

Ready to lead? The problems with lay pastors: The problems with lay pastors

by [Barbara G. Wheeler](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

My home congregation is in some ways emblematic of the dilemmas facing mainline Protestants. Bethel Peniel Presbyterian Church is located in a small town in upstate New York where Presbyterians were dominant in the 18th century and numerous in the 19th. A century ago, one of its predecessor churches had more than 300 members—as many as the building could hold. But in 2009, despite the merger of two Presbyterian churches that gave the congregation its double name, Bethel Peniel had fewer than 100 members on the rolls, and about one-quarter of those were too infirm to participate actively.

Nevertheless, the congregation had a significant ministry. The town is at the northern end of its county. The county offices, including the welfare office, are 20 miles to the south. There is no public transportation. All the day-to-day social services, including supplemental food and clothing programs and transportation for the elderly and disabled, are provided by the mainline churches working together. Bethel Peniel members were active in those ministries.

The church supported the area chorus, the only local volunteer cultural activity. The church's pastor taught courses that attracted participants from several churches, was active in ecumenical activities and was a respected figure in the town.

Then the regional denominational office, which employed this pastor as part-time camp director and paid the larger part of his salary, made changes to the camping program, leading the pastor to resign from the camp position. The congregation, many of whose members are retired, could not raise the funds to increase his salary to that of a full-time pastor. It looked as if he would soon leave. The chances of finding professional leadership for a church like ours, unable to afford a full-time minister, set in a location that happened not to have any part-time or retired clergy

within reach, were slim. Church members were alarmed and distressed.

We were not alone. In a region that was losing population, and businesses and leadership as well, our pastor's impending departure was a loss for the whole area.

There are tens of thousands of mainline Protestant congregations like Bethel Peniel: congregations that have a significant ministry but are unable to pay the minimum salaries that denominations mandate for a full-time professional leader. The congregations can be found in cities, towns and rural areas. Studies conducted in the middle of this decade by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership indicate that more than half of all mainline Protestant congregations have 100 or fewer members.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), with which Bethel Peniel is affiliated, mirrors this pattern. In 2006, 48 percent of its churches had membership under 100, and 4,600 of its 11,000 congregations—more than 40 percent—did not have regularly installed, full-salaried pastoral leadership. Almost half of those had no pastoral leadership at all, even on a temporary or part-time basis.

What do denominations offer to meet the leadership needs of Bethel Peniel and churches like it? If I and my fellow congregants had taken our problem to the presbytery, we probably would have been offered the services of a commissioned lay pastor (CLP), a church member trained by the presbytery to serve on a very part-time basis in churches that cannot afford a minister of Word and Sacrament (the Presbyterian term for a seminary-trained person ordained to professional church service).

Some mainline denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, have long had "lay pastors" serving congregations. Others, such as the Reformed Church in America and the PCUSA, have developed the role within the last two decades. The Presbyterians voted in 1997 to create the CLP position, upgrading the existing category of "commissioned lay preacher" to permit elders trained and approved by the presbytery to carry out all the functions of clergy for the length of their commission in a particular ministry. It was a major shift for Presbyterians, who for centuries have required postbaccalaureate education for ministers. Until the 1997 vote, the PCUSA permitted only those who held the Master of Divinity degree from an accredited institution and had passed national exams to serve congregations on a regular basis.

The Presbyterians' stringent educational requirements had an ecclesiological basis. The Reformed understanding of ministry, as former Princeton Seminary president Thomas Gillespie once said, is "almost rabbinic." Its ministers used to be called teaching elders, and the term seems to be coming back into fashion. Learning is important because the two functions that actually constitute the church in a Reformed understanding are the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments. The best insurance that the gospel will be rightly preached and the sacraments properly administered is to require that the person who performs these acts be well educated and personally formed by an intensive program of interlocking study and practice.

