate a shortage or oversupply, a denomination with a roster of qualified candidates would need to use as a numerator only the number of credentialed persons ready and able to assume responsibilities in congregational leadership—it would not include retired pastors or ordained persons in denominational offices. And the denominator would need to represent the number of pastoral *positions*, which may be different from the number of *congregations*. As we have seen, some larger congregations want and need more than one credentialed clergy person and some small congregations want to share a full-time pastor. After making these adjustments, denominations ending up with ratios of less than one—with fewer available and qualified candidates than positions—could then appropriately speak of shortage.

Some denominations or judicatories will have available data for drawing good conclusions and tracking trends in ratios. Others would need to make an investment in time and resources to gather these data if they wished to use quantitative studies of these kinds to understand their situations and have good quantitative informational bases for making plans for meeting their future leadership needs.



## QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

Congregations in the so-called “Free Church” tradition of which I am a part tend to choose their own leaders. These denominations may not have rosters of those who have met high educational or other professional standards. The lists of ordained or licensed pastors they do have are essentially lists of people their congregations have chosen and then proposed to their judicatories or denominations for authentication.

Free Church congregations normally find leaders somewhere, sometimes by calling leaders from their own ranks, and sometimes by recruiting leaders from outside their circles. It is hard to speak quantitatively of shortage or oversupply. One must instead try to assess the qualifications of the leaders congregations are choosing at a given time, and trends in the gifts and experiences of new recruits over time. It is hard to quantify these characteristics in ratios. Congregations get pastors, but less-qualified prospects are chosen when strong candidates are not available. If congregations are choosing fewer and fewer well-qualified people, that signals a problem.

There was a time in American history when the pastor in a mainline congregation on the village green was the best educated person in the community—better educated than medical doctors, lawyers, and other professionals in town. In Free Church congregations near the frontier, ministers were sometimes chosen from among the most successful farmers or businesspersons in the community.

There was a time after World War II when the average aptitude test scores of the first women going to seminaries in significant numbers were higher than those of men—the women were sometimes pioneers in ministry in their denominations. Now seminary women have more opportunities in ministry and in other occupations, and the aptitude test averages of women are closer to those of men. Especially gifted men and women have occupational opportunities in many fields; those who are gifted have choices in fields other than pastoral ministry.

We do not have good quantitative measures of the kind of “spirituality” and “charisma” congregations are seeking in pastoral prospects. We can track trends in the numbers of those who meet minimum qualifica-

tions for credentialing or of those who are chosen by congregations and credentialed, but we need to go beyond quantitative analyses in terms of supply to a more fundamental question: In the face of new opportunities for our young people on every side, are we calling reasonable numbers of our spiritually and intellectually gifted members to pastoral leadership?

## SMALL CONGREGATIONS

Chang finds a shortage of pastors willing or able to serve in small, ethnic, or rural congregations. There are some leadership vacancies and shortages, particularly in the small-congregation sector. Some small congregations cannot pay full-time salaries, and some pastors cannot accept positions in which they and their families cannot receive adequate salaries and benefits. Candidates are more selective in specifying locations to which they can or will move.

In some mainline churches, declining memberships add to the problem—they are finding themselves with more small congregations with limited resources. Some smaller churches in the Free Church tradition are able to call leaders out from their people and provide in-service resources for their pastoral preparation and mentoring. But some judicatories have started more small churches than they can help grow to independence. These judicatories may need to focus their efforts on providing financial support for attracting strong and entrepreneurial pastoral leadership for existing congregations before they start too many new ventures that are not well served and are hardly able to survive.

Regional judicatory staff members and overseers can play important roles in setting priorities and focusing regional efforts on calling appropriately-gifted leaders to small (and ethnic and rural) congregations for which timely and focused help can make the difference between subsistence and healthy growth.

## ALTERNATIVE PASTORAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Many denominations are finding that they need to provide ways of preparing prospects for ministry who cannot take time out for seven years of college and seminary work. Many are starting new in-service and non-M.Div. programs and providing for alternative

paths to ordination. Some minority (and majority) congregations are calling leaders who do not have baccalaureate degrees. Some pastors prefer bi-vocational ministry.

In our Mennonite circles, we are finding an increasing number of gifted prospects who are ready to prepare for pastoral ministry. More of them are interested in plural ministry teams that include both “lay” and previously-authenticated leaders. Many of the new prospects are ready for training for their responsibilities when this is available.

