

Stressed out: Why pastors leave

by [John Dart](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

The most common reason Protestant pastors leave parish ministry is an experience of stressful conflict, usually arising from differences with laity or staff but sometimes with denominational officials. Compounding these stresses, ex-pastors say, is a lack of support from church officials and fellow clergy.

Former pastors said they are in a Catch-22 situation when thinking about discussing problems with church higher-ups or ministerial colleagues, according to a study termed the best yet on why clergy leave pastoral work.

“Pastors found it difficult to confide their problems in denominational leaders because they did not want to jeopardize future calls and promotion,” according to surveys and follow-up interviews by sociologists Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger. In a paper presented at the Religious Research Association’s annual meeting last month, Hoge and Wenger said of pastors: “They felt constrained in seeking support from other clergy because of the enormous competition that exists among them.”

Lowest on the list of stressful issues were the contentious matters most visible at the national level—disputes over doctrine, homosexuality, racial issues, outreach programs and church growth. When pastors reach the breaking point, it’s usually over organizational issues and internal disputes at local churches.

A decision so momentous for the unhappy pastor involves many factors, said Hoge. When asked their motivation for leaving, most pastors said “an opportunity came for new ministry.” But the study found that a combination of problems led to the departures.

The survey, taken in the spring and summer of 2002, involved 963 ex-pastors from the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Assemblies of God. Respondents included those who switched to a ministry other than shepherding a congregation as well as those who left the ministry altogether.

About one-third in the survey had no choice but to leave—they were forced out by lay or denominational leaders because of a divorce, allegations of sexual misconduct or unmanageable conflicts.

Many of the ex-pastors surveyed were women, notably 41 percent in the Presbyterian sample and 29 percent in the United Methodist. In both of those denominations, 18 percent of active clergy are women. About 15 percent of women ex-pastors said a prime motive for leaving was to care for family or children. Hoge and Wenger conceded that it was likely that “the angriest and most alienated ministers tended not to return the questionnaires [and] are therefore underrepresented.”

Nevertheless, “you are not going to get a better study” identifying the most frequent points of strife precipitating a break with the pastorate, Hoge said. The veteran sociologist, a Protestant, is a longtime faculty member at Catholic University of America. The study, part of the Pulpit & Pew research project at Duke Divinity School, also derived data from surveys on pastoral satisfaction conducted by Jackson Carroll, project director.

Compared with the views of current pastors in three mainline Protestant denominations (PCUSA, ELCA and United Methodist), the ex-pastors were not especially unhappy about living arrangements, salaries and benefits, spiritual life and relations with other clergy. But whereas 56 percent of current pastors said they were satisfied with their relations with their lay leaders, only about 30 percent of the ex-pastors had satisfactory relations with lay leaders in the final years of their pastorates.

The same disparity existed among the two groups on questions about family life: ex-pastors reported much less satisfaction, and said they experienced “resentment from their spouses because of the high time demands and low pay of ministry.”

In pinpointing the nature of congregational conflicts, the study showed that disputes over “pastoral leadership style” ranked first, particularly among Presbyterian and Assemblies of God ministers. Next was finances, especially troublesome for Methodist and ELCA clergy. “Changes in worship style” was the third highest source of conflict. Close behind were conflicts with staffers, differences over a new building or renovation, changes in music and congregational programs, and lay leadership styles.

Not surprisingly, problems arose for “innovative young pastors faced with traditional don’t-change-anything older adults and new pastors in churches that had just experienced long-gratifying pastorates,” the study said. At least half of the ex-pastors contended that seminary training is “not practical and realistic enough” in preparing people for parish ministry.

Former pastors also tend to feel that ministerial placement systems need to be reformed. United Methodists (79 percent) agreed emphatically on that point. Asked for recommendations, many onetime pastors told researchers that denominational leaders need to be more candid about the congregation a pastor is going to. “No one told me that the last two pastors there had fled from that church,” said one, according to Wenger.

Ex-pastors called for improved communications and support at the regional level. “Having skilled and effective conflict-helpers on a synod staff would be very helpful,” said a former ELCA pastor. “Without exception the people in the synod that I served in were not good at it.” A United Methodist minister who left at age 49 was pessimistic about getting support from a district superintendent. “The bishop certainly is not a shepherd to the shepherds in that structure where he really becomes the judge, jury and, by and large, the executioner,” he said.

A Presbyterian pastor who resigned at 62 said he thought that pastors often felt they were “out there by themselves.” Regional leaders may bring pastors together for retreats and other such events, he said. “But when push comes to shove . . . they sort of leave the ministers alone, and that’s not good.”