Not surprisingly, the proposal to permit persons without graduate-level theological education to function as pastors provoked a strenuous debate among Presbyterians. The argument that won the day was one that appealed to a denomination whose demographic base is shrinking and that hopes to grow by incorporating new groups: new immigrant churches needed pastors, and few if any seminary graduates are available who speak their languages.

A program to train indigenous leaders would also benefit small churches in very remote locations (Alaska and Appalachia were mentioned) that had little hope of attracting ordained ministers. Use of CLPs would be limited, the advocates insisted, but they would meet compelling needs for local service and for growth.

Those who first imagined the role of commissioned lay pastor argued further that training needs would vary a great deal from culture to culture and place to place. This argument also prevailed, and therefore the preparation requirements added to the Presbyterian *Book of Order* are spare: "The elder shall be instructed in Bible, Reformed Theology and Sacraments, Presbyterian Polity, preaching, leading worship, pastoral care, and teaching." It was widely anticipated that every presbytery would design and run its own program and that programs would vary greatly from place to place.

Over the past 15 years, the development of the CLPs has taken a very different course from the one its proponents forecast. Use of CLPs is not limited to a few special settings but is widespread. Three-quarters of the church's 173 presbyteries train and use CLPs for purposes quite different from those for which the role was created. Most are solo pastors of small churches. Some are in the geographically isolated settings that the program was originally devised to serve, but most are in

cities and towns where churches have, for one reason or another, shrunk.

CLPs are also found in a wide range of roles not mentioned in the early debates. Some are functioning as chaplains, especially in settings like nursing homes and prisons that cannot afford presbytery-minimum salaries for seminary-trained ministers. Ten percent of presbyteries report that CLPs have been commissioned as associate pastors in large churches that choose not to pay the minimum salary that an ordained and installed minister would require. The smallest numbers of CLPs, it turns out, are found in the settings whose needs were foremost in the early debates—immigrant fellowships and racial/ethnic congregations.

Patterns of preparing lay pastors are different too. At first, as was predicted by those who wanted to give presbyteries freedom to shape their own training programs, most presbyteries did design and conduct their own programs, and there was variety in both format and contents. Very soon, however, presbyteries discovered that mounting a full-scale educational program was burdensome. Now most rely on a small number of suppliers of instruction—colleges, seminaries, consortia of regional judicatories and, most notably, online programs offered by the University of Dubuque and other providers.

As a result, the early variety that was thought to be essential if the programs were to meet local needs has largely disappeared. Most programs now look remarkably alike. Few have educational prerequisites, such as a college degree. Almost all require eight courses or instructional units, each one focused on one of the seven topics named in the *Book of Order*, with “Bible” divided into two units, one for Old Testament and one for New. There is little variety and there are very few electives. Most programs require some sort of mentoring or supervision, but most do not offer supervised practice or field education. Half of the programs impose psychological screening before a commission is granted; half do not.

What does such training amount to? The Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education collected program descriptions from two dozen training programs and interviewed many of the program directors. It found that almost all the programs conduct instruction at an introductory college level and require the same number of contact hours: 120–135 for the full program of courses. At the college level, a full three-hour semester course requires 40–45 hours of classroom instruction. Most CLP programs, by that standard, require the equivalent of three college courses, or part of one semester’s load of four or five courses.

Dubuque, the most-used program provider, confirms this calculation on its Web site. It offers a core of eight courses that, it says, are each “equivalent to the work required in a one-credit -hour college course.” Eight credit-hours equal almost three three-hour courses.

In addition to course attendance, in the classroom or on-line, participants are expected to read several hundred pages per course and write at least one paper, though we were told that there is less reading and writing than credit-bearing courses would require. In a few programs, the academic instruction is consequential—those who can’t handle the work are screened out—but this is not generally the case. More often, all those who choose to complete the requirements receive passing grades.

One provider of courses for several presbyteries said that the program did not have enough leverage with client presbyteries to convince them that some students enrolled should be released from the program because they could not do the work required.

