

Called but not ordained: The need for lay pastors

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

For the sake of discretion, call him Hank—just don't tell him that he's not a real pastor. He has been serving churches for 30 years and has never been busier than he is today. A calendar posted in the foyer of the church he serves bears him out: a 12-step group at sunrise, men's Bible study at breakfast, women's Bible study at 10:00, a clothing bank, a nursery, an after-school program for kids. Starting at 5:30, the church will host a big dinner open to the public, followed by events for all ages, including financial classes. Hank has to see a couple of folks in the hospital and iron out an issue with a trustee about the church bus.

He is not an elder, as the United Methodist Church refers to its ordained clergy, but a "local pastor" who was credentialed through a Course of Study program. The church has grown significantly during his pastorate: almost 300 people attend on Sunday.

"One of these days, they're going to take it away and give it to an elder," Hank says with pride.

Down at Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church, Sheryl, a lay pastor, has gladly accepted the challenges of a small African-American congregation. It's an anchor in the neighborhood, which once was home to middle-class auto workers, then a depressed area with fewer jobs, and is now a landing place for immigrants. When a former pastor suffered a stroke, the congregation encouraged her to pursue her lifelong love of church. "I couldn't pick my family up and go to seminary. But I felt called to serve," she says.

She helps maintain the building, puts out the bulletin, preaches, teaches, visits the sick—all while juggling her two-year training program.

Is she a layperson or a clergyperson? The question meets with a stunned look and then a stoical laugh.

"They call me Pastor Sheryl," she says.

The term *lay pastor* means something different to each denomination. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, it means someone who steps in to fill roles that properly belong to clergy. The boundaries are clear: authorized laypersons may serve the Eucharist, for example, but its elements must be consecrated by a priest.

In Protestant churches, the distinction between laity and clergy can be more fluid. The Episcopal Church licenses volunteers for six lay ministries which closely resemble ordained ministries. According to Bishop Dean Wolfe of Kansas, “We couldn’t do our work without them.”

There is another practice, which has not been without its critics, even though it dates back to the American frontier. The United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) license nonordained persons for vocational church ministry, including all priestly functions. Because thousands of small churches cannot afford seminary-trained clergy, these nonordained pastors are absolutely vital.

In 2008, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) deployed 884 commissioned lay pastors (CLPs), a number that has “increased exponentially,” says Marcia Clark Myers, director of the PCUSA Office for Vocation.

More than a third of United Methodist churches are now served by local pastors. The need for them has grown so much that the 2004 General Conference created still another category—certified lay ministers—to provide pastoral support; unlike local pastors, they do not have sacramental authority and are not considered clergy.

The UCC has declared that “licensed pastoral ministries have the same theological foundations as ordained ministries, and are identical in purpose,” a statement that many Christians would find truly extraordinary. But it’s born of necessity: over 60 percent of UCC churches have fewer than 200 members, and many cannot afford full-time, seminary-trained clergy. Acknowledging the obstacles that licensed pastors have met in the past, the UCC now hopes “to develop appropriate new educational opportunities through which licensure itself may become a path toward ordination.”

Seven years ago, in a lengthy article in this magazine, Lawton Posey proclaimed, “Lay pastors are here to stay.” Indeed, it seems the need for lay pastors has only grown since then. But that has not ended the prejudice they encounter—the implication that they are not real pastors.

One CLP, who prefers to remain anonymous, says she was received enthusiastically by parishioners but less cordially by ordained colleagues. The most well-meaning suggested that she was too good not to have an M.Div. Her presbytery required yearly examinations to make sure that, among other things, she and other CLPs have a sound theology.

“I understand this stuff pretty well,” she says. “It’s not something I last took in seminary 20 years ago. But they say some of us need a review.” It made her feel like a second-class citizen, she said. However, she admits that some lay pastors do live down to the stereotype and that some may have less than desirable investment in church doctrine.