Denominational offices and theological faculties need to recognize these realities if they want to provide for the preparation of prospects who may have unusual

*If we want to talk about calling more able young people to ministry, we need to be talking also about using the gifts of the ministers we have.*

gifts, but limited formal education for pastoral work. The “supply” of pastors for the future is not necessarily limited to those who have completed M.Div. degrees and are waiting on denominational rosters for assignment—it may include members whose

gifts are recognized by their congregations and who are called out of their congregations to ministry.

## USING THE GIFTS WE HAVE

Although it is not a special focus in Patricia Chang’s present paper, she does identify a need for better information on pastoral terminations.

Perhaps an annotated bibliography of available materials on terminations would be a good beginning. Some studies have been done. In just the Mennonite circle, we have Menno H. Epp’s book, *The Pastor’s Exit* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College Publications, 1984); Ardean Goertzen’s 1987 report, “Congregational/Systemic Stress and Pastoral Burnout: The Findings of a Research Project on Pastoral Leadership and Stress...”; and materials from

the Lilly-supported “Pastorate Project” David L. Sutter and I led in the early 1990s. Certainly there would be studies with data from other denominations and groups of denominations. Bringing together what is already known would be helpful.

When a gifted pastor is terminated inappropriately, the church loses not only the contributions of the pastor, but, sometimes even more serious, the contributions of gifted younger members who witness the proceedings and then decide that their gifts can be better used in other-than-pastoral vocations. If we want to talk about calling more able young people to ministry, we need to be talking also about using the gifts of the ministers we have.

I have the impression that this problem is particularly acute in churches in which congregations act on their own in the employment and termination of pastors. Without significant outside and timely help with procedures for maintaining good pastor-congregation relationships, for handling differences and conflict, and for making wise retention and termination decisions, pastors and inexperienced congregational leaders sometimes find themselves caught up in developments they later regret. Sometimes a pastor who would have been able to make a lifelong contribution to the church is discouraged and lost to the pastoral ministry.

There is some evidence for the hypothesis that there are more involuntary terminations in denominations in which congregations function autonomously and fewer in denominations in which denominations provide some form of support to congregations in the pastoral “hiring and firing” process. If this is true, it would not necessarily mean that congregations should not be ultimately responsible for employing and retaining their pastors, but it could strongly suggest that judicatories and denominations make outside resources available to pastors and congregations who are making these decisions—and, ideally, do so on a continuing basis. A significant factor in the supply of pastors for the future is the retention and affirmation of the gifts of the pastors we already have.

# A THEOLOGICAL LOOK AT CLERGY SUPPLY

A Response by **Melissa Wiginton**

**Director, Partnership for Excellence, The Fund for Theological Education, Atlanta, Ga.**

Patricia Chang accepted a daunting task when she agreed to assess the Protestant clergy supply in the 21st century. From across the breadth of the Protestant landscape, Chang gathered diverse and idiosyncratic data. Chang says that as she began to draw conclusions about the shape of the church's clergy supply, she felt like the proverbial blind person trying to describe an elephant. The elephant she ultimately conjures is not one steadily toting royalty in a canopied throne on its back; it is instead the image of an elephant stepping precariously onto a stool under the Big Top. The ringmaster directs the elephant up and we wonder how this magnificent yet ungainly creature will distribute its weight to achieve balance. In this brief commentary, I will highlight Chang's important contributions to understanding of the challenges of balancing in clergy supply and demand, elaborate the limitations of her approach, and finally, propose an alternative set of questions for the assessment of clergy supply.

Primary among her contributions, Chang appropriately calls for clear, consistent, and well-documented data collection as important for identifying emergent trends. Chang further convinces us that denominational leaders and scholars will benefit from carefully investigating specific dynamics that frustrate full clergy deployment: We do need to learn more about why pastors drop out of congregational ministry, how gender politics influence clergy retention, and which models of ministry might energize clergy for parish leadership. She also helpfully identifies newly emerging patterns of authorizing non-traditional pastoral leaders in response to the need for clergy. Most importantly, Chang determines that the Protestant church has more than enough pastors to serve all of its congregations but that many pastors are not accepting jobs where there are openings — in churches of small membership.

Professor Chang tells us from the outset that she will, as commissioned, conduct her inquiry as a question of labor supply and demand. She thus takes her analytical tools from the sociological and economic literature about labor markets. In Chang's language, the problem of clergy supply is one of imbalance, a failure to meet the goal of full employment with good fits between persons and jobs. Chang offers two primary explanations for the labor imbalance: financial disincentives (low pay, no pension) and inefficient means of matching candidates and positions. Chang rightly empha-

sizes the labor imbalance as a matter to which churches must attend.

