

What are supply clergy?

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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What are supply clergy? Are they merely ordained persons who are authorized to use the costume, magic words and hand motions needed to legitimize an hour of worship while the life of the congregation goes along without them quite well, thank you very much?

That appears to be the way they are seen and used by more than a few small congregations without regular clergy. I think there are several reasons for it. First, some supply clergy, mostly retired, see themselves that way. They are disinterested in the pastoral care of the people whom they serve for a few hours, and maybe never again. The life of the congregation is of little concern to them. A bit of extra income and a chance to exercise their rights of ordination are what it's about.

That fits in well with congregations who need a clergy person from time to time, but have no interest in letting some stranger into the intimacy of their lives together, and, perhaps, some resentment toward larger congregations with beloved full time pastoral leadership.

It isn't always that way. Along with two others, I've been supply clergy for a small, rural congregation for eleven years. Before I retired, I celebrated an evening service once a month, but another retired clergy celebrated a morning service with them twice a month. She moved away, and now I'm the one who is retired and serve them twice a month, sometimes more. Two other retired clergy each serve once a month as available. I am very fond of this little congregation. Their spiritual, emotional, physical and economic welfare is important to me.

Home visits, hospital calls, funerals and just hanging around with them are an important part of my life. The thirty-mile drive is a breeze on country highways where ten or twelve other cars are heavy traffic. With a little effort, we will start a midweek adult bible study this spring.

It still

does not make me their pastor. I think it has to do with the idea that, as supply clergy, I could walk away tomorrow. Indeed, I am free to travel at my convenience, even over major holidays, something I would never have done when serving as a full time pastor of a congregation. It also has to do with their recognition, maybe embarrassment, that they can only afford to pay for an hour a Sunday plus travel, and anything else they receive from supply clergy is a gift that they might hope for but cannot ask for.

It's a tricky place with a lot of psychology wrapped around insecurity involved. I wonder if there is a better way to do it?

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