

Protestant Pastoral Ministry at the Beginning of the New Millennium*

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In a news release about Duke Divinity School's Pastoral Leadership Project (about which I will say more shortly), I made the statement that "ministry is in many respects a troubled profession." That statement led to numerous questions about what I meant by describing ministry as troubled. This paper is an effort to answer that question as well as to introduce our project.

Viewing ordained ministry as "a troubled profession" is not new. In his 1956 book, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, H. Richard Niebuhr referred to the ministry as "The Perplexed Profession." Niebuhr attributed the problem primarily to the lack of "a clear-cut, generally accepted conception of the office of the ministry" which he thought, at the time was emerging. Unfortunately, history proved him wrong. The intervening years have brought considerable changes in the fortunes of the churches and new challenges to those who lead them. They have not, however, brought much additional clarity about a guiding conception of ordained ministry, as Matthew Price's paper later in this session will make clear. It is still possible to describe ordained ministry as "troubled" or "perplexed." A report by George Barna (1993: 59) describes clergy as "one of the most frustrated occupational groups in our country."¹ A similar comment comes from the writer, Paul Wilkes in an op-ed article in the *Boston Sunday Globe*. Based on visits to congregations and parishes across the country, Wilkes concluded that "in too many of our parishes, we have [clergy] who are sadly ordinary, . . . who had they ended up in any other field would be seen as second-rate practitioners" (Wilkes 1999).

In response to concerns like these, we are undertaking at Duke a large-scale project aimed at strengthening the quality of the church's leadership, especially its pastors. The project, funded by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment, is designed to create sustained conversation about pastoral leadership, the changes impacting it, and ways of strengthening it. We are focusing on three central sets of questions:

- 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 (or excellent) ministry?" Can we describe it? How does it come into being? Do its characteristics vary by denominational tradition? By congregational context?

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- What can be done to enable “good ministry” to come into being more frequently, and how can it be nurtured and supported more directly?

To address these questions, we have commissioned a number of research projects, some mining existing data, some collecting new information. Theologians, historians, as well as social scientists, are involved. Results from these various projects, including a national survey and in-depth interviews with a smaller sample of clergy and lay leaders which will begin next spring, should give us a clearer picture of the state of pastoral leadership today and help us to understand what good ministry entails and how it is nurtured and supported. Our findings will be disseminated as widely as possible—in publications, on the web, and in conferences and symposia.

Rather than saying more now about the project, I want to use the time remaining to review several indicators that seem to support the observation that ordained ministry continues to be a perplexed, if not troubled, profession. Let me add, however, that I am not suggesting that all clergy are perplexed, troubled, or frustrated. Substantial numbers are doing exemplary ministry, and one of the happy consequences of my involvement in this research project is the opportunity to meet and observe the work of many outstanding ministers and priests. Nonetheless, all is not well with the profession. What are some indicators?

Indicators of Trouble in Zion

Candidates for Ordained Ministry: Recruitment into the ministry, as measured by entrants into seminary Master of Divinity programs, has remained relatively flat in recent years. From 1994 to 1998, the last five years for which the Association of Theological Schools has reported enrollment data (A. T. S., 1998-99), the very slight increase in M.Div. enrollment during these years has come almost entirely from growth in ethnic minority candidates, especially Asian and African-American.

As is generally well-known, students entering seminary today are, in majority, in their second or even third careers. They are, therefore, considerably older than candidates previously. A recent study by the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education conducted for the Fund for Theological Education, reports that the average (mean) age of entering students in 1999 was 35.4 years. Women entrants were, on average, older than men (36.9 as compared with 34.1 years); Roman Catholic entrants were older than Mainline Protestants (38.7 as compared with 36.8 years); while Evangelical Protestant and Jewish entrants were younger (32.3 and 28.8 years respectively). Furthermore, among the younger men and women who do enter seminary, there is considerably less interest in becoming pastors of congregations than is true for their older counterparts. Many younger students look to other avenues to give expression to their calling.

The rise in the average age of seminarians stands in sharp contrast to the entering age of students in law (26 years in 1991) and medicine (24.3 years in 1996), and this raises an important question: Why is ministry generally, and especially pastoral ministry, not as attractive to younger cohorts as it once was? We need answers to this crucial question.