These findings raise major questions not only about the adequacy of training for lay pastoral ministry, but about the response of mainline denominations to their circumstances.

The most obvious question is whether congregations are well served by pastoral leaders whose theological preparation is the equivalent of less than a college semester of introductory study. This amount of exposure to theological ideas and formative experiences seems inadequate at several levels. Preaching and leading worship weekly, teaching children and adults, responding to a wide range of human needs and problems, and overseeing the organizational structures of a congregation—most mainline Protestant ministers would say that they use a myriad of resources to carry out these functions, that they learned at least to locate these resources over three years of graduate education and supervised practice in field settings, and that even so they don’t know enough. In eight very short courses, possibly taken online, lay pastors are introduced to only a sliver of the information and perspectives that ministry requires.

Those eight introductory courses cannot offer much depth, either. A mark of all mainline traditions, not just the heady Presbyterians, is openness to theological engagement with the wider intellectual world. Is it really possible, in 140 hours of

instruction and not-too-intensive preparatory study, to learn enough about classical and contemporary Christian theology, scripture and its interpretation, church traditions, liturgical structures, principles of religious ethics—the list goes on—to bring these bodies of knowledge into meaningful encounter with the kinds of knowledge that shape the questions of those who come to church?

We heard in our interviews of program directors that some lay pastors are seasoned social leaders, professionals or academics, and some are lifelong students of scripture or readers of theological texts. Arguably, some of them are better prepared than seminary graduates to preach, lead worship, organize and care for congregants.

But our experience in Granville, the town in which Bethel Peniel is located, suggests that such lay pastors are the exception. The lay pastors (none of them at the moment Presbyterian) who serve congregations in the area are local residents who have limited educational background and training. Most bring natural warmth to the tasks of ministry and are well liked. They are diligent: they show up when and where they are needed. But their sermons are typically a mixture of folksy, informal comments and tightly constructed sections that may have originated on the Internet. These lay pastors do not have the self-confidence to do much teaching. Their congregations tend to be insular and to dwindle in size. (There is at least one significant exception to the last statement: a congregation served by a lay pastor for the past decade recently donated the church's historic manse and the energy of some of its members to help create a hospice in the town.)

The most striking difference between the ordained ministers in Granville and the lay pastors is the amount of public leadership they offer. Granville faces major social challenges—depopulation, unemployment, drugs, and a belligerent undercurrent that surfaces during strikes and other disruptions. The lay pastors do not speak out, and they sometimes echo in their preaching and conversations the hard-edged views that fuel social tensions in the town. The Catholic priest and the seminary-trained mainline Protestant ministers, by sharp contrast, operate with a different, more gentle and generous tone. Their influence ripples through their congregations. Their influence on the community is felt in joint pastoral letters to the newspaper that plead for tolerance and peace and in hundreds of hours of patient behind-the-scenes efforts in concert with school and town leaders.

The social environment of Granville is healthier and more civil because of the presence of the mainline churches. Mainline religion, often accused of irrelevance these days, may have diminished influence at the centers of power. Out on the margins, however, in places like Granville, it makes a decisive difference, and the vision, depth of understanding and personal maturity that well-educated pastors bring to their work are a pivotal part of the mainline contribution.

What strategy, then, is implicit in the widespread use of lightly trained lay pastors? The purpose of the lay pastorate seems to be to keep open the doors of as many churches as possible with the denomination's name on them, no matter their capacity or future prospects. This approach might be called *laissez-faire* congregationalism: every congregation is left to find its own level. If its location and constituency enable it to afford what the denomination deems first-class ministry, it can have it. If not, if the denomination's requirements, such as graduate training for pastors and pay above a stated minimum, cannot be met, then the requirements are waived or changed.

This response is part of a trend. As the mainline denominations have devolved over the past 50 years—as they have lost members, money and social power—they have generally gone with the flow. They have lowered institutional standards and sliced financial assets into ever smaller splinters so that, despite reduced resources, as many denominational offices, congregations, programs, agencies and seminaries as want to can remain in existence—and they almost always want to.

