

Pulpit supply: A clergy shortage?

by [Patricia Mei Yin Chang](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

When denominational officials look at the number of empty pulpits in their churches, they worry about a shortage of pastors. Some have strategized about new ways to recruit candidates for ministry. “The clergy shortage is impacting me at every turn,” says Bishop Ted Gulick of the Episcopal Diocese in Kentucky. “The bishops and seminaries woke up about two and a half years ago, and realized we have to start recruiting younger people to fill the ranks.”

Yet from the perspective of clergy, the situation appears quite the opposite. They see a crowded job market, with few attractive positions and even fewer chances for promotion. Denominational statistics show that there are twice as many ordained ministers as there are pastoral positions to fill. Jack Marcum, head of research services for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), sees “little evidence of a literal shortage of ministers . . . We are training more than sufficient numbers of ministers of word and sacrament in the PCUSA to pastor mid-sized and larger congregations and fill other traditional ministries.”

The data supplied by denominations to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* confirm that there is a clergy glut. Whereas data in the 1950s showed slightly less than one pastor for every church, in 2000 there were almost two pastors for every church. This trend appears across liberal, moderate and conservative denominations, across large and small denominations, and across fast-growing and slow-growing denominations.

If there are so many unemployed clergy, why are denominational leaders wringing their hands about a clergy shortage? The answer is that denominational officials are focusing not on the total number of clergy but on the number of vacant pulpits, and on this score many denominations are indeed facing a crisis. In the denominations often designated as liberal—the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—roughly 20 percent of churches lack clergy (according to *Yearbook* data). The “moderate” mainline denominations—including the United Methodist Church, various Lutheran denominations, the Disciples of

Christ, the American Baptist Churches and the Reformed Church—show a 10 percent vacancy rate. The conservative denominations, which have among the highest numbers of clergy per member, also have the highest proportions of employed clergy per church. The data from these denominations—including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of the Nazarene and the Assemblies of God—suggest that there are 1.4 working clergy per church. (Anecdotally, however, officials in these denominations believe that there are still empty pulpits out there, and they estimate the percentage to be between 4 and 6 percent.)

How can some denominations report both a surplus of clergy and a large percentage of empty pulpits? Because the empty pulpits are mostly in small, rural churches, which aren't very attractive positions; they are isolated geographically and they don't pay much in salary or benefits.

In the PCUSA, one of the few denominations that keeps data on ministerial vacancies by church size, the vacancy rate in congregations with fewer than 100 members has grown from 39 percent in 1990 to 44 percent in 2000. Among churches with fewer than 50 members, the vacancy rate has grown from 71 percent to 77 percent. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reports a similar trend, with half of its pastoral vacancies occurring in churches with fewer than 175 members.

The problem of filling ministerial posts in small churches cannot be ignored, for most churches are small. A 1999 study of American congregations reported that 71 percent have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults. The median size of a church is 75 active members. In other words, half of all American congregations have fewer than 75 members.

Why don't pastors want to serve small churches? Many pastors would say that it is deeply satisfying to work in smaller churches. As one pastor who moved from a large church to a small church commented, "I would never go back to a large church . . . Administrative tasks kept getting in the way of doing what I wanted to be doing, . . . [which is] serving a congregation and making a difference in people's lives." Nevertheless, for many pastors the position of senior pastor in a large multistaff church remains a symbol of professional accomplishment.

Visions of success aside, several factors make pastors hesitate to take a call to a small church. First of all, seminary graduates these days tend to be older and are embarking upon a second or third career. They are also more likely than in the past

to be women. These factors introduce personal and family demands that limit choices. As more and more women have entered the workforce, male pastors are increasingly constrained by the needs of their wives' professional lives. And female pastors are also often constrained as to where they can serve by a husband's career. For these people, serving in an isolated community away from other employment opportunities may not be an option.

A study published in 2000 by the ELCA revealed that of the cohort of newly minted pastors, 71 percent placed constraints upon where they could move due to the needs or desires of a spouse; 58 percent restricted their first call to a location in or near a large city; 36 percent were opposed to serving in a small congregation; and 32 percent were opposed to serving in a rural setting.

As for financial concerns, a 1998 study of first-call candidates in the ELCA showed that roughly half were called to churches with average attendance under 83. These churches had an average operating budget of less than \$63,300 from which they had to pay not only the pastor's salary but also the mortgage, along with such expenses as maintenance of the church building, supplies, equipment, utilities and educational materials. It may not be surprising that 25 percent of the first calls ended within the first three years and 45 to 50 percent ended within five years.

