

## REFLECTIONS OF A CLERGY-WATCHER

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Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to all of you who have turned out for this event? family, colleagues, students, and friends. I especially want to welcome members of the Church Leader's Group from the Duke Pastoral Leadership Project? which we have recently renamed as ?Pulpit & Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership.? I co-opted the Church Leaders to come to this lecture by scheduling it during the time of their meeting. I also want to acknowledge my deep indebtedness to my wife, Anne, who has been my partner, constructive critic, and long-suffering prodder and pusher for almost forty seven years. I could not have survived these years without her love and support? though I realize that at times, she wonders how she has survived me! Finally, in expressing my gratitude, I want to thank the Dean and the Divinity School for sponsoring this occasion. I'm pleased, however, they changed the name from ?Last Lecture? to ?Retirement Lecture.? ?Last Lecture? sounded awfully final! I view it more as a kind of rite of passage? a transition which signifies both a change of status and also some continuity? especially since I will continue to direct the Pulpit & Pew project in retirement. So, I greatly appreciate the opportunity that tonight's lecture provides? even if I have faced it with a mix of dread and excitement over the past several weeks!

The reference in my title to being a clergy watcher comes from a sociologist colleague in a review of one of my books in which he referred to me as a "veteran clergy watcher." I would agree that this is a reasonably accurate depiction. I have devoted a considerable portion of my scholarly career to "clergy watching," including the institutions engaged in clergy education and the congregations in which clergy serve. While such a focus does not always offer the kind of novelty that some of my colleagues in the sociology of religion find by studying exotic new religious movements, clergy watching has by no means been boring. The well-publicized sexual foibles of some religious leaders in recent years are a case in point. That can quickly turn one from a "watcher" to a "voyeur!"

I came to clergy watching to some extent accidentally, though I now consider it to have been providential, since clergy watching has become a major way of giving expression to my calling. Two

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\*Duke Divinity School has recently begun the practice of final lectures by retiring faculty members.

sociological mentors in graduate school? Samuel Blizzard of Princeton Seminary, a pioneer in the study of clergy, and Wilbert Moore of Princeton University, a leading student of work and the professions? gave me a number of not-so-gentle nudges that shifted me away from my intended area of dissertation research to a study of the impact of theological education on Protestant clergy. With that study, the die was cast, and studying clergy, along with related concerns for theological education and congregational life became the major tracks along which my academic career has run. Now, God willing and thanks to the largesse of Lilly Endowment, it will continue to run on those tracks for at least several more years.

### Changes in the Ministry Context

Initially, I thought that I might use the lecture to reflect on changes that have occurred during the years that I have been studying clergy, changes that have profoundly restructured American religious life and ministry practice. Though I decided not to make this my primary focus, I do think it important to list some of the more significant changes in order to provide a backdrop for some of the issues that I will consider later.

I was ordained in the late 1950s at the peak of the post-World War II ?religious revival,? shortly before the ?sea change? in American society that occurred during the 1960s. These were the years of the Civil Rights revolution, with the feminist and anti-war movements following close on its heels. Late in the decade, the counter-culture swept on to the scene with its anti-institutional stance and ?hang-loose? ethic. These movements gave rise to what some called a ?new breed? of activist clergy who called the churches to address issues of social justice, often creating a ?gathering storm? of divisive denominational and congregational conflicts? conflicts which continue today under other guises. Among other major events during this period, few were more important than the Second Vatican Council, which brought in its wake a renewed and invigorated Catholic laity as well as a precipitous decline in the number of priests, a trend that also continues unabated today.

In the early 1970s there was dawning public awareness of the growth of evangelical Protestantism as a significant social and religious force. At the same time, there was near panic among mainline Protestants as we suddenly discovered our sharply declining memberships. Beginning about 1974, large numbers of women entered the ranks of the ordained ministry in several major Protestant denominations? an event that decisively challenged the centuries? old sacredly masculine image of ministry. When we published our study of clergy women in 1980, our editor suggested that we call it *The New Shape of the Ministry*. I asked what he had in mind for the book jacket. We quickly settled on a different title: *Women of the Cloth!*

In the late 1970s, the relative ?graying? of seminary student populations began to be noticed as older, second career women and men began enrolling in seminaries in large numbers. Currently, the average age of entering seminary students is 35. This contrasts with entering medical students who are

average just over 24 years, and entering law students who average 26 years.<sup>1</sup>

