



# The View from Pulpit & Pew: Provocative Findings on Pastoral Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

SACEM Presentation  
February 21, 2003

Becky R. McMillan, Ph.D., M. Div.  
Associate Director, Pulpit & Pew  
Email: [bcmillan@div.duke.edu](mailto:bcmillan@div.duke.edu)

*[www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu)*

If I had to describe a portrait of pastoral leaders in the local church today, there would be many images to draw upon to describe the lives and ministries of the people continuing educators serve. Imagine sitting in your church or a church that you have attended during a typical worship service. How many people are worshipping with you? What is the pastor like? Is the pastor old, young? How many years of experience does the pastor have? Does the pastor have a Master's degree or not? Is the pastor a man or a woman? Anglo, Black, Hispanic, or Asian? Do you feel your church and pastor are "typical" of churches and pastors in the U.S.?

It is common to ask, "What is the typical pastor serving a local church in the U.S. like?" That is difficult to answer. There is not so much a typical pastor or even a typical church, but that there are pastors serving families of churches with similar characteristics. In the Pulpit & Pew national survey of local church leaders, we were able to collect information on 883 pastors, randomly sampled from across the nation. We surveyed only senior or solo pastors in local church settings. These data help us describe in broad strokes the types of pastors that serve local churches today. For this conversation, I am limiting the results to Protestant pastors.

**There is a 60/40 split between pastors serving "conservative" denominations, or independent churches, and those serving "mainline/liberal" denominations.** For this analysis, a local church is considered conservative if it is either an independent church or belongs to a conservative denomination within any denominational family. Thus, Southern Baptist, but not American Baptist churches are included. PCA, but not PC(USA) is included. Within these two broad labels, however, pastors expressed more variety in their "approaches to faith." Within the conservative denominational families, 40% of pastors reported they were "evangelical", only 15% reported they were "fundamentalist", and 7% reported they were "moderate or liberal". One-third of pastors in mainline/liberal denominations reported they were "evangelical."

**Most churches that local pastors serve are small.** Two-thirds of all pastors preach to a sanctuary filled with 100 attendees or less on a Sunday morning. Less than 1% of all pastors serve churches with mega-size congregations (1000+ attendees). The picture is somewhat different when looking at church size from an attendees perspective. Only 25% of all persons sitting in church on Sunday morning are in a small-size congregation (100 or less attendees). Most (75%) attend churches with medium- to large-size congregations (101 to 999 attendees). Only 5% attend mega-size congregations.

**Relative to the general population of workers, pastors are typically older and more experienced.** The median age of all pastors is age 50 and 20% are 61 years old or older. The median years experience is 20 years with 21% of pastors reporting 30 years or more experience. There has been a large shift toward pastors entering pastoral leadership later in life or as a second or third career. In the last 10 years, pastors getting ordained were on average in their late thirties. Thirty years ago, pastors getting ordained were on average in their mid-twenties.

**Pastoral leadership in the local church is largely white and male.** Women pastors make up a low percentage of pastors, 20% in mainline/liberal denominations and only 3% in conservative denominations. African-American pastors made up 16% of our sample of pastors – and were much more prevalent among conservative denominations, 23% vs. only 6% in mainline/liberal denominations. Additional data is currently being collected and compiled on the state of pastoral leadership in African-American, Hispanic, and Asian contexts.

**Whether a pastor has graduate theological education only partially predicts whether that pastor participates in continuing education.** Most pastors in mainline/liberal denominations have graduate theological education (83%), compared to a smaller percentage

(47%) of pastors in conservative denominations. Yet, 90% of mainline/liberal pastors and 67% of conservative pastors reported having attended at least one continuing education event in the last year. Twenty-five percent of pastors who participated in continuing education in the last year had no graduate theological education.

**Where a pastor is located is significantly related to their participating in continuing education.** The highest levels of participation in continuing education events are among mainline/liberal Protestants in the Northeast region (96%). Between 88 and 89% of mainline/liberal Protestants in all other regions participated in continuing education. The lowest levels of participation are among conservative Protestants in the Southern region (65%). Between 66 and 74% of conservative Protestants in all other regions participated in continuing education. Conservative Protestants serving urban congregations participate at greater levels than their colleagues in rural congregations (82% vs. 62%). Only nominal differences were found in levels of participation between urban and rural mainline/liberal Protestants.