The United Methodist Church, which makes the most extensive use of licensed ministers, experiences other tensions as a consequence of its appointive system. Ordained clergy have been guaranteed appointments, so in recent years, as many of them have postponed retirement, there have been fewer spots left for local pastors. One local pastor recalls, “Our congregation was doing great, but then the bishop moved me to another church 90 miles away. My wife couldn’t leave her job. What can you do? If you don’t take an appointment, that’s it.”

Another United Methodist pastor, having come through the Course of Study ranks and having painstakingly made his way toward the first step of ordination, was appointed senior pastor of a large church. “You’ve earned it,” the district superintendent told him. But there was a catch: the bishop also appointed as associate pastor a recent seminary graduate who was paid more—a lot more.

In a thorough survey of CLPs, the PCUSA has found that an overwhelming majority are serving part-time, as the sole pastors of one congregation or more. They receive hardly any benefits; only 8 percent get health insurance, and still fewer receive a pension. They are usually paid much less than ordained clergy. Most are serving in places “where ministers of Word and Sacrament are not willing to serve.”

Some denominations have begun to address these inequities. United Methodist local pastors are now considered clergy by constitutional law, whereas a few years ago they were neither fish nor fowl: unlike lay members and ordained clergy, they had no vote on some matters before the annual conference. “It was crazy. I had less of a voice than I did before my Course of Study,” said one local pastor. It is still true—and will be so until further constitutional changes are ratified—that local pastors may not

vote for delegates to the General Conference or sit on Boards of Ordained Ministry. Depending on who oversees the pastor, he or she may not be permitted to serve communion at retreats beyond the strict confines of a church family.

Like ordained clergy, lay ministers receive mixed reviews, as evidenced by a pair of essays in a Lutheran seminary magazine. Diane Melbye, a layperson whose essay was titled “Lay Preaching: A Blessed Necessity,” argued that God can speak powerfully through persons who have not received seminary training. “We are called as the body of Christ to journey together *faithfully*, not *flawlessly*,” she said. On the opposite page, Craig Boehlke called lay preachers “A Mixed Bag.” He noted that the ELCA did not at that time have a candidacy process for them, and that some had been less than rousing successes and had even led churches out of the denomination.

It is interesting that these essays appeared in a seminary magazine. Seminaries manage to hold out the value of a Master of Divinity degree while also operating Course of Study schools during the summer. What might at first seem like a mixed message turns out to be brilliant strategy: it pleases denominational officials, who can trust that attendees will be well trained, and it introduces the seminary to a wider range of prospective students. In some ways, this is not unlike the gains that colleges found years ago by appealing to nontraditional students.

But an M.Div. remains the route most trusted by church members and officials. As lay ministers prove their worth individually, they may be strongly encouraged to pursue the degree. At its General Synod in 2005, the UCC expressed a preference for moving licensed ministers through seminary and toward ordination wherever gifts were in evidence. The message was not lost on licensed ministers. Then in 2009, bowing to the needs of its churches, the General Synod adopted a much more inclusive resolution which allows regional bodies to ordain candidates with or without a college degree and an M. Div.

Increasingly one hears calls for mainline denominations to focus on “quality” rather than ubiquity—to close smaller, struggling churches, which typically are served by nonordained clergy. As a business strategy this may sound sensible, if one believes that a denomination is a brand that should be consistent everywhere and in every respect. If, on the other hand, one believes that churches are local expressions of faith and that they thrive when pastoral leadership matches local needs, those smaller churches begin to look like success stories.

According to Bishop Wolfe, such successes are numerous. His diocese has needed and has welcomed lay ministers. “We are always challenged to find highly faithful, capable people called to ordained ministry,” he said, “and churches are challenged to pay full-time salaries for priests who come out of school with \$30,000 to \$40,000 of debt.” With no Episcopal seminary nearby, he has worked to develop a School for Ministry whose regimen is fairly rigorous: lay ministers attend one weekend a month for three years.