With the 1980s came the intensification of the so-called culture wars, continuing the conflicts that began during the 1960s. Gay ordination and gay unions are but the most recent battle lines, dividing denominations into opposing camps and raising the level of congregational conflict. Clergy moral failures, not only those of the televangelists, but additionally of a large number of less well-known clergy also became news during this time. During the 1980s, we became aware of a long-term trend towards religious individualism bringing with it a consumerist approach to religious participation. One response has been the advent of megachurches? seeker churches, mall churches, cell churches? many with no denominational ties, little regard for historic traditions, new styles of pastoral and lay leadership, and a commitment to making Christian disciples of the new religious consumers. Likewise a renewed interest in spirituality emerged in and outside the churches. I will return to these trends later in my lecture. Finally, during the 1980s, we ?rediscovered? the importance of congregations after several decades of bashing them as out-dated and irrelevant to God?s real work in the world. I was pleased to have had a role in this ?rediscovery.?

With the 1990s came the explosion of the Internet, the impact of which we are only beginning to experience. not only in giving us a means of rapid communication, but in Bible study, theological discussion groups, prayer networks, sermon resources, and seminary courses. I?ve even discovered a virtual church with detailed instructions for do-it-yourself eucharist!

Finally during the nineties, we became increasingly aware of living in a global village, not only through television, the Internet, and the effects of global economic and politics, but first hand in our neighborhoods and communities as we encounter the new immigrants in our midst. They are reshaping our society, bringing with them their distinctive cultures, religious traditions and practices, and challenging us to understand what it means to live and minister in a genuinely multi-cultural and multi-religious society.

Surely there are other important developments that I have failed to mention, but you can see from my list that clergy watching has by no means been boring. More important, these changes have profoundly altered the landscape in which ministry takes place today. They pose significant challenges for those of you who are now or will be soon engaged in pastoral leadership as well as for those of us responsible for theological education or the ongoing nurture and support of pastoral leaders. I want to

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<sup>1</sup>See Barbara G. Wheeler, ?A New Profile of Seminarians: Fit for Ministry?;? *The Christian Century* (April 11, 2001): 167-23, and several articles in Alban Institute?s publication, *Congregations* (March-April, 2001). Both consider why ministry seems to attract so few younger students just out of college.

address some these challenges in the time that remains.

### A "Scouting Report": the Topography of Ministry Today

If this were a sermon, I would have a text, and it would come from the thirteenth chapter of Numbers. Numbers is, perhaps, an appropriate book for a sociologist to cite, but it is not my reason for mentioning it here. Near the end of Israel's exodus from Egypt, God instructs Moses to send out spies to the land of Canaan to scout out what the land and its people were like. The spies returned with what has to be one of the earliest "good news-bad news" stories on record: The good news was that the land was flowing with milk and honey. The bad news was that it was strongly fortified and populated with giants. Well, that's not a bad description of the challenges that clergy and congregations face today: There is "milk and honey," but there are also "giants" to be met!

Recently, reading comments of a number of clergy about ordained ministry, I was struck by their sharply contrasting perspectives. Whereas one pastor wrote that "I can think of no more exciting work than the opportunity that the ministry gives me to participate in God's work in the world," another complained, that "The pastor is kind of a "fifth wheel," an employee of an institution that is comforting to have around but far removed from the real issues of the world." A study last year of Missouri Synod Lutheran pastors reflects a similar spread of opinion. The study found that about 30 percent of the clergy express substantial joy and satisfaction with their work. They have found the "milk and honey." They describe their ministries as tough, challenging, and fulfilling, with a constant demand for creativity and flexibility. They thrive on these challenges. Another 30 percent express mixed feelings about their work. For them ministry is "a roller coaster of highs and lows," "a balancing act of extremes of fulfillment and frustration." Of the remaining 40 percent, half were moderately distressed and approaching burnout, and the other half, representing as many as 1000 pastors, were severely depressed and in advanced stages of burnout. Comments such as "The joy is gone. I can't take the crap anymore," or "I cannot encourage others into this," or "Young people see this and say, "No way!" were typical. Some of the most negative critics of ordained ministry came from the interviews with spouses and children of current and former pastors.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to remember that clergy are not the only professionals facing such difficulties. A 1997 study by the Commonwealth Fund described considerable physician dissatisfaction with the new work environment that managed care has created. The percentages expressing dissatisfaction were quite similar to those for clergy. Many are leaving private practice, trying new professions, and finding life much less stressful. An *Esquire* article last summer by a Harvard law graduate reported on a poll of his classmates ten years after graduation. Although a few were content with their law careers, most who were still practicing were described as "suffering" or "resigned" about their work. Those who had left