**Gender is not significantly related to participating in continuing education.** While 96% of mainline/liberal women pastors participated in continuing education and only 88% of men did, this difference was not statistically significant.

**Who is not taking Continuing Education (yet)?** While most mainline/liberal pastors do participate in continuing education, pastors of very large congregations (1000+ attendees) participate at lower levels than of all other size churches (78% vs. nearly 90% of all other size congregations). For conservatives, the lowest levels of participation are at small churches, where only 60% participate, while participation rates are 80-90% at all other size congregations.

### **What are the pastors like who are (and who are not) taking continuing education?**

- (1) Continuing Education participants are more likely to try new things.

“I try to keep things stirred up with new ideas and programs.”

Participants <sup>1</sup>	35%
Non-Participants	15%

- (2) Participants believe in innovative leadership.

“A rapidly changing world requires innovation.”

Participants	72%
Non-Part.	33%

“Rapid change requires focus on church tradition and practices.”

Participants	28%
Non-participants	66%

- (3) Participants look to the future rather than maintaining the past.

“We regularly discuss the congregation’s future direction.”

Participants	60%
Non-Participants	38%

“We largely focus on keeping things going.”

Participants	40%
Non-participants	62%

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<sup>1</sup> Participants include pastors who reported attending at least one continuing education event in the past year.

(4) A larger percentage of conflicts concerned lay leadership in participants' congregations than non-participants' congregations.

Participants	12%
Non-participants	7%

(5) Participants are less satisfied with their spiritual life than non-participants.

Participants	40% "Very Satisfied with own Spiritual Life"
Non-participants	52% "Very Satisfied with own Spiritual Life"

Selected Findings from Preliminary Analysis of Pulpit & Pew national random sample of local church pastoral leaders:

**(1) Today's clergy in large part find that being a religious leader is a deeply satisfying calling, something well-worth giving one's life to.** Six in ten clergy say that they have never doubted their call to the ministry, and seven in ten report that they have never considered leaving pastoral ministry. What sustains this strong sense of commitment? Eighty-five percent say that it is sustained by a feeling that one's gifts for ministry are right for the congregation they are serving. Another 65 percent cite close relationships with members of their congregation as important in sustaining commitment, and 57 percent value serving a congregation that challenges their creativity. This strong commitment to their calling is reflected in a variety of other ways in the survey. As we will note below, clergy, for the most part, express high levels of satisfaction with many aspects of their work.

**(2) A second finding however raises an important further question: The surveys dramatically confirm reports about the growth in the number of second (or even third) career entrants into ordained ministry in recent years.** Those clergy who have been in ministry less than ten years were, on average, in their *late thirties* when they were ordained. In contrast, those who have been in ministry thirty or more years were, on average, in their *mid twenties* when they were ordained. This was true for all denominations and religious groups.

**(3) Returning to the issue of satisfaction, as we noted clergy are highly satisfied with many aspects of their work. At the same time, however, they are relatively less satisfied with other aspects. That in itself is not surprising. What is somewhat surprising are those things that receive high marks and what are in the less satisfied list and some questions that these two sets of items raise.** Among those things with which clergy are most satisfied are their current position, their family life, their relationships with lay leaders in the congregation, and with other staff members where this is relevant. For each of these, over 70 percent said that they were very satisfied. As might be expected satisfaction was higher the longer one has served in ministry. On the less satisfied list—with half or fewer indicating satisfaction—are the following characteristics: relationships with other clergy, opportunities for continuing education, support from denominational officials, one's current salary and benefits, one's spiritual life, and, lowest of all, one's sense of overall effectiveness as a pastoral leader in one's current congregation. This profile makes clear that the factors that receive high satisfaction marks have mostly to do with one's current congregation and family life. On the other hand, several of the "less satisfied" factors have to do with relationships and various support structures: relationships

with other clergy, denominational support, continuing education, and salary and benefits. This suggests that clergy morale—already relatively higher than we expected—can be strengthened even more if denominations and congregations will take with greater seriousness their responsibilities in improving the support structures for ordained leadership.