Looking through the analytical grid of the market, Chang proposes several correctives for the labor imbalance. Her recommendations are familiar: better market research, replication of successes, targeted marketing strategies, easier access to product, retooling products to fit market niches, incentives to influence choice, and investigation of those who have switched loyalties. These labor supply and demand driven responses are not bad ideas. Many pastors do have rich stories to tell about the goodness of life in small membership churches. Seminaries should take a long hard look at how they prepare ministers to serve in all kinds of congregations. Church leaders can benefit from telling each other about fruitful strategies for matching clergy and congregational needs. However, I want to comment on two realities that militate against the potential success of the market driven responses Chang suggests.

First, Chang places the burden of addressing the labor imbalance squarely on the shoulders of national denominational offices. In advocating this strategy, Chang likely overestimates the potency, resources, commitments, and capabilities of national offices. Not only are the national institutions' budgets being reduced because of diminishing membership and the general economic downturn, but they also face reductions because many congregations are deciding to keep their funds local or regional. With shrinking resources, denominational leaders must make difficult decisions about priorities. We cannot assume, as does Chang's labor market model, that these central structures will be able to effectively discharge the responsibility for the health, welfare, and happiness of clergy.

Additionally, Chang believes that small membership churches can attract clergy in two ways: marketing and incentives. That is, denominations should promote the unique benefits of serving their small congregations, and if small churches cannot add dollars to compensation packages, they should put together in-kind benefits (housing and transportation) or build in other intangible benefits (flexible time and responsibilities.) Chang's approach, however, fails to fully attend to the reasons clergy under the age of 35 resist pastorates in small membership churches.<sup>1</sup> Young clergy are worried about finances—not that the salaries are low per se but that amount of salary impedes their ability to pay off

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Barron, "Listening to the Next Generation: Aspiring Pastors Talk About the Road Ahead," Unpublished manuscript, Fund for Theological Education, July 2003.

their student loans. More urgently, they are concerned about loneliness in isolated areas—not having friends their age, not having people to date. These young would-be pastors fear rejection by an older congregation that suspects their competency. At the same time, they worry about their ability to minister to churches full of members much older than themselves. Young pastors often come into ministry with a zeal to heal the wounds of their communities, and they tend to think small congregations are conservative and will resist new ideas. By relying solely on the tools of labor supply and demand analysis, Chang obscures the constellation of issues that must be addressed if young, first career pastors are to be drawn to empty pulpits.

*By relying solely on the tools of labor supply and demand analysis, Chang obscures the constellation of issues that must be addressed if young, first career pastors are to be drawn to empty pulpits.*

that flatten our humanity, obscure God’s movement among us, and silence God’s call to the church. The market framework used by Chang engenders a kind of amnesia: It is as if upon entering the grid of labor analysis we forget that we are Christians, that we have resources beyond the sociological and economic from which to draw in responding to the contemporary landscape. Among others, United Methodist Bishop Kenneth L. Carder argues vigorously that the logic of the market and the values of consumerism are at odds

Beyond naming these two realities—weakening denominational power and young pastors’ multiple resistances—I want to argue that the heuristic of supply and demand forecloses a theological assessment of the situation. When we use the grammar of the market to structure our consideration of the needs of the church, we risk importing categories

with, if not antithetical to, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Bishop Carder contends that the logic of the market is that of scarcity while the logic of the gospel is that of abundance and that “the problem is that the market logic shapes more than the market.”<sup>2</sup> He further says:

*The church’s future is not secured by strategic planning processes and long-range planning based on demographic studies and marketing surveys. The church with a future is a church that knows who Jesus is, takes with utter seriousness what Jesus says, goes where Jesus goes, does what Jesus does, and loves those whom Jesus loves.*<sup>3</sup>

I want now to take Carder’s prophetic admonition as a framework for engaging three matters embedded in Chang’s assessment: how we understand what it means to be clergy, how we evaluate the needs of smaller membership churches, and what is at stake in the match between younger clergy and smaller congregations.

Chang begins her report by acknowledging the need for religious leadership that “inspires, guides and nurtures” and has the “ability to shape a prophetic vision for its members.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Chang assumes that “clergy see themselves as professionals who wish to pursue ministry as a full-time occupation and to sustain a middle-class lifestyle while doing so”<sup>5</sup> After all, Chang says, these are the “normative aspirations of typical Americans.”<sup>6</sup> Clergy may unreflectively hold such aspirations, but with Bishop Carder, I believe that the gospel calls these aspirations into question; indeed, the gospel shatters the idol we have made of middle-class Americanism—especially as it refers to individualism, entitlement, and materialism. Therefore, instead of advancing the category of the *profession of ministry*, I want to talk about the *way of life or vocation of ministry*. Professionalism implies an upward trajectory—always moving to greater power, more income, increased insulation from those who are different.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, as Henri Nouwen says, the way of the Christian leader is the way of downward