The judicatory to which Bethel Peniel belongs produced a striking example of the denomination's tendency to permit, or even encourage, congregations to give up everything but mere existence. It published an elaborate guide for churches that no longer want the responsibilities of congregational status. They can become low-level "fellowships" that don't pay dues, manage the property they occupy, participate in church governance or have to employ approved ministers or preachers at approved rates. (They also surrender control of their assets to the presbytery, a fact that is muted in the guide.) The manual even includes liturgies for the decommissioning of a congregation. If Bethel Peniel had been just a little smaller, we might have been offered this option, which amounts to assisted suicide, when our pastor departed. Notably, no other presbytery-produced manuals are available to prompt dwindling churches to explore other possibilities.

Occasionally the widespread denominational pattern of accommodation to decline is punctuated by a marketing campaign with cheerleading slogans (“Catch the spirit!”; “Different people, different beliefs, one faith!”) intended to attract new members. There is little evidence, though, that denominations have the will to reshape their institutions so that they will not only survive in changed circumstances but also accomplish mainline Protestantism’s larger purposes—purposes that are, if Granville, New York, is any measure, still vitally important.

Some of my fellow Granvillians recognized in time that the patterns of church leadership urged on them by their denominations were not in the long-term interest of either the churches or the town. The United Methodists, who were increasingly unhappy with the amount and quality of attention they were getting from ministers and lay readers appointed to serve several churches over a wide area, took the initiative. When they heard that the Presbyterian pastor would probably leave to find full-time employment, they approached him and their denominational office, asking that he be appointed as their pastor too. Methodist officials were responsive. The members of Bethel Peniel Presbyterian welcomed the arrangement with relief and joy.

Over the next months, the pastor and leaders in both churches began to knit the two congregations together. Currently we worship jointly, participate in each other’s programs, have crafted a common mission statement, and are about to convene work groups to plan new programs and to take on the trickiest challenges of joint operation: finances and buildings. No decision has been made about merger, but the congregations seem delighted to have each other’s company, and all the signs point toward a permanent federation.

The religious prospects of Granville are brighter as a result. Absent this bold move, it is likely that in a few years Granville would have no full-time professional religious leader. All the town’s other Protestant churches already have part-time ordained or lay pastors. Right now there is a talented Catholic priest who lives in Granville and spends the larger part of his time there, but in a diocese starved for clergy, there may not be a resident priest in the future. The advantages of our conjoined congregation are so obvious—a stable mainline Protestant church where there hasn’t been any for some time, the opportunity to bring skilled leadership to an area where it is in short supply—that one wonders why denominations are covering the congregational landscape with lay pastors and other palliative measures rather than promoting alternatives more likely to create a durable presence.

One feature of the Granville case is important: the imaginative new arrangement came about as a result of local initiative. Conjunctions of churches forced by denominational authorities would not succeed. Roman Catholic authorities can close or merge churches with some success because Catholic identity is still more often ascribed by birth rather than achieved by choice, so many Catholics will attend the new or merged church prescribed for them even if they are deeply disgruntled. Protestant identity and church attendance is almost entirely “achieved”—very few North Americans whose heritage is Protestant feel obligated to belong to and attend a particular church or to go to church at all. Even if denominations could see the wisdom of mergers in settings where none of them has viable churches or ecumenical agreements to plan jointly how to cover a territory, they could not impose them.