(4) Finally, there is the issue of **clergy health and well-being** about which the survey gives some interesting and somewhat conflicting and troubling insights. We asked a number of questions about clergy’s physical and emotional health, including questions about weight and height. Here there are some mixed messages. **On the one hand, clergy overall are positive about their physical and emotional health.** Slightly more than 76 percent rate their general health as “excellent” or “very good.” Similar percentages report that neither their physical nor emotional health has caused them to limit their work. **On the other hand, however, there were counterbalancing worrisome results about clergy health.** Ten percent reported feeling depressed some or most of the time, and over 40 percent reported feeling at times depressed or worn out some or most of the time. Most troubling, however, is the issue of weight. We computed what is known as the Body-Mass Index (BMI), a standard measure for assessing weight relative to height. According to a 1999 report from the U.S. Surgeon General, 61 percent of the American population are either overweight or obese (have a BMI of greater than 25). For clergy, the figures are higher. Seventy-six percent of percent of clergy are either overweight (46 percent) or obese (30 percent). The problem is greatest for male clergy (79 percent overweight or obese) compared with clergywomen (52 percent). We believe that this is a serious problem that should concern us all since, as the Surgeon General’s report reminds us, overweight and obesity are associated with a long list of health problems and diseases. Thus, the relatively optimistic report that clergy give of their general health needs to be tempered with these latter findings, especially about weight.

These are just a few of the interesting findings from our survey. It is obviously only a first and partial look at the large amount of data that the *Pulpit & Pew* survey provides, but these findings give some important glimpses into the busy, many-faceted life and work of America’s clergy and insight into some of their major concerns. They show much that is positive and deserving of celebration. At the same time we have also noted areas that are cause for concern and that beg for further analysis and reflection.

Key Messages from our survey analysis and our Focus Group conversations with pastors, laity, and judicatory executives:

- ✍ Ministry must be reclaimed as a “craft” whose lore and practices one learns in large part through various forms of apprenticeship with mentors. Currently this is mostly lacking in the formation of many mainline Protestant and Catholic pastors. Apprenticeship and mentoring begin in the local congregation and continue through the seminary experience and beyond, especially through the early years of pastoral ministry. Mentoring is essential for learning many ministry practices, for dealing with difficulties and challenges, for accountability, and for social and spiritual support. Seminaries, denominations and local churches need to be intentional about identifying and training mentors, building

mentoring into the curriculum, and insuring that seminary students and recently ordained clergy experience significant mentoring relationships.

- ✍ Theological education and mentoring that foster agility, reflexivity and pastoral imagination are essential; that is, formation that is not only grounded in the scriptures and traditions of the church, but develops the capacity to interpret and faithfully adapt the Gospel and the church's practices to the changing society and culture in which we live.
- ✍ The first call or appointment following seminary—especially the first five years of ministry—is a critical time for mentoring and support. New clergy need assistance in clarifying their call, reflecting on their experiences, sorting out what is happening to them personally and professionally, developing healthy habits of ministry and self-care, learning where to get the resources they need, and developing healthy peer relationships. Denominations could learn from the E.L.C.A. "First Call" program and other similar efforts.
- ✍ Because the demands on clergy and the needs they experience change over time and under different circumstances, they need resources of continuing education and other types of support appropriate to different stages of a pastoral career and to the changing contexts in which clergy serve.
- ✍ Friendships with fellow clergy are an essential part of a pastor's support system. Clergy need colleagues (in addition to mentors) who provide support, hold them accountable, reflect together on leadership experiences, and participate in mutual spiritual formation. Some friendships are important because they offer safe and supportive relationships, while others, equally important, offer challenge and growth. In our focus groups we were told by some that their most helpful clergy friendships are with those from other denominations. Within-denomination relationships with other clergy are often colored by career competition. Continuing education played a large role in creating a "safe, structured" space for clergy to connect.
- ✍ An essential but difficult task for clergy is engaging in intentional, periodic reflection and feedback on the ministry of their congregation and their leadership in that ministry, undertaken in light of the congregation's particular mission in the local context. This involves occasions for in-depth evaluation of one's ministry that goes beyond whether numbers have increased or budgets been met. Denominational supervisors and lay leaders from within the congregation are often not effective in assisting clergy in this evaluative reflection. Neutral parties such as outside consultants, mentors, or trusted clergy peers are often more helpful. This may be an area that continuing education can deepen and strengthen.
- ✍ Congregations and denominations must take seriously the need for financial resources and support for clergy families required for a well-lived life. Pastoral leaders need to be able, at the least, to educate their children, have major medical needs covered, and be able to live comfortably currently and in retirement.

