

Pastors' picks: What preachers are reading

by [Jackson W. Carroll](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

How often do clergy read? And what are they reading? In a project commissioned by Pulpit & Pew, clergy from eight denominations reported spending an average of four hours a week reading beyond the reading done for a sermon or teaching lesson. Episcopal clergy were highest at five hours per week; Nazarenes were lowest at two hours. Just over 10 percent of all clergy reported that they spend one hour or less.

The telephone survey was commissioned in 2001 by Duke Divinity School's Pulpit & Pew project, and conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (NORC). A random sample of Catholic and Protestant clergy were asked not only how often they read, but what they read: "Other than the Bible what three authors do you read most often in your work as a pastor?" Of 1,231 clergy invited to participate, 72 percent responded, for a total of 833 clergy from 80 different denominations.

We supplemented the telephone interviews with surveys mailed to selected samples of Protestant clergy in eight mainline and conservative denominations. In the written survey, we asked the above question and two others: "Please list the last three books you read on any subject" and "What journals do you most often read?" (up to three). Just under 2,500 clergy completed the mailed survey. Although they represent random samples of clergy of their denominations, Episcopal and Presbyterian clergy are slightly overrepresented in the mainline group. Because there were too few clergy to do analysis by specific denominations, we grouped the respondents into two traditions: mainline and conservative.

The following table lists the top 12 authors named by Catholic, mainline Protestant and conservative Protestant clergy. There is little overlap among the three. C. S. Lewis is the only author who made all three lists. Both Catholics and mainline Protestants listed Henri J. M. Nouwen, while both conservative and mainline Protestants listed Max Lucado, Eugene Peterson, John C. Maxwell and Philip Yancey.

Three of these four come from conservative Protestantism, the exception being Peterson.

Although there were a few additional crossover authors farther down the list—primarily between the two Protestant groups—the comparison suggests that clergy from the three traditions live in distinct intellectual and cultural worlds, at least when it comes to the authors they most often read. The Protestant mainliners make an exception in their reading of conservative authors who write about leadership, church growth or spirituality. Few conservatives read mainline Protestant or Catholic authors.

Women authors do not fare well on the lists. The lone woman author among the top 12 is Barbara Brown Taylor, and she appears only on the mainline Protestant list. Other women authors appear further down that list—Kathleen Norris, Marva Dawn, Elizabeth Achtemeier, Roberta Bondi, Sue Bender and Annie Dillard. Below the top dozen on the Catholic list one finds Dianne Bergant, Joan Chittister, Joyce Rupp and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Not a single woman made the author list of conservative Protestant clergy.

The authors included most often are those who write about ministry (including the theology of ministry), spirituality (especially pastoral spirituality) and church leadership. Biblical scholars and interpreters are popular in all three groups. No historian or social scientist is in the top 12, although Martin Marty and Robert Wuthnow are mentioned by mainline Protestants. Catholic priests are most likely to name theologians, and they put Richard McBrien and Karl Rahner in the Catholic top 12; not far behind them are St. Augustine, Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Hans Küng. Mainline Protestants include Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther.

Conservative Protestants list no one who might be considered a professional theologian. Instead they choose popular authors (some of them successful pastors) who write about ministry and spirituality, albeit often from a theological perspective. Conservatives also read books by biblical interpreters and writers on leadership and church growth. Although a degree of pragmatism characterizes all of the lists, conservative Protestants show the most marked tendency to read about the practice of ministry.

As for the most recently read books and the most frequently read journals and magazines, the supplemental sample gives some clues. Showing the three most

recently read books (aggregated), the following table lists the top 12 for each group. The list is time bound—clergy are likely to have read books that were “hot” or popular at the time of the survey.

Again a limited number of books appear on both lists. Bruce Wilkinson’s *The Prayer of Jabez* is first for conservative Protestants and second for mainliners, while the *Left Behind* series is near the top of both lists. The only other jointly listed book among the top 12 is *The Purpose Driven Church*, a book on church growth based on author Rick Warren’s experience as pastor of Saddleback Community Church in California. Philip Yancey made both lists, but with different books.

The mainline list includes almost no books on biblical interpretation, formal theology or historical and social analysis. Popular novels dominate the list (several by women authors). The exceptions are *The Prayer of Jabez*, Warren’s book on church leadership, Spencer Johnson’s book on change, and Yancey’s and Norris’s books on grace.

In contrast, conservative Protestants listed few novels in their top 12—except for the *Left Behind* series. Books on pastoral leadership and popular spirituality dominate the list. There are three books by Brooklyn pastor Jim Cymbala, and the types of books change little through the list. Interestingly, the book by Steve Wohlberg, a Christian convert from Judaism, argues from scripture against the kind of popular apocalyptic thinking about the place of Israel that is central to the *Left Behind* series.

As for journal and magazine reading, denominational publications were near the top on each group’s list, but we omitted them from the list unless they are magazines read across denominations. The top 12 journals are shown in the table above.

Again, the lists contain some crossovers. *Leadership*, published by *Christianity Today* as “a practical journal for church leaders,” makes both lists, as do *Newsweek* and *Time*. Both lists emphasize preaching, and both reflect clergy concern with church leadership and church growth. But mainline and conservative clergy use different resources. Mainline clergy read *Weavings*, a journal focusing on Christian spirituality, and *Interpretation*, a journal of current biblical and theological interpretation. Family and sexuality concerns, interpreted from a conservative Protestant perspective, are reflected in the *AFA Journal*, published by the American Family Association, and *Focus on the Family* magazine, published by James Dobson’s organization.

The surveys tell us that most clergy spend at least four hours a week reading. This is not insignificant. But what they read is more important, and these lists reflect a strong focus on the practical concerns of preaching, church leadership and church growth. These areas not only occupy much of clergy's time; they are also the areas in which many say that they feel ill prepared. Also important are authors who write about spirituality, especially pastoral spirituality, and who help clergy reflect on their vocation.

Fiction is strongly represented in mainline Protestants' recently read books (less so for conservatives). Although much of this may be recreational reading, it is also a way of staying alert to cultural trends (as is the penchant for reading popular newsmagazines) and expanding one's pastoral imagination. This is important if clergy are to interpret the faith in today's world.

Unfortunately, these preferences leave out works of serious theology, biblical interpretation, history and social analysis. Although one hesitates to pass judgment on pastors with their busy lives and constant interruptions, the overall impression is that clergy do not read very deeply. Although they may read regularly, what they read seems to be relatively light fare and pragmatically focused.

There are exceptions. Several of the most influential authors listed are substantial thinkers and provide significant resources for reflecting on one's ministry. What seems to characterize these authors is their ability to write works of substance in a style that captures clergy's attention and addresses problems they face. Otherwise, the research might lead one to agree with English social historian G. M. Trevelyan, who says that "education . . . has produced a vast population [in this case a number of American clergy] able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading."