

# Fear of falling: Male clergy in economic crisis

by [Matthew J. Price](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

Although ministers like to think of themselves as members of the professional middle class, they are hanging on to that status by their fingernails. Male clergy especially are pursuing their vocations despite a strong “fear of falling,” to use Barbara Ehrenreich’s phrase. They worry that they won’t be able to sustain a middle-class lifestyle or meet middle-class expectations for their children’s education or their own retirement years.

In collecting data on clergy lives, the Duke Divinity School “Pulpit and Pew” project heard repeated accounts of the clergyman’s quiet but increasingly tense struggle to keep his family within the boundaries of the professional middle class. Although the data also substantiated the particular problems that female clergy face, the magnitude of troubles faced by *male* clergy came as a surprise.

Today a clergyman cannot assume that he’ll realize the gradual income growth that most Americans with graduate degrees take for granted. How, he wonders, will he pay off educational debts, finance his child’s college education, save for retirement and buy a home at the end of a ministerial career? Compounding his predicament is guilt. Why must he be preoccupied with career moves and money when he has responded not to a career, but to a call?

Until recently, people have assumed that clergy are members of the professional middle class and can accumulate the same assets as other professionals—including some property—and pass them on to children. From the progressive era to the 1960s, “pastor” was associated with a sense of personal calling and public service, making it an agreeable social position. Clergy lived a comfortable although not extravagant lifestyle, and could offer their children the opportunities enjoyed by children of professionals in law, medicine and education. Many institutions helped guarantee this class position. Duke University, for example, gave free tuition to any North Carolina United Methodist minister’s child who obtained admission. Local

businesses offered discounts on merchandise and services.

But beginning in the late 1960s, clergy were criticized for their preoccupation with professional identity. At the same time, the public's general trust in the professions began to decrease. The criticism did not, surprisingly, change the clergy's assumptions about their position in the class structure. Most seminary graduates have assumed that they will be able to support a family, accumulate assets and be able to retire without a drastic drop in living standards. As a result, in the past 30 years many clergy have been living within the professional middle class while keeping their distance from the professional label.

Now, however, the clergy's place within the professional middle class is becoming increasingly tenuous. Mean clergy income has remained relatively flat over the past 20 years, while others with graduate degrees, especially those in medicine and law, have seen their salaries rise. While the average mean salary for a married clergyman with a graduate-level degree was 11 percent higher in the 1990s than in the 1980s, salary levels rose by 25 percent for all married males with graduate-level degrees. For married male doctors and lawyers income rose 37 percent and 30 percent respectively.

Ministers' difficulty in retaining a place in the professional middle class comes into sharp relief when they face financing college education, retirement and even elder care for their parents. In the 1990s, the average mean household income of married male clergy between 45 and 55 with a graduate degree was \$54,044. Doctors were earning \$188,630, and lawyers \$155,801. Clergy household earnings also lagged well behind those of teachers (\$90,260). In the past decade, those with graduate-level degrees earned an average mean household income of \$105,539—almost double that of male married clergy. The ratio of the earnings of all those with graduate degrees to clergy earnings is gradually increasing; the clergy are slipping further behind.

While they do not receive the benefits of corporate employment, clergy are subject to the maladies of corporate-style work hours, high levels of job stress and low job security. Clergy families struggle with the tensions. In one survey, over 50 percent of the male pastors spent ten or fewer hours per week with their families. Although male clergy may stoically view this fact as simply part of the job, their spouses are often unhappy as a result. They worry that their families will fall out of the middle class. Yet with their husbands' high workloads and lack of family time, spouses are

reluctant to work outside the home. Their dissatisfaction is reflected in two surveys. In a survey of pastors who had recently entered the ministry, spouses ranked ninth among those who influenced a pastor to enter the ministry. In a survey of pastors who had recently decided to leave the ministry, spouses were by far the party most supportive of the pastor's decision.

Although unhappy spouses are as much a part of the world of female clergy as they are of male clergy, married women clergy are not subject to the same level of financial stress as their male colleagues. While a number of clergy salary studies examine the male-female salary gap, a 1990s cross-denominational survey found that the total household income of female clergy is 20 percent higher than that of male clergy.