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth L. Carder, “Market and Mission: Competing Visions for Transforming Ministry,” Hickman Lecture, Duke Divinity School, [www.pulpitandpew@div.duke.edu](http://www.pulpitandpew@div.duke.edu), p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Id., p. 6

<sup>4</sup> Chang, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Id., p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> I am not suggesting that the church set up structures to insure that clergy are poor (although some would say we have that now); the way of justice requires that churches attend to their ministers’ needs.

mobility.<sup>8</sup> In this more theologically considered paradigm, church leaders might approach questions of compensation, placement, and expectation as elements that shape a *way of life* that nurtures, guides, inspires and shapes prophetic vision for the church. As long as the church believes the norms of middle class professionalism ought to be upheld, we limit the possibilities for responding to the issues of pastoral leadership to those of consumer capitalism and the logic of the market.

Carder's logic of the gospel also problematizes Chang's notion of marketing for smaller membership churches. If those who would market small congregations take with utter seriousness what Jesus says, the questions change: "What does our little church have to offer that would make someone want to serve here?" might become "How can we best convey our work of loving God and neighbor to draw the right leader for us?" Pastors considering a call in a small church might shift from asking, "What does this church have to offer that appeals to me?" to wondering, "How am I compelled to be part of this community's movement toward greater love of God and neighbor?" The work of discerning a congregation's charism is not a task of market analysis or the logic of scarcity; it waits to be reclaimed by those of us who would address the leadership needs of smaller membership churches as a theological task. I know that this kind of investment is extravagant and, as such, counter to the logic of market. Denominations do have limited resources. But I am urging that those resources be spent in the theologically grounded work of the discernment of congregational charisms—especially for smaller membership churches—with the tools of the market used sparingly in service to that end.

Finally, we need to ask some uncomfortable questions about the absence of pastors from small membership churches. Do some pulpits stand empty because con-

gregations are resisting a movement of the Spirit that would bring change? Are some clergy turning away from calls solely because they are not attractive by market standards? We tend to view the labor imbalance as an indication of something gone wrong in the system that needs to be repaired. But as people following Jesus in the way Carder describes, we need to ask a question not raised by the logic of the market: What new thing God is doing in our midst?

Chang mentions recent efforts to encourage bright young people toward ministry, and, in fact, more highly qualified young adults are pursuing theological education and congregational ministry. One pastor I know calls this the "greening of the church."<sup>9</sup> I want to urge church leaders to become curious about how this phenomenon may be God's Spirit moving in the life of the church. What gifts and graces do young adults bring to pastoral leadership *as* young adults? How are they being called to make a difference in the life of the church? In the 2003 opening convocation address to the entering M. Div. students at Candler School of Theology, Dr. Robert Franklin emphatically argued that "Every congregation in America should be a community of worship and prayer to be sure but they must also grow into communities of cultural discernment, moral deliberation, and courageous action. They cannot do that on their own. They need leaders. And so you are here." This call excites many young people preparing to be pastors; many of them have the gifts to step up to such a call if the church is ready to make a place for them.

As I raise these three theologically generated areas of inquiry—ministry as a way of life, discernment of charism for small membership congregations, and embracing of the gifts young clergy bring as young leaders—I do not mean to dismiss the value of Chang's work. I aim rather to invite denominational officers, theological educators and religious scholars concerned with the church to robustly engage these questions.

<sup>8</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (The Crossroads Publishing Company: New York, 1989), p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Dr. L.P. Lewis of Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, Calif. for this phrase.

## ABOUT PULPIT & PEW

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**P**ulpit & Pew is a research initiative of the Duke Divinity School funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., and aimed at strengthening the quality of pastoral leadership (clergy and lay) in churches across America. The goal of the research is to strengthen the quality of pastoral leaders, especially those in ordained ministry, through (1) understanding how changes in the social, cultural, economic, and religious context in recent years have affected ministry, (2) forming pastoral leaders with the capacity for continual learning and growth in response to these changes, and (3) identifying policies and practices that will support creative pastoral leadership and vital congregations as they respond to a changing environment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**P**atricia M.Y. Chang is the assistant director of the Boisi Center and associate research professor in the sociology department of Boston College. She has published extensively in the area of religion and organizations, including a number of articles that examine how the organizational structures of denominations affect wage inequality between male and female clergy. She is a co-author of the book *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* and is currently working on a book that examines the role of institutional networks and theology on the crafting of moral agendas in Protestant denominations.

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