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<sup>2</sup>Alan C. Klaas, and Cheryl D. Klaas. *Clergy Shortage Study*. Board for Higher Education, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Smithville, MO: Mission Growth Ministries, 1999.

law, or at least had left law firms, were happy to have done so. Similarly, our inability to attract and retain good public school teachers is fast becoming a national crisis, as a recent *Newsweek* article reported. It is important to remind ourselves that ordained ministry is not the only profession facing "giants." Changing work environments and heightened expectations for professional performance are widespread. Nevertheless, that other professions are experiencing difficulties does not alter the fact that the pastor's work is not an easy one, that the work environment for pastoral ministry has changed, and that the rather mixed picture described in the Lutheran research is typical in other denominations as well. There is "milk and honey," but there are also "giants" in the land.

On the "milk and honey" side, there are important rewards that pastors and priests have long experienced—rewards that continue to bring considerable satisfaction and make ministry worthwhile for many clergy. There is the opportunity to stand before a community week after week as a *theotokos*, a "God-bearer," representing God to the people and the people to God. There is the awesome responsibility of proclaiming the truth of God's reign and calling people to salvation and liberation through Jesus Christ. There are the challenges of being a spiritual and moral guide to a congregation's members through preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Clergy have entrée to parishioners' lives in times of deep sorrow or great joy. And there are the opportunities and challenges for exercising leadership, enabling individual members to discover and exercise their spiritual gifts, helping a congregation to become alive and vital in mission to the community and the world beyond. None of these occasions for ministry are easy, but they are the kinds of rich and rewarding experiences that keep many clergy going. They are the "milk and honey" that nourish a pastor's spirit and make bearable many of the inevitable frustrations.

Furthermore, though many clergy fail to recognize it, few groups in American society have the potential for such a broad base of ministry and influence. Each Sunday, if the polls are to be trusted, between 35 and 40 percent of the population gathers in the more than 345,000 local congregations and synagogues in the United States. That is a huge number of people—almost one hundred million weekly!

One of the considerable pleasures that I have had thus far in my work in the Pulpit and Pew project has been to meet many really excellent clergy from various denominations and in quite different types of congregations, clergy who are finding deep fulfillment in their various pastoral tasks and who claim their spheres of influence through their congregations. To be sure, they encounter frustrations in their ministries, but they also thrive on the "milk and honey."

Unfortunately, not all clergy find such fulfillment in their work. Many mostly see only the "giants." They experience stress, burnout, and discouragement, and they often end with the kind of negativity expressed by some of the pastors in the Lutheran study. Although I want to avoid turning these reflections into what my friend Loren Mead calls an "ain't-it-awful" exercise, I believe that truthfulness demands looking not only at the "milk and honey," but also at some of the "giants" that must be faced. In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris warns that "when we write about what matters to us most, words will take us places we don't want to go. You begin to see that you will have to say things you

don't want to say.<sup>3</sup> What are some of the hard realities that need to be named?

One is the very mundane issue of compensation? hardly a new one for clergy. Except for a fairly small number of elite ministers serving large or wealthy congregations, clergy salaries have almost always been low relative to other comparably educated professions. I can attest to that from experience! In 1957, my starting salary as a pastor was \$4,250, with no fringe benefits other than a modestly furnished parsonage. This was, by the way, considered to be a very good starting salary. Many of my peers were paid several hundred dollars less. Converted to today's dollars, my salary would be just over \$25,000 before taxes. It took creativity and a charge account at a member's grocery store to make ends meet!

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<sup>3</sup>*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 273

James Hudnut-Beumler recently examined salary trends using Methodist data. He found that in 1960, clergy salaries were about equal to the national median family income. By the late-1970s, as the nation's standard of living soared, clergy made less than half of what a typical middle class family spent in a year.<sup>4</sup> Although some aspects of clergy compensation have changed for the better, the gap between clergy salaries and those of other comparably educated professionals continues to grow. We often speak of medicine, law, and ministry as peer professions. When it comes to salary, however, the more apt comparisons are between clergy, public school teachers, and social workers. Even then, clergy come out near the bottom. A salary study for our Duke project by Matthew Price and Becky McMillan found that the 1999 median salary for all full-time, married pastors with graduate degrees was approximately \$37,000. Only 3 percent of United Methodist pastors earn more than \$50,000. To be sure, housing and fringe benefits, now more generous than in the past, add to total compensation; however, given the years of education required, the salaries of a majority of clergy are quite low. The previously mentioned Lutheran report put it rather bluntly: "The fact is (that) many pastors. . . have earned the academic equivalent of Ph.D., M.D., or J.D. . . and earn per hour what a crew chief makes at McDonald's. . . ."