Denominations could, however, offer encouragement and incentives for creating an effective mainline presence in places where existing churches are growing weaker or where no mainline option now exists. They could urge their congregations to consider alliances with congregations of other mainline denominations, especially those with which they have historic ties or current covenants. They might advise regional denominational officials to meet with their counterparts to survey their territories together, looking for ways that fewer, stronger congregations might be forged from numerous shaky ones where there is local willingness to consider such moves. Moreover, national denominational offices could create bureaus, along the lines of the boards of homeland missions of an earlier day, to work with other denominations toward the goal of having some sturdy mainline congregation everywhere that such ministry is needed. These offices could produce resources that portray life, growth and mission, possibly in federation with other congregations that are now struggling, as a more attractive option than winding down into a barely functioning “fellowship.” They could train clergy to work effectively in such situations. And they could make grants from denominational funds to encourage promising local efforts. They might even restart an American Protestant tradition—prosperous churches starting or aiding “mission chapels”—by recruiting larger churches to help smaller ones survive in tough settings. In short, instead of accepting devolution as their new state, they might devise imaginative strategies that work against it.

Do lay ministers have any part to play in the approach suggested here—creating stable institutions in places where the mission and ministry of mainline

Protestantism is sorely needed? They do. The original purpose for which the commissioned lay pastorate was devised—providing leaders for groups of new immigrants—is still pressing. They can also serve very widely in the church. Para professionals play increasingly important parts in other sectors, and they can in this one too. Paraprofessional ministers can help mainline denominations whose financial resources are now at a low ebb do more with less. They can work in tandem with clergy, filling on a part-time basis a variety of roles in administrative, social service and pastoral care ministries that paid professional staff would occupy in a sizable congregation.

In Granville, for instance, where needs are greater than the financial resources available to meet them, several church members donate more time and expertise than the usual church volunteer. A retired math teacher functions as an executive minister would in a larger church; several professional and amateur musicians make up the worship “team.” Commissioning them to those roles would enhance their status as leaders, and theological education and formation would enable them to do even more, enriching the congregation’s ministry and extending its mission.

Lay ministers in the variety of positions they might occupy must, however, be much better educated than many now are for their assignments. Ungraded completion of a smattering of introductory college courses is insufficient grounding for ministry in traditions that understand inquiry as central to Christian life. Lay ministers must be examined carefully before they are deployed, with attention to character formation as well as knowledge, insightfulness and judgment. Especially today, with confidence in the integrity of ministry severely undermined, training programs must be long and intense enough for students’ personality strengths and weaknesses to become evident. As in other fields, paraprofessional ministers must work under the close and ongoing supervision of experienced professionals, a condition that rarely pertains when lay pastors are assigned to be the sole ministerial leader of a remote congregation.

Even with these reforms, the lay pastorate is not the first or best response to the challenges faced by mainline Protestant denominations. The future of these denominations lies in building sturdy institutions, a project that requires the urgent attention of all parts and sectors of the church. Congregational initiative is key. The measures taken by the Granville Methodists and Presbyterians to secure their future could work in many other places. By themselves, though, they are not enough to reverse mainline Protestant fortunes. Seminary-trained ministers will have to be

better equipped to build stronger institutions. That means that education and formation for ministry must change: more attention must be given to teaching students to understand local contexts and helping them to develop a willingness, even eagerness, to minister where they are needed, regardless of amenities.

Reinvigorating the old-line segments of mainline denominations is only part of the task. Denominations will also have to pursue much more vigorously the strategic goal for which the Presbyterian lay pastorate was originally created: making it possible for immigrant congregations that are already part of the denominational family to align themselves with the mainline version of the denomination in the U.S. This will require an openness and flexibility that do not come naturally to regulation-minded organizations like American mainline denominations.

The Presbyterian Church and its main line cousins have the means to take all these steps. The question is whether they have the motive. In order to change their longstanding operating patterns, their leaders and members need to rediscover their mission. The Granville Methodists and Presbyterians were impelled to act in unprecedented ways when they realized that their presence matters and that, if they faded away, the loss not only to their members but also to the whole area would be great. For mainline Protestants who have come to regard their congregations as one of the personal comforts of a middle-class life, this amounts to a conversion. That is precisely what mainline denominations most need: a movement-wide change of heart, an awakening to the certainty that God wants us, here and now, to accomplish what other groups can't or won't.