Of course, low salaries are also a problem for women. A low salary may lead a married woman pastor to turn down a promising career move because her husband's higher salary sustains the family's standard of living. Moreover, sociologists have shown that when family commitments need attention, it is the person with the lower salary who cuts back on work commitment—and this is almost always the woman. Yet in their daily experience of the material world—from the houses they live in to expectations they have for their children to their anxieties about a retirement income—many married clergywomen live a more secure life than that of their male counterparts.

Not long ago, male clergy with a traditional family who were serving a small- to medium-sized congregation might have expected the conservative wing of their denomination to support them. But many conservatives, entranced by the dominant market culture and the megachurch, have identified small- to medium-sized congregations as “market failures,” even though these are the bread and butter of the average working pastor. Lyle Schaller places congregations with 85 to 200 members on his endangered species list.

Perhaps the most influential force in the clergyman's falling status is the critique of the professional career clergyman. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon are critical of those seminarians who desire to become officeholders in what Willimon and Hauerwas call “a static institution.” These clergymen want to “fit in, find a place and gradually climb to the top.” But critics of a careerist clergy do not acknowledge that those who seek greater rewards are often driven by fear. The career ladder is the only mechanism available both to those who want to provide for their families'

future and to those who seek the same consumer durables as other members of the professional middle class. Since it is practically impossible to distinguish between the two goals, clergy are drawn into a theologically corrupted system. Serving the richer affluent churches that pay larger salaries becomes a “higher” calling as one progresses “upward” on a clergy career track. The only remedy for one’s “fear of falling” is to climb higher.

Criticism of the career clergy model has not generated much formal discussion of class and the clergy. Meanwhile, the hallways of denominational conventions are filled with talk of salary and appointments. One report found that this pattern of official reticence and private worries leads pastors to bring up the salary issue repeatedly in the course of interviews, and then follow the “party line” by adding, “But salary’s not that important.”

The same report stated that many clergy were resentful of the fact that after years of education and training, they earned only “what a crew chief makes at McDonald’s.” But if the professional model of ministry is abandoned, then there is no benchmark for clergy salaries. If the clergy are no longer regarded as professionals, why should a minister make more money than a crew chief at McDonald’s?

And, if the professional model of ministry is gone, what will replace it? Two dominant motifs are emerging. One is the “entrepreneurial mission,” in which pastors “grow” their own churches and receive a salary that reflects their entrepreneurial success. This compensation pattern matches the winner-take-all logic of the corporate world, and it’s a path open to relatively few.

The other motif, the one that I believe will come to dominate mainline denominations, might be called “meaningful vocation.” In this pattern, a pastor is called to the ministry after a defining experience in mid-life. But this path is open only to those are willing to step down a class level or two, or to those who come in with the support of a spouse’s income or their own preordination earnings.

These trends will leave out young ministers who long to serve the church but do not wish to compete for a few choice appointments. They will eliminate those who hope to maintain their families within the professional middle class but have only a clergyman’s earnings.

Who’s left? Those who have other means, and those who are happy to live outside the middle class. The latter group might include clergy who surrender a lifestyle they

once expected, and clergy who never expected to be part of the professional middle class.

The church may be the better for this—it has often been a more vital institution when pastors from humble origins saw its relatively modest rewards as a route to upward social mobility. Perhaps the church will be better, too, for not having ministers who aspire to higher-class status. But should such aspirations disqualify people for ministry? And will those who surrender such aspirations be a large enough group to fill the projected clergy shortages in many denominations?

Perhaps instead of asking what salary we think clergy should receive, we should concentrate on what class we think they should be in. What steps could we take to keep clergy in the middle class? Instead of raising salaries, the denominations could put aside funds for educating clergy children and for providing a home for those retiring from the ministry. The dollar amounts in these accounts might depend upon years of service rather than amount of salary. Ideally, the denomination would finance this system, although this is difficult to imagine in today's world of de facto congregationalism.

Such a system would slow the race to the top of the salary pile and reduce the power exercised by the larger churches in attracting pastors. It would give female clergy greater bargaining power when trying to convince a spouse to relocate. And it would take away the sense that serving small, poor and struggling churches is a millstone around the neck of clergy families.

Developing any such plan requires honest and open debate about the class position of clergy. From megachurches to mainline seminaries, there is talk of renewal based on the model of the New Testament church. But the reward structure of today's churches is creating a few well-endowed livings for ambitious pastors, and a mass of poorly paid positions for pastors with independent means. If this continues, the American church will resemble not so much the first-century church of the apostles, but the 18th-century Church of England.