To be sure, few choose pastoral ministry because of the salary it promises; yet the issue of just compensation cannot be ignored. In a culture driven by consumption, one that all too often measures personal worth by net worth and style of life, is it surprising very few bright, achievement-oriented college students give ordained ministry a second thought when making vocational decisions? Is it surprising, too, that many clergy and their spouses become bitter or discouraged over their relatively low salaries? Why too should we be surprised that worries over career advancement often diminish a pastor's sense of calling? It is quite difficult to keep one's call to ministry vital and healthy when there are constant worries about finances. As one United Church of Christ pastor in Connecticut expressed it, "Nobody goes into ministry for the money, but we do have to pay the mortgage, put food on the table, pay for child care, and save for college education."

All of this suggests the need for critical theological reflection on the meaning of money in our society, including what constitutes fair compensation for clergy. Clergy should not by default be left to bear Christian witness to a simple lifestyle if it is because their salaries leave them no option. If congregations are to have the good leadership for which they ask, they will need to pay for it. Doing so should encourage good pastors to stay in ministry for the long haul. It may also make ordained ministry a more attractive vocational choice for promising candidates.

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<sup>4</sup>"Clergy Salaries and Status," *The Material History of American Religion Project*, Spring 1998, p. 6.

As a corollary to low salaries, another reality of today's ministry context is the diminished status and authority of clergy both in the church and in the broader culture. It has been a long time since the pastor was the "parson" "the person" in the community as he was in early New England, where, as historian Harry Stout has written, the Puritan preacher exercised "awesome powers," and whose authority "congregations were pledged to obey unconditionally."<sup>5</sup> In recent years, the clergy's diminished authority reflects the broad questioning of all kinds of authority that is a legacy of the 1960s.

Certainly, relative to some other occupations clergy status is still high. Lawyers and politicians especially come to mind! And, as I previously noted, clergy continue to have an inordinate opportunity to influence the millions of Americans who gather weekly in congregations. Nonetheless, in public opinion polls taken between 1973 and 1997, the public's confidence in religious leaders has dropped substantially for all age groups, with the largest declines—20 percent or more—coming in the 45 to 65 year old group. For the most recent time period, the late 1990s, it is younger groups—25 to 44 year-olds—who are least likely to express confidence in clergy. Only 20 percent of this age group expresses strong confidence. Doctors, scientists, supreme court judges, and even business and military leaders rank higher. No doubt these changes partly reflect the highly publicized moral failures of some clergy. Also, over the years, other professions—psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and many specialized ministries—have encroached on the jurisdiction of generalist pastors, eroding their authority and leading some to wonder aloud whether there is any longer a need for an ordained professional ministry.

Diminished status, combined with low salaries for a demanding job, are reflected in the comments of parents who complain that they did not pay \$30,000 a year to send their son or daughter to Duke or some other elite school for them to become a minister. It is also why it is no longer a mark of honor for many Catholic parents to send one of their sons into the priesthood. A woman that we interviewed for another project expressed great admiration for her priest, but then she added this comment: "People just aren't becoming priests. I mean it's not a popular occupation. Nobody wants to be a priest. It's not a real attractive job. No pay, no marriage, no fun, just a lot of work." Even more blunt is the comment of a former long-time Presbyterian judicatory executive: "Why would one want to enter a profession where generally there is low pay, low respect, [and] little effective support from the system. . . ?" Whether we agree or not, these comments point to important realities of the context in which clergy function in our culture.

Let me turn now to another feature of context. As some of you know, over half of all congregations in the United States have fewer than 100 participating adults. The percentage would be larger if it did not include Catholic parishes whose membership is rarely that small. Seventy-one percent of United Methodist congregations have 100 or fewer regular attendees, and it is close to that for most other Protestant denominations. Another 20 to 25 percent are mid-sized—with 250 or fewer regular participants. Fewer than 10 percent of all Protestant congregations have more than 250 regular

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<sup>5</sup>*The New England Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.19.

participants at worship. In contrast, the average Catholic parish has 3000 communicants? a far cry from the smallest United Methodist congregation in North Carolina with its 4 members!