Ministers' sense of the financial burden of serving small churches should not be taken simply as evidence of a weak commitment. One former pastor told me that he decided to leave the ministry and find secular work when he saw his parents go hungry. They had served the church as missionaries all of their lives, yet when they retired they had neither health nor retirement benefits. He said the denomination offered them no financial help, and at that point he decided to quit the ministry in order to gain medical and retirement benefits for his family. In his denomination, pensions were available only to those clergy who worked for churches that had made contributions to the pension fund over the course of their careers—something small churches have fewer resources to provide.

Since job opportunities are primarily in small or rural churches, which offer lower wages, clergy who look to move to larger and larger churches are inevitably going to be frustrated. There are simply not enough large churches for clergy to move into. Only 10 percent of the nation's congregations have 350 or more active members. Not only are clergy likely to start out in small churches, they are likely to stay there throughout their careers.

These realities have affected the pattern of clergy employment. The Hartford Study of Ordained Men and Women, conducted in 1993, found that many pastors drop in and out of ministry. They may take a job in a secular field and then return to ministry. They may experience occasional periods of unemployment. Many work as part-time clergy while also working in secular occupations to support themselves and to gain medical and retirement benefits. Many report being subsidized by a spouse—which often means that they are the ones able to take jobs in small churches that cannot otherwise offer a living wage. Yet those being subsidized in this way are also most constrained by a partner’s job and lifestyle.

As denominational leaders consider the increase in part-time clergy, and the high unemployment figures for clergy combined with high rates of pastoral vacancies, they often worry about the “decline” of church leadership. They think nostalgically about a time—actually rather short—when the brightest college graduates sought a career in the ministry. They wonder how to make a theological vocation attractive to these kinds of candidates once again.

Historically, however, the idea of the ministry as a middle-class, white-collar profession is more the exception than the rule for most American denominations, and in many traditions today it is still a relatively unfamiliar concept. The rapid growth of the Baptists and the Methodists in the early 19th century was fueled by itinerant lay ministers with little or no training and who were sometimes largely illiterate. Yet they were willing to sacrifice their families and their health to ride through the wilderness and proclaim the word of God. African-American churches have long flourished with clergy who work at one job during the week and preach on Sundays. And it is perhaps not a coincidence that many clergy in the fastest-growing denominations today—those in the Pentecostal tradition, for example—follow the same model, supplementing their ministries through other work.

Mainline Protestants have been waking up to the reality that the nature of ministry is changing. Increasingly, the available opportunities do not match the traditional career aspirations of someone who has spent three years in seminary and is loaded down with family responsibilities and student loans. Says Robert Kohler, an executive with the United Methodist Church: “Instead of a [clergy] shortage or crisis, I see a changing profile in pastoral ministry, with an intentional use of more full- and part-time local pastors to address the needs for clergy.”

Researchers in the PCUSA and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod have reached a similar conclusion. A 1999 study conducted by Alan and Cheryl Klass concluded with the suggestion that the LCMS use licensed deacons, supervised by a local pastor, to fill the more than 1,000 vacant ministry posts. “Virtually all of organized Christendom,” they argued, “is embracing the concept.” Jack Marcum, denominational researcher for the PCUSA, says that “general efforts to recruit more inquirers and candidates for ministry seem misguided. . . . It’s not going to solve the twin problems of tiny congregations that are not economically viable and ministers who are tied to a particular city or region. . . . Making more use of commissioned lay pastors, a practice already under way in several presbyteries, seems like the best option of those currently available.”

The number of unemployed clergy and empty pulpits is alarming to those who measure success in traditional terms. But rather than interpret these numbers as indications of institutional failure, they might be seen as a call to reexamine the yardsticks of success. Members of small churches served by part-time lay ministers are not necessarily worse off spiritually than their counterparts in large churches—and perhaps they are better off. Small churches may be more likely to create strong interpersonal bonds, forge vibrant communities and create a stronger witness to the community. It may be that church life occupies a more significant place in the lives of people in small churches.

In that case, perhaps small churches with part-time pastors should be embraced for their special gifts and the contributions they make to the vitality of the denomination. For denominations to discount congregations on the basis of size and physical resources may be to discount their own future.