There are also other consequences of the rising age of seminarians. One is a sharp increase in the ratio of educational costs to years of active service. In some seminaries, three years of tuition alone (excluding books, room and board, travel, and other expenses) can cost as much as forty thousand dollars—more if the seminarian is married with a family. Thus, for example, the cost of education relative to years of active pastoral ministry service is considerably higher for a 48 year old graduate than for a 28 year old. Obviously, too, the increase in older, second career seminarians raises the average age of clergy generally. An Episcopal study (Holland and Sachs 1999) reports that in 1998, the age of ordination of Episcopal priests (as distinct from the age of entry to seminary) was just over 46 years. A 1998 Barna report found the median age of Protestant clergy to be 48, up from 44 in 1992 (Barna 1998). The mean age of Catholic priests in 1993 was 56.5.

It is not only the aging of seminarians and clergy generally that is troubling, but there are also questions of quality of candidates for ministry. Someone once pointed out that laments about declining ministerial quality have been made since the 1600s and that, if true, we would have hit bottom by the time of the American Revolution! In spite of this important reminder, it is still an important question to raise, especially for recent years? Unfortunately, we have many impressions but little adequate data to provide an answer. The closest we can come is with academic quality, which admittedly is not the only measure of quality that should be considered. Even here the data are quite limited and somewhat inconclusive, but what we have suggests that entrants to seminaries are not as academically gifted as in the past. Comparisons of M.Div. applicants with all applicants who took the Graduate Record Exam during the 1980s show that male seminarians' verbal scores, which were slightly lower than the average for all examinees in 1981, declined further by 1987, widening the gap between them and all who took the exam. Women M.Div. candidates scored higher than the average of all examinees throughout the period, though their scores also declined slightly between 1981 and 1987 (Grandy and Greiner, 1990). College students elected to Phi Beta Kappa, who later became ordained clergy, declined from approximately 4 percent of the total in the late 1940s, to two percent in the 1970s, to just under 1 percent in the late 1980s (*Key Reporter*, 1985). A study of entering seminarians at one mainline seminary over a twenty-five year period found that academic ability, measured by various standardized tests, steadily decreased and was at an all-time low at the end of the 25 year period. (Stone 1993). To repeat, academic ability is only one measure of the quality of candidates, but the limited data available does suggest that candidates' academic ability has declined over the years. I view this, along with the aging of seminary entrants and the questions it raises about the relative attractiveness of ministry as a profession as indicators of a profession in some trouble.

Supply and Demand Imbalance: Catholics have faced a severe shortage of priests for some time, while Protestants have thought they did not have a problem. That seems no longer to be true. Although the data are mixed, there appears to be an emerging shortage of ordained clergy among a growing number of Protestant denominations. During the 10 years from 1988-1997, the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, experienced a net loss of 1,305 clergy, with 1,500 retirees and 1,775 who resigned before normal retirement age. A recent report estimates that if these numbers continue through 2017, approximately 38 percent of the denomination's congregations will not have a pastor (Klass and Klass 1999). Research by the Evangelical Lutheran Church (E.L.C.A. 2000) found that the number of pastors has declined slowly over the past decade, with shortages reaching crisis proportions in some

regional Synods—especially those with a large number of small congregations in very rural or inner city locations. Among other denominations reporting shortages are the Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), and United Methodist Church. Disciples are facing a somewhat similar profile of looming shortages as the Missouri Synod Lutherans.² Presbyterians report that, for more than a decade, retirements, dismissals, and deaths have outstripped ordinations and transfers of clergy from other denominations. The number of ministers serving as pastors or co-pastors declined by 12 percent from 1990 to 1999 (P.C.U.S.A. 1999) Methodist shortages, as with the E.L.C.A., vary regionally. . Most denominations have experienced similar growth in the number of clergy retirements and an increase in clergy resignations and removals.