Why are these statistics important? They provide essential information about the congregations in which a majority of clergy will serve for a significant portion of their ministries. Protestant clergy will mostly be pastors of small to mid-sized congregations? often in small town and rural areas where 52 percent of all congregations are located. Clearly there is nothing wrong with this. Such congregations deserve excellent leadership as much as any other, and they can be just as rewarding a context for a fulfilling ministry as a large urban or suburban congregation. The majority of seminary students, however, do not come from these small, rural congregations. Like the majority of church members, they come from mid- to large-size suburban or urban congregations, and these are the kinds of congregations that most seminarians picture themselves serving? at least after ?paying their dues? in smaller congregations. The career path that many envision goes something like this (and I was no different when I graduated): a first assignment in a small congregation or as an associate in a large one, then service as solo pastor in a mid-sized congregation, and finally one or more assignments as senior minister in large, multiple staff congregations in an urban or suburban locale. Although a small percentage will follow this path, the size distribution of Protestant congregations makes it highly unlikely for most.

Catholic priests, in contrast, experience very different pressures. Because of the severe shortage of priests, those who are newly ordained may be part of a small staff of priests faced with the ?pressure cooker? demands of a parish of several thousand. Or they may be assigned as a ?circuit riding? pastor of several parishes with no resident priest. There are today over 1250 Catholic lay members per active priest. This figure is in sharp contrast to Presbyterians who have approximately 365 lay members per ordained minister or to the Church of the Nazarene with a ratio of approximately 136 to one. It is not surprising that the Catholic Church is experiencing a high dropout rate among recently ordained priests? exacerbating the priest shortage.

Whether Catholic or Protestant, seminarians need to be prepared for the diverse kinds of parishes they are likely to serve during their careers. Protestants need to know that they are apt to spend much of their ministry in small to mid-sized congregations; Catholics need to be aware of the pressures they are likely to face as the priest shortage continues. Both need to understand the culture and dynamics of such diverse congregations so that they can respond faithfully and creatively to the leadership challenges and opportunities for ministry that these very different settings present.

Although the several characteristics of the topography of contemporary ministry that I've mentioned thus far are not entirely new, they continue to pose important challenges for ministry. Equally challenging is a characteristic that is relatively new. Just as the environment of medicine has been radically altered by managed care, so too has the religious environment been changed by the emergence of what might be called a culture of choice. This culture affects religious participation and ministry in important ways.

What do I mean? Consider the culture in which we live. As compared with fifty years ago, the number of options open to us in all areas of life has increased exponentially. Occupational choices have exploded, especially for women, as also have educational opportunities. The same is true for entertainment. My hometown had two movie theaters, each with one screen. Compare this with today's multiplex theaters from which we can choose among fifteen or more movies! When television came on the scene, there were only three, or at most four channels from which to choose. Now there are hundreds if one has the right equipment to receive them. And so on we could go. We live in a culture where having multiple options is the norm. So is it surprising religious participation has also been affected by this culture?

Even as recently as 1950, most people's religious identity was generally an ascribed one; that is, whether one was Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian, Italian Catholic, Irish Catholic, Jew, or had no affiliation was something that was mostly inherited from one's family or ethnic community. Furthermore, one rarely changed one's identification. Nor did one marry too far beyond one's denominational fold. In contrast, religious identity today is much more an achieved or self-chosen identity. Many people, especially those generations born since the Second World War, choose how and if they will define themselves religiously. They self-author their identity drawing from the multiple options open to them. Recently we surveyed a large random sample of residents of North Carolina and California for a project on generations and religion. Seventy-three percent of Generation-Xers, 64 percent of the Baby Boomers, and 59 percent of those born prior to World War II, agreed that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or religious group." Although denominations have obviously not withered away, they are much less salient than previously. The attractiveness of the programs and ministries of particular local congregations is more significant in the religious choices that most people make than a congregation's denominational label. One chooses to participate if the congregation meets one's needs. One looks elsewhere if it does not—regardless of one's family or ethnic heritage or the place where one lives. A *New Yorker* cartoon several years ago captured this consumerist approach in a conversation between two couples at a cocktail party. "We tried on religion," one couple said to the other, "and it fits!"