“The sacramental focus of our life and understanding will always seek to place a priest,” says Bishop Wolfe. “But I can see the time when that priest may be bi-vocational, nonstipended and trained locally.” He acknowledges that this sounds much like today’s lay minister. “Our theology is leading us in those directions, and our resources are pushing us in those directions.” This movement cuts across all denominations, he says, and “as with all revolutions, there’s a certain amount of chaos.”

Indeed, one can discern a counterrevolution. Thomas Edward Frank, professor at the Candler School of Theology, laments that the distinctiveness of ordination is being lost. He asks if United Methodism still constitutes a church—that is, by his definition, an institution that values a priestly role—or whether it has again become a lay movement.

“This question has nothing to do with the abilities, integrity or faithfulness of local pastors, nor the witness and mission of the local churches they serve. Many nonordained pastors do a terrific job and are much loved by their people. But our practices make no sense ecclesologically. What do we think we are doing? Increasingly we are saying that ordination does not matter.”

John Wright, a UMC pastor in Texas, concurs: “Before long, the concept of an ‘ordained member of the annual conference in full connection’ will be left with no real coherent meaning at all.”

These are, it must be said, old objections. They go back at least to the early 19th century, when the Presbyterian Church insisted that its clergy must be formally educated and expelled the Cumberland churches that did not meet its standard. (Ironically, today’s Cumberland Presbyterian clergy are seminary-educated, while the PCUSA commissions CLPs.)

Similarly, the early Methodist movement was characterized by preachers qualified by their willingness to take up the gospel. They declared, as John Wesley had, “The world is my parish.” Some licensed ministers today feel more constrained. Gregory Lee, a United Methodist local pastor in Georgia, asks, “Why is what I preach and teach and the way I minister acceptable in my appointed charge and nowhere else? In other words, why can’t the world be my parish, too?” Others would argue that licensed ministers enjoy more latitude than ever before.

Perhaps the passions in this debate are no mystery. The fact of lay ministers makes us rethink the distinction between clergy and laity. How does one become a pastor? Is it by the laying on of hands? Or by carrying out certain work? Protestant theologies, in particular, struggle to answer such questions. Many churches hold in tension both a “functional” view of ordination (based on an actual call) and a “sacramental” view (a lifetime vocation). The functions of licensed ministers and ordained ministers can be identical, so it’s curious that Protestant churches distinguish between them when in their own traditions ordination is not officially a sacrament.

On the other hand, a purely functional approach would remove ordination from retired clergy and those serving beyond the local church—not a happy prospect, either.

Commented Kenneth L. Carder, professor of the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity and a retired UMC bishop: “A student in my Intro to Ordained Ministry class was a licensed minister. And he asked me, ‘What theological rationale can you provide for me to administer the sacraments?’ None, I said. A practical, missional rationale perhaps, but not a theological one.” Carder acknowledged that the Protestant dilemma began centuries ago when the apostolic line of succession was broken. “There is a very definite trend toward use of nonordained persons,” he said. “Our need is trumping our ecclesiology.”

“Polity is always contextual,” says Dwight Zscheile of Luther Seminary. “We had this idea, born out of corporate America, that you could standardize the training of clergy and employ them like interchangeable parts—give them a standard middle-class salary and benefits package and move them around as needed. But many churches can’t support that anymore.”

Clergy are at once “set apart” and “representative.” Their role, distinct from that of the laity, represents the church’s distinctive function in a secular society. An elision of laity and clergy portends an elision of church and society—a truly terrifying prospect for some. But it may not be so terrible if the church develops homegrown leaders with a full commitment to unglamorous churches that just ask to be loved.

Almost every denomination believes that its clergy are called to equip God’s people for ministry. Today, of necessity that has come to mean a sharing of pastoral duties. At Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church, Sheryl does not worry overmuch about her own standing in this enterprise. For her, it is enough to live out the Great Commission—to go and make disciples. “It’s kind of busy here,” she says. “We’ve got a bunch of kids who just finished three days of retreat, and they’re putting on a youth service. People here aren’t hung up on who’s supposed to be doing what. It’s sure not about me.”