The diminishing supply of ordained clergy may actually be fortuitous for most Protestant denominations. It reflects the reality of too many small congregations—more than 60 percent in several denominations—that are not only less attractive to clergy candidates, as the E.L.C.A. study found, but are unable to support full-time, seminary trained pastoral leadership without denominational subsidies for salary. Thus, the shortages are a way of rebalancing supply and demand that is long overdue. Although this is probably correct, anecdotal evidence suggests that current and impending shortages are nonetheless real and not solely a problem of filling the pulpits of small congregations. Several denominational officials have commented to us about a marked decline in the number of quality applicants for what they consider “plum” congregations.

Job Expectations: Have clergy job expectations changed over time, creating a mismatch between the expectations of clergy and laity about what is important? Here the evidence is mixed? Studies of how clergy actually use their time and understand their roles show limited changes over time (Lehman 1993; Zikmund et al. 1998; Brunette-Hill and Finke 1999; Monahan 1999). Many of the patterns identified by Samuel Blizzard’s studies of clergy in the 1950s are evident in clergy practice today. Furthermore, on the basis of his national study of congregations, Mark Chaves notes that worship services, religious education, and providing pastoral care for their members continue to be the core activities of most congregations—not too different from 25, 50 or even 100 years ago. Yet, the appearance of sameness may in fact mask important differences in many congregations: differences in what lay members expect of their congregation’s core activities, differences in the ways that some congregations are attempting to produce these core services, and corresponding changes in the role of pastoral leaders. For example, however we evaluate the growth of religious individualism and a consumerist approach to congregational participation, these are important social and cultural realities that affect expectations for congregational life and pastoral roles. What Donald Miller (1997) called “new paradigm” churches are but a very small percentage of the total population of churches, but they are examples of congregational responses to religious individualism and consumerism, and they are having an important ripple effect as they raise questions and challenges for a large number of smaller, more traditional congregations and their clergy. A variety of other congregational innovations are also being tried. Many clergy today find themselves unprepared for these new expectations and often unwilling on theological grounds to respond to some of them. The lack of a clear-cut conception of the office of the minister, which Niebuhr noted in the 1950s, is perhaps even more true today than it was in the 1950s.

Clergy Satisfaction: How have changing expectations affected clergy job satisfaction? The findings are also mixed.³ Some studies have found a large percentage of pastors who say that they are “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” and fulfilled in ministry (Barna 1993; National Federation of Priests’ Councils 1994). Two-thirds of the Protestant clergy surveyed by Barna (1993: 61) indicated that their ministry efforts in their current congregations have been worth the effort. In the same survey, however, almost 50 percent believed that being a pastor has had a negative effect on their families. In contrast to Barna’s generally satisfied clergy, the previously mentioned Lutheran Church Missouri Synod study (Klass and Klass 1999) found that 30 percent of the clergy interviewed expressed satisfaction with their work; another 30 percent expressed moderate degrees of satisfaction; and half of the remaining 40 percent—approximately 1000 clergy—were in what the report called “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. Among the severest critics of ordained ministry in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod study were the spouses of current and former pastors (Klaas and Klass 1999).

Clergy Salaries: Besides changing expectations for the pastoral role, a critical issue that affects satisfaction is compensation. Clergy salaries vary by denomination, region, size, and affluence of congregations, but for the most part they remain low relative to other occupations requiring comparable education. In 1998, Barna reported that the total compensation package for Protestant pastors, including housing allowance and other benefits, amounts to \$36,410. As he noted, “Although that is 14 percent higher than the 1992 average package, the average is barely above the national household norm and has essentially done little more than keep pace with inflation. A more recent study of Protestant clergy by *Leadership* magazine (Reed 2000) reported somewhat higher salaries, especially for pastors who are head of multiple staff churches. The median total compensation (base salary and benefits) was \$37,793 for solo pastors and \$53,607 for senior pastors of multiple staff churches. In forthcoming study undertaken for the Duke Project (McMillan and Price, in progress), the researchers have examined time-series data from the Current Population survey from 1976 to 1998. Their findings about average clergy salary are generally similar to the *Leadership* study. Moreover, they compare the average salary of full-time clergy holding graduate degrees with all persons working full-time and holding graduate degrees, and they also compare average clergy salaries with those from other selected professions. In these several comparisons, clergy salaries are considerably lower, even when clergy housing is taken into account. More specifically—and this will come as no surprise—they are substantially lower than salaries of lawyers and doctors, but they are also lower than those of teachers and social workers. Furthermore, when converted to constant dollars, clergy, social worker, and teacher salaries have risen only slightly between 1976 and 1999, in sharp contrast to lawyer and physician salaries. When we compare the average of clergy between age 46 and 55, which might be considered as peak earning years, with other professionals of the same age and holding graduate degrees, the average clergy salary was only 52 percent less than the other professionals. Average total household income for clergy and their spouses was 56 percent less than the total household income of other similar professionals. As one report put it, “The fact is 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. Large debt and low income forces some spouses who would prefer not to work to earn a second family income. Financial problems make all the problems of ministry worse” (Klaas and Klaas 1999).