In a recent book, Robert Wuthnow describes this change as a shift from a "spirituality of dwelling" to a "spirituality of seeking." In a spirituality of dwelling, one's religious identity is tied to family and place—to particular communities, sacred spaces, and familiar traditional practices. In contrast, in a spirituality of seeking one negotiates one's experience of the sacred individually and pieces together a religious identity like a patchwork quilt—with a bit from here, another bit from there, and yet another from elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> A sociologist friend described a visit to her hairdresser, a young Catholic who told my friend that she believed in reincarnation, but she said that she also enjoyed going to Mass most Sundays—that is, if her boyfriend has not arranged something else. My friend asked what the young woman's Catholic parents thought about her beliefs? Her answer was a surprise: "My mother brought in the Jehovah's

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<sup>6</sup>*After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Witnesses to help me when I was asking questions, because she thought they might be able to help, knowing such a lot about the Bible as they do.?

As the story illustrates, in a spirituality of seeking one's identity is not fixed but constantly being revised with new experiences. Obviously one can overdraw this contrast. ?Dwelling? is still important. Local communities of faith are still looked to as places for encountering the sacred; yet, especially for Baby Boomers and Generation Xers, spiritual seeking is widespread, often uncoupled from pre-given, ascribed religious identities.

As I noted earlier, a major ecclesial response to this change has been the growing number of megachurches, or what I have elsewhere called post-traditional congregations, often independent or at least playing down their denominational affiliation. Their mall-like character offers many entry points for spiritual seekers. We also have a burgeoning spiritual marketplace outside established congregations: Christian and New Age bookstores, parachurch organizations, a host of twelve-step programs, and gurus offering an assortment of goods to spiritual seekers. Clergy and their congregations cannot simply ignore the challenges that a culture of choice poses, or dismiss them as unimportant. They must, instead, make some kind of response whether it is resistance, accommodation, or finding ways to adapt reflexively to the challenges? negotiating between the traditions of faith and the new religious culture.

As people exercise their choices in participation, congregational life has become more and more contested. Members' generation, gender, race, educational background, or social class are lines of demarcation along which differences are often defined. Some conflicts are spill overs from issues dividing national denominations: women's roles, abortion rights, and especially now issues relating to sexual orientation. Conflicts also develop over questions of money, staffing, buildings, doctrine, different visions of congregational mission, pastoral leadership, use of inclusive language, and, especially, liturgical and music styles? the so-called ?worship wars.? Members ask, ?Who are we as a congregation? What is our identity? How will it affect us if we become ?open and affirming? to gay and lesbian Christians? If we change our liturgy and music will we become something else? How important is it that we continue to emphasize our denomination's name, use its publications and resources, or contribute to its programs? especially since many of our members come from other denominations and care little about who we are as Lutherans or Episcopalians? How shall we respond to the challenge of the non-denominational megachurch? the religious equivalent of a Walmart? that has grown up on the edge of town and is attracting our young families and youth by its broad array of programs and contemporary worship style? Shall we become like the megachurch, tailoring our worship and programs to meet the needs of persons who are shopping around for a church, or to hold on to those of our own membership whose loyalty is not especially deep? Or shall we resist such changes, seeking instead to be a community of ?resident aliens???

Who decides such matters? In a time of declining denominational loyalty and an increase in what sociologist Stephen Warner has called ?de facto congregationalism,? there are no easy answers. Lay and clergy leaders often recognize that their congregation must change if it is to survive; yet, when they propose changes, many members resist vociferously: ?But we've always done it this way!?' Pastors are

increasingly caught in the middle of such conflicts with little skill in conflict management and little formal authority to impose their wills. It is no wonder that stress and burnout are on the rise.

I am painfully aware that my scouting report on the topography of contemporary ministry has focused more on some of the "giants" in the land than on "milk and honey." The realities of clergy compensation and status, the implications of church size and diversity, religious consumerism and conflict are not the kinds of things about which I would have liked to have spoken. Like Kathleen Norris, my words have taken me places I did not particularly want to go. I want to be clear, however, that by enumerating these issues, I am not lamenting some lost Golden Age when things were somehow better. The Golden Age is a figment of our myth-making. It never was. What is needed is not lament but realism—naming the giants as well as celebrating the milk and honey. Those entering ordained ministry today must understand these realities and be equipped and supported to face them.

### Some Concluding Reflections about Ministry in the Land of the Giants

What kind of equipment and support do they need? What is needed for pastoral leadership in the land of the giants? Please don't worry. I am not going to keep you here long enough to attempt a full answer—even if I were able to do so. A full answer would need to address distinct but interdependent contributions required of members of congregations, theological educators, and denominational leaders who deploy and support clergy. Rather than take this route, I want instead to conclude with some brief reflections about the particular style of leadership that I believe is required for meeting the challenges that face the church in today's world.

