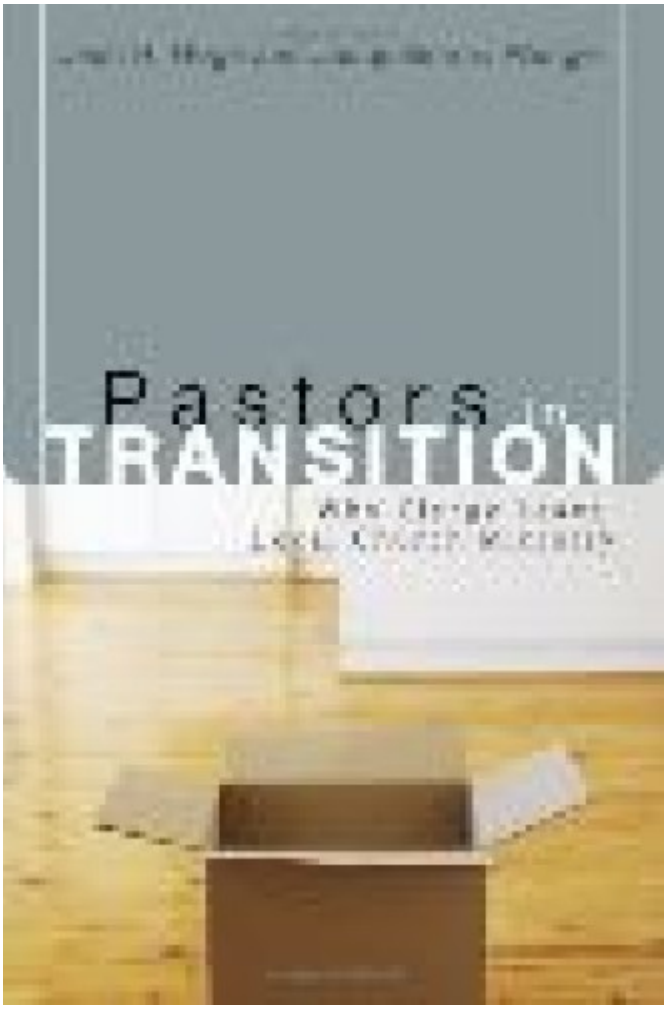
Exit interview

By David J. Wood in the December 13, 2005 issue

In Review



Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry

Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger
Eerdmans

Why do pastors leave the ministry? Several common issues emerge from the research of Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger: preference for another form of

ministry, the need to care for children or family, conflict in the congregation, conflict with denominational leaders, burnout or discouragement, sexual misconduct, and divorce or marital problems. Of these factors, which form the basis for the central chapters of *Pastors in Transition*, two are especially important: conflict and a preference for specialized ministry. A close third is the experience of burnout, discouragement, stress and overwork. As the authors explore these factors, they provide significant insights into what can be done to help people stay in ministry.

Hoge and Wenger's study is part of the larger Pulpit and Pew research project on the state of pastoral ministry, based at Duke Divinity School and funded by the Lilly Endowment. Hoge has authored two previous volumes (one coauthored with Wenger) on the status of the Catholic priesthood. *Pastors in Transition* is the first book-length Pulpit and Pew publication to examine the state of Protestant clergy.

The authors conducted extensive interviews with clergy who have left parish ministry, voluntarily or involuntarily, and with denominational leaders from five church bodies—the Assemblies of God, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church. The narrative is peppered with numerous quotes from clergy and enhanced with helpful graphs and concise summaries of the findings.

Hoge and Wenger learned, first of all, that polity matters. This finding is most clearly illustrated by the high degree of dissatisfaction expressed by United Methodist clergy in relation to their denomination's deployment systems and the level of support they received from judicatory officials. Among the denominations included in the study, "the United Methodist Church stands out for the level of centralization, supervision, and commitment to its clergy."

The denomination sets up a standard of dependence between clergy and denominational leadership that is hard to live up to. Furthermore, social trends such as greater freedom of choice and the tendency of pastors' spouses to be working outside the home have made the itinerant model increasingly difficult to implement. The authors conclude that "the more a pastor's career is determined by his or her denomination, the more conflict that pastor will potentially feel with denominational leaders."

Conflict in the parish also looms large. The top five conflict issues cited by pastors who left ministry were pastoral leadership style, church finances, changes in worship

style, staff relationships and building projects. Organizational and interpersonal issues, rather than doctrinal differences or hot-button issues such as homosexuality, were the most likely to motivate pastors to move on. “Most notable about the main conflicts experienced by ministers who left parish ministry is their ‘everyday,’ prosaic nature.” As they reflected on this finding, Hoge and Wenger “came to believe that the conflicts most often experienced by our participants are ones that could probably be resolved and in the process offer growth experiences for both pastor and congregation.”

