

Young, male and married: What search committees want

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

Churches seeking a new pastor tend to want a man under 40, preferably married to a nonworking woman who volunteers on church committees. It's a caricature, but only slightly so, says sociologist Adair Lummis, who is describing not congregations from the 1950s, but those today. This preference exists "even in those denominations which have ordained women to full ministerial status for 50 years or more," according to her little-publicized nationwide study.

The preference for a male may be unspoken or obliquely voiced by search committees, especially in liberal Protestant denominations where "it is totally unacceptable to refuse" pastor candidates because of gender, race or ethnicity, and it is "frowned upon" to make age or marital status an issue, said the study, published last year as part of the Pulpit & Pew project at Duke Divinity School.

But Lummis, who works at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, said interviews with regional church officials in seven denominations showed they "can guess quite well the search committee preferences." As put by two unnamed officials she quoted:

They tell me they want "someone" in the pastor's family [meaning a wife] "who can help with small groups or children's ministries." I look at them and say, "Do you know that a third of our UMC pastors are single now, and 50 percent of the people in the seminary are female?"

If I send out a profile of a pastor who is mediocre along with a picture of him with his family, and he is 35 years old, has a cute wife and two beautiful children, I guarantee he will be interviewed if not called.

Though lay members of search committees may feel that to attract young couples to church they at least need an under-50 clergyperson with church experience, Lummis said the chances are relatively slim with so many older students in theological

schools. “Our average seminary graduate is in his or her 40s, and our average UCC pastor is 57,” said one regional church official. “Everybody is looking for a 32-year-old with 15 years’ experience—we have one [candidate who is both young and experienced].”

More important than gender or age is the pastor’s sexual orientation, Lummis wrote. Even in the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ, where gay and lesbian pastors are sometimes permitted, “search committees may not be so accepting,” she said. Lay leaders that Lummis interviewed in the fall of 2001 were forthcoming about why not, a number of them saying that the congregation, to begin with, was not “open and affirming” in relation to gays.

By contrast, another congregation that was officially open and affirming said it wanted a pastor who agreed with that stance whether or not he or she was gay. “We had a lesbian-partnered woman as interim, and now we have a [heterosexual] black woman pastor who is a wonderful minister to everyone here,” the lay leader said.

Lummis said that regional leaders across denominations “also tend to be exasperated with those search committees and congregations who say they want a pastor who will ‘grow their church,’ but then do not want to undertake the necessary changes for this to happen.” One official put it this way: “A lot of parishes say, ‘We want younger people’—except that younger people bring new ideas and that is what they do not want. They want to incorporate younger people so that they can teach them the ways of the old school.”

That’s not all. When trying to fill a pulpit vacancy, churches capable of paying a full-time salary have expectations of finding a fine preacher and spiritual leader, an innovator with good “people skills” who can build consensus, and a person who will be devoted to ministry pretty much around the clock.

The stereotype of a pastor on call 24-7 “is seriously questioned today,” Lummis wrote in her report, *What Do Lay People Want in Pastors?* “Clergy psychologists and others who have to deal with clergy health problems and ‘burnout’ now strongly caution pastors that to enhance their overall physical, mental and spiritual well-being and maintain effectiveness as pastoral leaders, they must learn to maintain boundaries, particularly between church work and private time.”

Executives at regional denominational offices, whose authority varies according to denomination, try to recruit pastors with the ability and “self-assurance” to

negotiate boundaries for personal and pastoral time. One official advised: “If they are wishy-washy, they are going to get walked all over in a lot of congregations. If they are strident people, the congregations are not going to appreciate that either.”

Lummis found plenty of search committees that encountered candidates lacking that self-confidence (“Several members on our committee voted against him because he would not make eye contact with us when he talked”). Some showed inordinate interest in other activities. One asked “whether he could find a small farm so he could bring his [exotic animals] with him.” Another was rejected as “a person who wanted to play more than work—a person who was also into sailing.” Lummis indicated that some lay leaders knew that a pastor with good time-management skills could establish agreed-upon office hours or other policies that would strike a reasonable balance.

Small churches, alas, cannot be so choosy. Fewer and fewer congregations are able to pay a salary sufficient to support a pastor and his or her family, Lummis said. Graduates with a M.Div. degree have a pile of debt to pay off, a factor that virtually forces them to cross small churches off the list. Moreover, any pastorate is difficult in rural areas since a part-time job for pastor or spouse may be hard to come by.

One regional church official said bluntly: “The small churches that cannot afford to pay even a beginning full-time pastoral salary in many cases now are happy to get anyone with blood pressure of ten over five! They are not very particular. They fall in love with some preacher who ‘loves the Lord,’ and that is the end of that.”

As for ideas to help small congregations, Lummis discussed a) developing financial supports and incentives from denominational sources, b) using retired clergy, c) employing clergy from other denominations, d) ordaining people to less-than-full clergy status and e) using lay pastoral leaders or cluster teams of clergy and lay leaders.

Budget problems faced by small churches, and even larger ones, could be alleviated if a new passion for tithing were to catch hold in church life, said Anthony Pappas, an American Baptist area minister in southeastern Massachusetts who commented in the study on Lummis’s findings. Saying that the average family in mainline congregations gives about 2.5 percent instead of 10 percent, Pappas added, “How many small churches could be players in the pastoral ‘market’ if spiritual passion and faithfulness governed their priorities?”

Pappas also declared that too many seminary students are being equipped to be “chaplains” for local churches rather than being prepared as “entrepreneurs.” That conclusion, he wrote, came from seven years trying to place “some of the nicest, sweetest, caring-est persons God ever created into congregations that desperately needed total transformation.”

More advice came from William Chris Hobgood, top executive of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), in his commentary printed in the Lummis report. When he wrote his analysis, Hobgood was regional minister for the Disciples in Washington, D.C., and a longtime consultant to the Alban Institute. Hobgood called for some bold changes “in this important postmainline time.” He said that seminaries should prepare would-be pastors for a “tent-making” option.

“We are today becoming more like the frontier church, where most pastors had second jobs,” Hobgood said, and alternatives to traditional seminary degrees need to be further developed, and “they need to be accorded real credibility and dignity.”

First among Hobgood’s recommendations, however, is to create “a massive education program” especially for lay leaders, to convince them that good pastors are available in the female gender and in all colors. “Sticking with that bias for a 35-year-old man, married, etc.—unless challenged directly—will leave many congregations without pastors in a few years,” he said.