In the first meeting of our Pulpit and Pew project's Core Seminar, we asked members how they would describe good pastoral leadership. Dan Aleshire, the Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, told about a layperson who listed his congregation's criteria for good clergy. "We ask three questions: 'Does this person love God? Does this person love me? Can this person do the job that needs to be done in this congregation?'" The three questions may somewhat oversimplify matters, but they are not a bad summary of the essentials.

If a pastoral leader's being and sense of call to ministry is not grounded in the love of God, how can he or she be an effective spiritual guide to a congregation? How can a person stand week after week representing God to the congregation and the congregation to God if the people sense that the pastor does not truly love God, that he or she is primarily interested in receiving the congregation's adulation or being the leader of a successful congregation? Without grounding in God's love, how can a pastor stand alongside people at pivotal moments in their lives as a living sign of One in whom they can put their trust? Likewise, being grounded in God's love is essential if clergy are to sustain a lively sense their calling in difficult and stressful times in their ministry, or when financial pressures mount, or when a colleague gets a choice appointment or call that one has coveted, or when one feels under appreciated or under attack. Being grounded in God's love and purposes also enables a leader to imagine new possibilities for a congregations when it seems stuck and unable to move beyond the ways it has always done things. So the question, "Does this person love God?" is profoundly important for ministry in the

land of the giants.

But so also is the love of one's people. I do not mean to condone poor pastoral performance, but a pastor who shows genuine love and respect for her people can often weather a multitude of other pastoral failings. Conversely, no matter how good a preacher, teacher, or administrator one might be, if members feel that he does not love or respect them, then all profession of God's love and grace will ring quite hollow. It is not always easy to love one's people. Almost every congregation has its antagonists, those few who seem to delight in making life hell for any pastor who tries to serve the congregation. Loving such people while keeping them from subverting one's leadership is difficult. Nor is it easy to continue to love one's members in the midst of the conflicts and disputes which seem increasingly to afflict congregational life; yet, like the love of God, love and respect of one's members are essential ingredients of good pastoral leadership. Together they form the basis for trust between pastor and people that enables the pastor to answer the third question: Can this person do the work that needs to be done?

But what is the work that needs to be done in today's church? What is it that the present environment requires? Let me try to answer by comparing it with the work I understood to be necessary when I graduated from Duke and assumed my first parish. On the surface of things, what I did in the parish does not seem too different from what is required today. I led in the worship and preached each Sunday morning and evening. (Well, the latter obviously is a big difference, since Sunday evening worship has mostly gone the way of the dinosaur!) I taught; I visited and provided pastoral care; I presided over weddings and funerals; and I attended meetings and did the necessary administrative tasks of the church. By doing them well, members would be nurtured in their spiritual lives, new members would join the church, the budget would be met, and my lay leaders and denominational superiors would be satisfied. It was, though, a very pastor-centered model of the church, and it was essentially the model of ministry that I was taught in seminary.

Don't misunderstand me. I count myself to have received a very good theological education here in the Divinity School. I received a solid grounding in biblical studies, in the traditions of the church, in systematic theology and ethics. I was taught quite well to do many of the things a minister was supposed to do, especially as a preacher and leader of worship, and passably so in the techniques of pastoral care and church management. Yet, like the expectations I encountered in the parish, I was taught an essentially pastor-centered model of ministry. As I think back, I don't think I'm wrong in saying that the primary ecclesiology that we were taught focused on the contrast between the visible and the invisible church, with the invisible side coming off by far the winner. Not much positive was said about the visible side of the equation; nothing much that helped me to understand ministry as the work of the congregation as a whole rather than of the pastor; nothing much that taught me how to help lay members discover their spiritual gifts or empower them to use their gifts in ministry; nothing about the importance of understanding a congregation's distinctive culture and context; nothing either about how to help a congregation reflexively shape a vision for its ministry that is faithful to the gospel while, at the same time, appropriate to its particular circumstances. And I was taught nothing at all about how to deal with the conflicts that inevitably are experienced in congregational life. In short, however solid the theological

education was that I received, it was nonetheless based on an inadequate model of ministry.