The importance of collegiality to pastors’ flourishing emerges in several places in this study. Isolation and loneliness contributed directly or indirectly to pastors’ moves out of local ministry. Of those who left due to sexual misconduct, 75 percent indicated that they were lonely and isolated. In all five denominational groups, the top motivating factors for leaving were the same. Pastors reported:

> “I felt drained by demands.”
> “I felt lonely and isolated.”
> “I did not feel supported by denominational officials.”
> “I felt bored and constrained.”

Furthermore, Hoge and Wenger discovered a consensus among judicatory officers regarding pastors who have left local church ministry: “These pastors tended to be loners in the district or presbytery, for whatever reason not part of ministerial friendship groups or action groups.”

Leaving ministry is hard to do, and ex-pastors said “there are at least parts of ministry” that they miss. “Their accounts were remarkably consistent: they most missed leading worship and being a meaningful part of people’s lives.” Pastors who had left ministry under circumstances not of their own choosing or who felt that they had in some way been mistreated mourned the loss of pastoral ministry most intensely. The researchers note that “several interviews were interrupted when pastors cried.” Former pastors who were content with their new vocational setting also told of their love for local church ministry. The sense of loss says something important about the good that is intrinsic to the work of pastoral ministry and about how this work shapes a way of life that is not easily transferable to other vocational contexts.

The gap between the ideal and the reality of pastoral ministry also matters. A significant gap between pastors' ideal about how long it should take to accomplish particular tasks—preaching, teaching, pastoral care, administration—and the amount of time it really takes has a direct and predictable bearing on their level of stress and dissatisfaction. Striking a balance between what one wants to do in ministry and what one has to do is crucial.

This raises the critical question of encouraging pastors to manage their work in ways that take into account both their particular skills and capacities and the full breadth of demands and tasks that make up pastoral ministry. A correlative question is how congregations might become more active in helping pastors strike this balance.

There are two issues on which I would have liked to see the authors elaborate further. They assert in one of their introductory chapters that pastoral ministry is no more difficult today than it was four decades ago. Hoge and Wenger concede that ministry is different—indeed, they mention both differences that have emerged in Protestant life since the 1960s and differences in seminary graduates. However, they contend that the differences do not translate into a greater degree of difficulty. They leave unexplored the social and cultural changes of the past 50 years and the possibility that these changes have made pastoral ministry more difficult as well as different. The proliferation of communication technologies, the changing structure of everyday life (due largely to technology), the growing complexity of family life, the changing understandings and norms of sexual conduct and the expansion of consumer culture (as evidenced by unprecedented levels of consumer debt) are only a few of the conditions that present pastors with new kinds of demands.

The authors' apparent dismissal of this possibility is puzzling, and it prevents them from raising questions about social and cultural factors that may contribute to the negative experience of pastors. Addressing these new challenges would not diminish the challenges of past decades; nor would such a discussion need to claim too much for current circumstances. Rather, it would help pastors to make the connection between larger cultural shifts and their experience of the work they are called to do.

A second issue is the authors' assumption that collegiality among pastors, though important, is inherently limited because "ministers feel unavoidable competition with each other, which gets in the way of forming healthy support groups." But is such competitiveness inevitable? Or is it possible for denominations and judicatories to create conditions under which competitiveness becomes less likely and strong

collegiality more common?

By conceiving of collegiality in terms of “support groups,” the authors fail to appreciate the potential for strong forms of collegiality that have the character of friendship, in which fellow pastors share each other’s lives and help shape each other’s character. Friendship sustains pastors over time and not simply during crises—it is the kind of collegiality that is crucial to the cultivation of self-knowledge, relational intelligence, the capacity to remain dynamically engaged with one’s work and the ability to identify and negotiate conflict, all of which are relevant to preventing the dynamics that cause clergy to leave pastoral ministry.

In his book on the experiences of Roman Catholic clergy, *The First Five Years of the Priesthood*, Hoge claimed that one of the most important findings of his research was that priests left the ministry because they “felt lonely and unappreciated.” Loneliness was the one factor always present among the various reasons priests resigned in their early years of ministry. Hoge claims that when loneliness “is absent, resignation from the priesthood is unlikely. Whether a priest is heterosexual or homosexual, in love or not, it will not drive him to resign unless at the same time he feels lonely or unappreciated.”

This same dynamic appears to be present among Protestant clergy. The indication of loneliness and isolation among pastors who leave parish ministry warrants a more positive view of pastors’ potential for collegiality and calls for a vigorous exploration of the conditions that encourage noncompetitive relationships between clergy.

Precisely because this book succeeds in providing us with an unprecedented, multidenominational reading of why pastors depart from ministry, it is bound to leave readers asking for an equally in-depth discussion of why pastors stay and how they thrive.