

Lay pastors here to stay: Roots in the early church

by [Lawton W. Posey](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

Eighteen Presbyterian laypersons were recently authorized by the West Virginia Presbytery to conduct services and deliver sermons. They had completed a two-year course of study to become authorized lay preachers. Earlier, a smaller group of women and men were commissioned by the same body as lay pastors, having received an additional half-year of preparation and invitations to serve churches. They may be eligible to celebrate the Lord's Supper and administer baptism. They are also able to sit as voice-and-vote members of governing bodies. Most will be able to perform marriage services for church members. All had previously been elected as lay elders in their home congregations.

Presbyterians have traditionally depended upon seminary-educated persons ordained as ministers of word and sacrament to provide pastoral services. But a declining number of persons seeking ordination or a lack of people willing to serve in rural areas where churches are often very small, far apart, and limited in financial and social resources is forcing the church to look at other models of ministry.

Officially sanctioned lay pastors are a relatively new phenomenon for Presbyterians (which is not the case for Baptists or Methodists). Commissioned lay preachers (an older term) served for many years in areas where there were few ordained ministers. Presbyterians also have a rich tradition of preaching by elders. In fact, in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, a predecessor denomination of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the duties of the elder included "cultivating . . . aptness to teach the Bible and [improving] every opportunity of doing so, to the end that destitute places, mission points, and churches without pastors may be supplied with religious services."

The need for lay pastors is evident and urgent. Presbyterians and other mainline denominations are seeing ministerial ranks thinning, and ministers are getting older. Not only is the average age of ordained persons rising, but the newly ordained

minister may be a second-career person, and possibly in a more complex family situation. Very small congregations have difficulty paying adequate salaries to ordained ministers, even when congregations share pastors.

Some may believe that this new model of lay ministry dilutes the quality of ministry. My experience with commissioned lay pastors is otherwise. I've found them to be deeply dedicated people. All of them have been elders in local congregations, which serves as a foundation for more extensive formation. Many have complementary secular work experience, with advanced degrees in such fields as social work, industrial management and college administration. They have experience as schoolteachers, engineers, physicians, investment counselors, counselors, administrators and governmental officials. Many have reared families. Some have dealt with difficult personal situations that prepare them to empathize with others going through difficulties.

Recently I read a number of their statements describing their sense of "call," and their reflections compare favorably to those I have read by candidates for ordination. These women and men have a freshness about them and a sense of eagerness lacking in some older servants of the church.

A second strength of the lay pastoral ministry program is the faculty and staff of the presbytery's program of preparation. This mostly volunteer group includes seasoned pastors and educators who give their time to conduct courses in biblical interpretation, church polity, liturgy and pastoral care. Teachers and students become colleagues and friends. It is in the classroom and in personal encounters that modeling occurs. The practical experience of pastors and other educators who prepare lay pastors cannot be discounted.

True, there are some challenges for lay pastoral ministry. The first is to ensure that these dedicated persons are encouraged and supported. One way this is done in the PCUSA is through a mentoring program. The mentor is expected to meet regularly with the lay pastor throughout his or her pastoral commitment. Mentors also need to be prepared for their tasks, and have a clear sense of what they are to do.

Another concern is about establishing appropriate employment relationships. Such issues as scope of duties, salary and pension and medical insurance need to be addressed. In the not so distant past, lay pastors might have been hired on the basis of an almost informal nod by the local church. A salary with benefits might not have

been part of the picture. In the experience of our presbytery, few if any employing congregations have provided a pension or made it possible for the lay pastor to participate in the church's retirement (and other) programs. The matter of medical insurance has not come up, since all presently serving lay pastors have other employment that gives them coverage or they are in a well-compensated retirement situation. In my work as a mentor to two very talented and successful lay pastors, I found that these matters were neither discussed nor thought about by the parties involved. It is entirely possible that lay pastors in the future may not have secular employment with job benefits. They may need housing, medical insurance and provision for retirement.

Some other questions remain. For instance, should a lay pastor be excluded from consideration in his or her own congregation? How should transitions from one congregation to another be handled? Should commissioned lay pastors seek work in a particular congregation or should they wait until asked? What pastoral care do the families of these lay pastors need and deserve?

Lay pastors are here to stay. Ministerial leadership does not always need to be nurtured in a traditional seminary program. Seminaries are offering online courses, or courses within presbyteries. Or, as in the case of the presbytery in West Virginia, programs can be set up locally to train lay pastors.

God calls not only 21-year-old college graduates or 35-year-olds to ministry, but also people who hear God's call in the midst of a life in business, education, farming or counseling. God may call a physician in rural Virginia, an information technology expert in the West Virginia mountains, or a county clerk in a small town. Lay ministry has its roots in the early church where proclamation was the task of a bold Peter or John who were "uneducated and ordinary" persons (Acts 4:13), but also persons of passion, deeply immersed in sacred scripture, ready to risk their lives for the Good News.