## What are the Major Trends and Challenges at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

- ✍ A majority of current clergy from all traditions report high commitment to their call to ordained ministry. Few consider leaving, either for another ministry position or to drop out altogether. They also express considerable satisfaction with most aspects of their present ministry, despite popular conceptions to the contrary. Greatest satisfaction is expressed about their current position, relationships with lay members, and their family life (where relevant). Greatest dissatisfaction is expressed about their effectiveness as leaders of their current congregations, their spiritual life, salary and benefits, relationships with fellow clergy, and denominational support.
- ✍ For Protestants, there is an overabundance of small congregations (less than 100 attending) who need pastoral leadership but cannot afford either full-time or fully ordained pastors (as they had in the past). Because of this there is an increasing use of bivocational, non-seminary educated pastors. For denominations that resist use of non-seminary educated clergy, this creates a shortage of pastors willing to serve in these small, often isolated, congregations.
- ✍ There appears to be a declining number of seminary graduates seeking ordination to serve local churches as well as a growing number who drop out of pastoral ministry in the early years of ministry. This is true for Protestants and Catholics, though the reasons for dropping out sometimes differ. (A study of Protestant dropouts that will shed greater light on this and a complementary study of recently-ordained Catholics is underway. A major issue to be explored is the contrast between the high number of dropouts and the equally high expressions of commitment and satisfaction among active pastoral leaders, as noted previously. What contributes to these different experiences of pastoral ministry?)
- ✍ All denominational families have experienced a significant growth in second career clergy, many of whom are women. These persons reflect a range of educational backgrounds: some are less well educated and academically oriented than younger, first career entrants while others have significant academic and professional preparation. There is some concern about second career clergy's relatively shorter tenure in active pastoral ministry than is the case for those who come to ministry directly from college and seminary. At the same time, second career entrants often bring greater life experience and maturity and are more committed to local church ministry than younger seminary graduates with no significant work experience.
- ✍ A disparity in compensation and living standards exists for clergy in positions across local churches throughout the US. Pastors in small, rural churches receive especially low salaries and have little access to secondary employment opportunities for themselves or their spouses. Inadequate financial support, especially health care and pensions, is a major issue for many African-American clergy as well as for most non-Anglo, non-mainline clergy. Many receive no health care allowances or pensions. These disparities challenge denominations and relatively affluent congregations to consider how they may better share their abundance with their brothers and sisters.

- ✍ Data show somewhat poor mental and physical health among clergy. Clergy are overweight, even obese, compared with the U. S. population, and they often experience high degrees of stress and burnout. Related to this, one of the biggest problems that clergy report is being able to take time away for rest and spiritual renewal. This may reflect clergy reluctance to take to take time away and/or congregational reluctance to see this as important.
- ✍ Major growth in racial, ethnic, and indigenous faith communities in the US, both Christian and non-Christian. Such growth challenges the insularity and anglo-centrism of traditional Christian communities. This calls for leadership able to foster multi-ethnic congregations—leadership that takes seriously differences in ethnic culture and challenges pastors and laity to address the theological and practical implications of an interfaith, multi-religious society.

### Discussion Questions

1. Several fissures are developing between different groups of clergy – between first-and second-career pastors, between young and old pastors, between small and large congregation pastors, between moderate and conservative denominations. What ways might Continuing Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century help pastors name the different contexts and characteristics of their colleagues, as well as help span the divide across different groups?
2. Many pastors suggested that Continuing Education was one of the few ways they could seek support and connection to other pastors. They often felt it was time they could be “off the clock” since parishioners were not around. They also are hungry for spiritual renewal. What are some of the roadblocks to addressing these needs in the content and structure of Continuing Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?
3. Based on the Pulpit & Pew research findings, if one were to “color outside the lines” what might be some other creative approaches to the content and structure of Continuing Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?