

Survey shows that pastoral posts still attract and satisfy: Low attrition

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

Recent surveys have indicated that clergy are generally quite satisfied with their profession. But what about the men and women who are in seminary or who are fresh from seminary and face the demands of congregational service or the challenges of other ministries? How do they feel about ministry?

A newly published study has found that increasing numbers of seminarians favor the vocation of parish ministry by the time of graduation, and that the attrition rate of ministers in congregations is as low as 1 percent annually in the first 10 years.

Despite concerns that more and more seminarians in North America are pursuing master of arts degrees rather than the church-oriented master of divinity degree (M.Div.), researchers said they see a pattern of students gravitating toward congregational ministry.

Only half the students entering all M.Div. programs say that their first vocational choice is congregational ministry. But by the time they graduate, two-thirds say that parish ministry is their first preference. And nearly three-quarters of M.Div. graduates end up serving a congregation in their first hired position.

The upbeat report, "How Are We Doing?" was released by the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education and the Association of Theological Schools. The coauthors are Barbara G. Wheeler and Sharon L. Miller, the director and associate director of the New York-based center, and Daniel O. Aleshire, executive director of ATS.

The continuing growth in the past two decades of M.A. programs at seminaries (which accounted for about one-third of all master's degree programs in religion in 2003) is "often interpreted as a sign that interest in ministry, and congregational ministry in particular, is waning," the report said. The authors said that surveys of those who graduated with M.A. degrees in 1995 and 2000 revealed that half of them

took some kind of ministerial position after graduation. “Even more notable, one-third of them serve in congregations after graduation, and virtually the same percentage is still there,” they said. “For many, the M.A. is an alternate route to ministry rather than a road to other occupations.”

Wheeler, a Presbyterian minister, said in an interview that “the parish is a kind of default position” for graduates. “A lot higher percentage went into parish work than we thought would have.” Relatively few differences appeared between mainline Protestant, evangelical, Roman Catholic and Jewish seminary graduates.

In the interview, Wheeler conceded that the yearly attrition average of 1 percent among those in congregational ministry might be “a little higher” if one factored in respondents who completely dropped out of ministry and lacked the interest to respond to the survey. The return rate was low by most survey standards.

Questionnaires were mailed by either the Auburn center or participating seminaries to about 10,000 graduates who had earned a master’s or an equivalent degree. Only 2,323 usable replies were returned.

“Yes, 23 percent is not as high as we might have wanted, but this sample is a fair cross-section of the schools accredited by ATS,” said coauthor Miller. And if some recipients who are unhappy with ministry simply tossed away the surveys, she said, it’s likely that others welcomed the opportunity to sound off.

Aleshire said, “It’s hard to know what the real attrition rate is, but I don’t know of better sources of information—not even from the denominations themselves.” Aleshire speculated that some church officials might have believed the ministry drop-out rate is larger, “especially in the first five years, because denominational executives were dealing with these people a lot.”

Two sociologists who read the report advised against attributing too much weight to the survey data, but they noted that the Auburn-ATS findings echo those of previous studies.

“The 1 percent per year rate of leaving ministry is not too far from other estimates,” said Dean Hoge of Catholic University of America, coauthor of *Pastors in Transition* and president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. He also complimented the report’s authors for noting “a genuine problem”: seminaries are not preparing graduates well enough for practical and administrative tasks required

in congregations.

Sociologist Jackson Carroll, an emeritus professor at Duke Divinity School, also noted the survey's low response rate, but said that it was "overall pretty good news" that the Auburn-ATS study confirmed that clergy are highly satisfied and happy.

A study Carroll did for Duke's Pulpit & Pew project with Becky McMillan in 2001 found that 60 percent of clergy, mostly Protestants, said they never doubted their call to ministry and that 70 percent never thought of leaving. The study used telephone interviews of 883 pastors by the National Opinion Research Center and similar results from 2,500 written questionnaires.

In a separate study, NORC's Tom W. Smith released findings in April 2007 showing that clergy rank as the most satisfied group among professionals—87.3 percent said they were "very satisfied" in their work.

Smith noted that "in general, job satisfaction increases with the prestige or social standing of occupations." Other professionals who said they were "very satisfied" were firefighters, physical therapists, educational administrators and teachers, and painters, sculptors and authors.

The Auburn-ATS survey of newcomers to ministry reflected that contentment: nine out of 10 said they would "definitely" or "probably" attend theological school if they had it to do over again. To the question, "Would you encourage a young person to consider ministry or a religious profession?" very few said no. About one-third said they would recommend it "with reservations."