

Stuttering doesn't stop a call to ministry

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [July 11, 2012](#) issue

Tom Sherrod, an ordained United Methodist minister, loathed to “declare” a couple man and wife.

As a stutterer, Sherrod always had problems with hard “c” sounds, and the “c” in *declare* was a doozy. “P” sounds weren’t easy either, and the Bible is full of them. “If I tried to read, I would lock onto words,” said Sherrod, a North Carolina hospital chaplain. “I tried to steer clear of certain scriptures.”

Now, after intensive speech therapy, Sherrod publicly reads aloud whatever parts of the liturgy he likes. But before he learned to control the stutter, life was an exhausting exercise in avoiding some tough words and muscling through others.

A stuttering pastor, priest or rabbi sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but they are out there—ministering to the sick, comforting the bereaved and spreading the Word, even if the word may not sound perfect every time.

Increasingly, clergy who stutter are willing to talk about their stuttering and about how a profession that rewards inspiring speech can be open to those with speech impediments. The message from these clergy is often this: a stutterer can do the job well. But first there will be a struggle, both to minimize and to accept one’s stuttering. That fight, though, can make for a stronger spiritual leader.

“I think I became a rabbi not despite my stuttering but precisely because of it,” said Mark Glickman, who leads two Reform congregations in Washington State. “It was really a way of facing down my own demons.”

Glickman, like all the clergy interviewed for this story, had a serious stutter in his youth that improved markedly with speech therapy later in life. Sometimes when these men speak—and stutterers are most often men—the stutter is hardly noticeable.

Ronald Webster, a Virginia speech researcher and clinician who treated Sherrod, said that about 1 percent of people—across cultures—stutter. It's a disorder rooted in physiology, not anxiety or other emotional issues, as was once thought. Speech therapy is typically helpful, Webster said, and clergy—Webster has treated about half a dozen—enjoy particularly good results.

"They tend to be more disciplined in their approach to therapy than someone who has not been faced with the immense pressure of public speaking," he said.

Even those who have enjoyed dramatic improvement in their speech still stutter sometimes.

Glickman has learned to be fine with this. "Being a stutterer has made me more sensitive. It's made me more real with congregants," he said.

Gerald McDermott, an Anglican priest who preaches at a Lutheran church on Sundays and teaches religion at Virginia's Roanoke College during the week, also considers himself more approachable because he once stuttered badly—and still stutters occasionally.

"It shows people that you suffered," he said. "And I find that more people come to me for counseling because of it."

In his hospital chaplaincy, Sherrod said his stuttering has given him particular insight into patients whose physical limitations render them unable to say what they want to say—particularly stroke victims. "When the body betrays you, it can be extremely frustrating and irritating," Sherrod said. "It's taken me a long time to see my stuttering as a gift to connect to people."

But if stuttering can be an asset postordination, it can also be a daunting obstacle for those contemplating a clerical career. McDermott, who now lectures internationally and speaks on radio and television, recalls his own pastor's response when he expressed an interest in teaching religion: "I don't think so, Gerry. You stutter too much."

Glickman's father, a stutterer himself and always encouraging to his son, questioned whether rabbinical school made sense for a stutterer. "I used to think of heaven as the ability to talk freely," Sherrod said, "without having to worry about whether I could express myself or not."

Fortunately, stuttering clergy have a strong role model in Moses. Though the Bible does not expressly call Moses a stutterer, that's how Exodus 4:10 is frequently interpreted as Moses tells God that he doesn't want to be his spokesman: "Moses said to the Lord, O my Lord, I have never been eloquent . . . I am slow of speech, and slow of tongue."

Moses will certainly hold a prominent place in a book on famous stutterers that McDermott plans to write. He noted that Philipp Melanchthon, a founder of Lutheranism and Martin Luther's "right-hand man," also stuttered.

And while God sent Aaron to help Moses communicate, Glickman said it's notable that God requires Moses to keep talking despite his slow tongue. "It might not be pretty and perfect and glitzy and polished, but I need you to speak" is how Glickman interprets God's response. "And indeed God tells Moses to speak over 70 times. When Moses gets in trouble, it's because he doesn't speak up." —RNS