We strongly suspect too that the aforementioned recruitment problems are related in part to the relatively low salaries that clergy receive.

Forced Resignations and Removals from the Ministry: In recent years, there have been a substantial number of clergy who have been fired by their congregations, sometimes leading to the clergy's leaving ordained ministry altogether. Without time series data, it is difficult to say that clergy firings and removals have increased, but anecdotal evidence suggests that this is the case.

One reason for an increase in firings and removals has been clergy misconduct, especially sexual misconduct. Because such cases are more openly reported, and because it has become somewhat more difficult for congregations or denominations to ignore or sweep such incidents under the table, forced resignations for sexual misconduct have become more prevalent. Whether there has been an actual increase in clergy sexual abuse is, again, impossible to document.

But sexual misconduct is not the only reason for forced resignations. Often they are due to a mismatch between clergy and congregations. In the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod study Clergy Shortage Study (Klaas and Klaas 1999), mismatch accounted for about half of the clergy removals. In some the problem was present before the new pastor arrived in pre-existing and unresolved congregational conflict. Changing expectations for the clergy role also play a part in creating lay-clergy conflict that leads to removal.

Unfortunately for the congregations and clergy involved in these conflicts, denominational officials are not always helpful in efforts to resolve the conflicts. The L.C.M.S. study reported that in 60 percent of the cases where clergy were removed, denominational judicatory officials were judged to have treated the pastor poorly, caused the problem to worsen, or were unsupportive of the pastor.

Clergy women more frequently resign from parish ministry positions than men; though in most cases, their resignations are not ostensibly forced but are due to a lack of acceptance or support. Research findings have disagreed somewhat over where the lack of support is greatest—whether it is laity in congregations, denominational hierarchies, clergy peers, or some combination of the three.⁴ Whatever the answer, the rate of leaving for women clergy is higher than for males.⁵

Conclusion

To sum up, in spite of significant numbers of really effective clergy who are doing exemplary ministry—often under difficult circumstances—the several indicators that I have cited raise questions about the overall health of the profession. For many clergy, Niebuhr's description still holds: Ordained ministry is a perplexed profession. Why does the perplexity remain? What factors contribute to the indicators that I have cited? There is no single or simple answer, but we hope by the end of our project to have a better understanding of what is involved. Any answer will need to take into account a number of factors including broad and rapid social, economic, and cultural changes that impact upon the place of the church and the role of its leaders; changes in the system of professions (Abbott 1988) and the place of the clergy in that system; and internal changes in the church and its understanding and support of lay and ordained ministry.

Notes

¹ Clergy are not the only profession facing difficulties. Another recent *Boston Sunday Globe* article reported that “more and more physicians, frustrated with managed care, are trying new professions and finding life more stressful” (Barnard and Tong 2000).

² From figures supplied in correspondence with Disciples’ officials.

³ One of the dissertations that we are funding as part of our Pastoral Leadership Project (Jones, forthcoming) is exploring this matter in some detail. In responses to a mailed questionnaire, he has found that a majority of clergy check responses saying that they are very or moderately satisfied with their jobs. However, when given opportunity to write in comments, a significant portion of these same clergy express considerable dissatisfaction with their jobs. How to interpret the discrepancy is an interesting problem.

⁴ A recent study (Sullins 2000) found that, among women clergy in the Episcopal church, resistance was entirely the congregational level and that it had remained unchanged over 20 years.

⁵ For United Methodist figures, see Memming (1998) and Wiborg and Collier (1997).

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