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February 2002

Dear Friend:

Over the past summer and fall, you participated in a major national survey of religious leaders from congregations of many denominations and faith groups. Some of you were contacted by telephone by an interviewer from the National Opinion Research Center; others completed a questionnaire with similar questions. Both forms of the survey are part of a major research project on pastoral leadership, Pulpit & Pew, underway at Duke University with funding from Lilly Endowment. The survey is the most inclusive and representative of clergy ever undertaken, with responses from leaders in over eighty different denominations and faith groups. We interviewed 883 of you by phone, a response rate of 73 percent, and we received paper and pencil questionnaires from over 2500 of you who were randomly selected from seven denominations— 69 percent of those contacted. These are truly excellent response rates, and we are grateful for your cooperation! Our aim now is to provide a comprehensive profile of America's religious leaders that will be widely shared with clergy, lay leaders of congregations, denominational officials, theological educators, and the general public. Among the guiding questions of the research are what is the state of pastoral leadership today, and what do current trends suggest for the future?

Although we have only just begun to analyze the large amount of data from the surveys, we want to share some of the first findings with you, as we promised when you agreed to participate. During the coming months, more detailed analyses will appear in various reports, news releases, magazine and journal articles, and one or more books on pastoral leadership. You will also be able to find many reports on our Web site, www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu.

In the attached report we summarize several of the findings. Some of them appear to us as puzzles because they tell us both something positive about clergy as well as leaving us with questions in need of answers. We would welcome your reflection and response about these findings and invite you to write or email us at pulpitandpew@div.duke.edu.

Sincerely,

Jackson W. Carroll Becky R. McMillan .

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75th Anniversary



SELECTED FINDINGS FROM THE NATIONAL CLERGY SURVEY

(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.

We take these findings to be good news. They contradict reports of deep dissatisfaction and low morale among pastoral leaders that we have heard in recent months. They run contrary to the "gripe and moan" sessions that one sometimes experiences when clergy get together! Our question is this: Is this overall high sense of commitment and satisfaction an accurate perception? We think so, given our large response rate, but we would like to hear from you.

(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.

Although we are by no means critical of second career clergy—clergy of different ages and backgrounds bring an important diversity of gifts to ministry—we wonder nevertheless why this "graying" of the ordained ministry has happened in a profession whose members feel so strongly that it is a calling worth giving one's life to? Why do large numbers of young people not see such a satisfying calling as something to which they want to give their lives? Has the standing of ordained ministry diminished relative to other professions, especially since medicine, law, and business schools continue to attract younger entrants? Are young persons with desires for socially responsible careers not encouraged into ordained ministry? What factors are behind the desire for many persons to wait to enter ordained ministry until they are older? Does ordained ministry appear to be a profession that requires more life experience before entering it? Is this requirement

so strong that there is a growing number of older entrants entering seminary despite the fact that the costs of theological education are often greater for older students and they will likely serve significantly fewer years in active ministry? Will the age structure of the clergy meet the needs of congregations in the coming years? These are important questions that the significant increase in second career clergy raise.

(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.

The satisfaction items suggest additional questions: Why is there such a high degree of satisfaction with one's current position and one's relationships to congregational members and lay leaders, but such a low expression of satisfaction with one's personal spiritual life and sense of effectiveness with one's ministry? Are these just expressions of humility about these matters, or are many clergy today satisfied with their position while confessing to be ineffective as pastors and somewhat empty spiritually? These are questions that we want to explore more fully, and we would greatly appreciate your reflections on these important matters.

(4) One answer to the dissatisfaction that clergy express over their effectiveness as pastoral leaders may be found in a fourth survey finding: Over 70 percent of Christian clergy indicated that the difficulty of reaching people with the Gospel is one of the primary problems faced by pastors in today's world.* One feels ineffective because of the difficulty of the task. This may be why, in response to another question in which we asked what two or three pastoral tasks they need help to improve their effectiveness, clergy focused especially on three tasks having to do with *leadership*. These were discerning and promoting the congregation's vision, administering the congregation's

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^{*} We did not ask the question of those in other religious traditions.

work, and training congregational members to exercise their own ministries. These are important leadership tasks that are necessary for congregational vitality in a rapidly changing world. It is fair to say that they are also tasks that have not historically received much attention in seminary education. Highlighting the importance of leadership as a basic pastoral task does not diminish the salience of more traditional roles such as preaching, presiding at worship, and pastoral care; nonetheless, it calls special attention to what is increasingly a new role that faithful and effective pastors cannot shirk and for which training is urgently needed. It is difficult to reach people today with the Gospel today, and congregations must have well-trained leaders if they are to fulfill their calling in the complex world in which we live.

- (5) A fifth finding has to do with conflict. Many reports from clergy and laity indicate that congregational conflict is on the rise today. We cannot say whether or not there has been an actual increase in recent years, since our survey covers only one point in time, but it does seem that conflict is a fact of life in many congregations. Two-thirds of the clergy report that their congregation has experienced some form of conflict over the past two years, and over 20 percent report that the conflict was "significant" or "major"—the latter leading to members leaving the congregation. We asked what these conflicts were about, and the issues listed are interesting for several reasons. First, what congregations fight about are not the same issues as those that trouble national denominations and that are often in the news. The survey responses indicate that congregational conflict most often is about pastoral leadership styles, interpersonal relationships, building maintenance and use, church finances, and changes in worship and music styles. Denominational conflict, in contrast, is most often focused on clergy sexual misconduct (which, to be sure, affects congregations), homosexuality, the ordination of women, and doctrinal issues. Second, the issues about which congregations fight are often quite mundane and ordinary; although, they are no less important by virtue of being mundane. The nature of congregational conflict reminds us that while preaching and leading worship are the most visible and satisfying aspects of clergy work, much of clergy's daily lives is spent attending to quite routine, ordinary issues that are also necessary for the church's health and well-being.
- (6) 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.

We hope that you have found this report thought provoking and a stimulus for further conversation with your lay leaders, congregations, and other clergy. In the coming months, we will delve further into other areas concerning the life of clergy and congregations, including how clergy spend their time, the match between congregation and clergy expectations, and clergy compensation. As we generate additional findings, we hope the *Pulpit & Pew* project web site will provide a forum for you and other clergy, denominational officials, and congregations to engage these issues further.

Again we express our deepest appreciation to the many clergy who gave of their time to participate in the survey, and we welcome your reflection and response. Please continue to visit our web site at www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu and write or e-mail us at pulpitandpew@div.duke.edu.