In retrospect, the pastor-centered model was inadequate, especially given the challenges that the church faced in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. Its weak ecclesiology was a large part of the reason that many of us left parish ministry during that time. It led us to a disdain for congregations as unfaithful, noisy, irrelevant, solemn assemblies, far removed from where the real action was.<sup>7</sup>

If this pastor-centered model of theological education and ministry practice was the wrong one then, it is the wrong one today, especially in the face of the giants that I have described. What is needed instead is an ecclesial model that sees congregations and other Christian communities as partners in theological education; that understands ministry to be the calling of the whole people of God; that educates the pastor to be the leader of a ministering community; that understands that every congregation, however small or large, is called to be a present sign of God's promised reign in its gathered and scattered life. In this paradigm, pastors may look as if they are doing the same things that I did. They will continue to preside over the worshiping community; they will still preach; they will teach and give pastoral care; they will continue to have administrative responsibilities; but all these tasks will be aimed at building up the Body of Christ for its ministry, empowering lay members to claim and use their spiritual gifts as part of a ministering community, and helping the congregation negotiate its way reflexively between its faith traditions and the culture in which we live.

In an important recent book on the changing face of the Catholic priesthood, Donald Cozzens describes this paradigm shift with reference to the role of the post-Vatican II priest. In most respects Protestants need only to substitute pastor for priest for Cozzens' description to fit. The role of the priest, he says, has shifted from a cultic model to one of servant leadership in a community; from being on a pedestal to participation as a leader-companion with his people; from being a preacher teaching the truths of the faith and morally correct behavior to one who bears the mystery of God and leads the people into a more intimate contact with that mystery; from a lone ranger with unique sacramental powers to a collaborative ministry that focuses on the gifts of the parish as a whole; from a monastic spirituality that sets the priest apart from the people to a secular spirituality that is nourished by the rhythms of parish life; from saving souls from the world to liberating God's people to live fully in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Such a shift of models has not been easy for older priests who were formed in the cultic model of ministry, or for lay Catholics raised in a pre-Vatican II church. Nor is the shift from a clerical to an ecclesial paradigm an easy one for Protestants to make, whether in reshaping theological education or

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<sup>7</sup>Donald B. Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 4-8.

reorienting the practices of pastors, congregations, and denominations. Yet, I believe that this paradigm shift is absolutely essential if the church today is going to be able to meet the challenges of the post-traditional, post-Christian context in which we live.

Interestingly enough, however much some of us have criticized them, pastoral leaders of some of the new paradigm or post-traditional churches have been able to make this shift more readily than those of us in more established mainline traditions. Leaders of these churches are often quite innovative and imaginative. While they work hard at attracting spiritual seekers, sometimes appearing to make the gospel so "user-friendly" that its demanding edges are blunted, they also work equally hard to lead seekers into a deeper experience of God's love and to a fully committed discipleship. Although these pastors are typically strong leaders, even at times autocratic as they set forth a vision for their congregation, they nonetheless strongly encourage and support lay members in discovering and using their gifts in working towards that vision. In Donald Miller's excellent book on new paradigm churches, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, he describes the leaders of these churches as "democratizing the sacred," not jealously guarding their clerical prerogatives.<sup>8</sup> Their aim is to multiply members who will exercise their gifts for ministry, not to attract followers who will sit at their feet.

I am not suggesting an uncritical emulation of these congregations or their pastors. I do believe, however, that they provide examples of the kind of innovative and imaginative spirit necessary for those who will lead congregations faithfully and effectively in the complex, rapidly changing world in which we live. This is the new work that needs to be done. And if clergy are to learn to do this work, they must be equipped spiritually, intellectually, and practically in theological schools; supported, nurtured, and mentored by judicatory officials; and compensated, accepted, and affirmed by lay members of congregations in co-responsibility for the church's ministry.

As I said earlier, this lecture is not intended as a sermon; yet, one of the lessons someone taught about sermons is that they should have three points and end with a poem. Unfortunately for you, I have gone way over the limit in my number of points, but I would still like to end with a poem. It is a four line verse-question by the poet Abner Dean, himself an unbeliever, who nevertheless reminds us what, at heart, makes it possible for Christians to minister with courage and imagination in the land of the giants. It goes like this:

Remember the word?  
The one from the manger?  
It means only this ?  
You can dance with a stranger.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Cited by Paul Lehman, "The Shape of Theology for a World in Revolution," *Motive* (April 1965): 13. The poem is entitled "Grace Note" from a 1955 collection, *Wake Me When It's Over*.