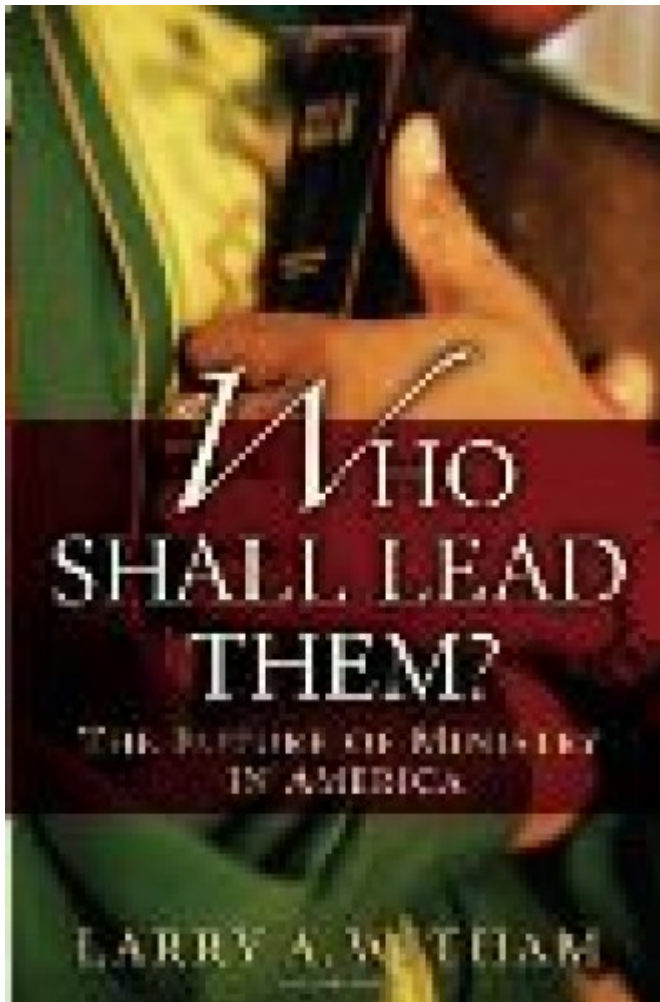


Making leaders

By [J. Nelson Kraybill](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Who Shall Lead Them? The Future of Ministry in America

Larry A. Witham
Oxford University Press

Is there a clergy crisis in the United States? Catholics and Protestants report that fewer candidates than needed are entering the ministry, and a large number of

practicing clergy are approaching retirement. The social status of clergy has declined, and ordained women have hit a stained-glass ceiling within the church. Priests and ministers are caught in the crossfire as worship wars, gender debates and sexuality battles rumble across the country.

Seasoned journalist Larry A. Witham takes a long, unblinking look at these and other issues facing U.S. clergy and uses his study of ministry to assess the trajectory of the whole church. Without being judgmental or sensational, Witham draws statistics and examples from a wide range of recent studies on pastoral leadership and church life to paint a vivid portrait of ministry, paying particular attention to Catholics, Southern Baptists and ethnic minority groups.

Clergy are respected in American culture, Witham says, but “ordained ministry is not receiving many of society’s rewards.” Salaries lag behind those in secular professions that have similar educational or administrative expectations. Psychiatrists and other helping professionals have assumed some of the counseling duties traditionally performed by priests and ministers. Movies and television tend to portray clergy as ineffectual, and although only a small percentage of clergy have been implicated in cases of sexual misconduct, such scandals have tarnished the reputation of the vocation.

Witham surveys this sobering landscape with guarded optimism, often taking time to put a particular conundrum in historical and social-scientific perspective. While lamenting pedophilia among clergy, for example, he points out that it has been an issue since the beginning of the church: the *Didache* (ca. AD 100) exhorts, “Thou shalt not seduce young boys.” Witham then cites pastoral counselors who recommend ways that ministers can avoid slipping into sexual misconduct.

Particular challenges face the burgeoning minority church. A wave of Mexican immigrants has swelled Spanish-language congregations, but relatively few of these newcomers will attain or even seek citizenship, and many will return to Mexico. This could affect the long-term stability of the Hispanic church in the United States. The desire of many Mexican immigrants for an economic foothold does not induce them to enter seminary. In the 1980s the Korean church in America also grew rapidly, but that may have been a one-generation phenomenon triggered by a temporary political and economic crisis in South Korea.

What does the growth of megachurches say about the future of the church and of those who will lead? “What churches draw on for their energy is either the obvious excitement of growth or the more internally generated pride in a tradition and heritage,” writes Witham. Most megachurches rely on the former, he says, and most growth in one church results from transfer from another. Just 7 percent of new participants are “real converts.” Nevertheless, Witham believes that the whole church can learn from the megachurch phenomenon and the recent church growth movement. Megachurch leaders typically understand marketing, a skill that may be essential for the church in a media-saturated culture. Growing churches often successfully combine “bonding” (development of social ties within the church) with “bridging” (the ability to build relationships beyond the church).

Witham observes a trend in the U.S. church away from traditional seminary education and toward greater reliance on mentoring programs within congregations—such as those developed by megachurches. He points out an irony noted by church historian James Hudnut-Beumler: although national educational attainment is at its highest point ever, the average educational attainment of pastors in the largest mainstream Protestant denominations is on the decline.

As a theological educator, I wish Witham had ended with a more systematic presentation of what he thinks the church can do to address current leadership challenges. Perhaps because he is a journalist he feels that prescribing solutions is beyond his mandate or expertise. Still, he configures the data in such a way that the reader usually can infer what course he hopes the church will chart into the future.

Witham implies that people concerned about the integrity and vitality of pastoral leadership should give increased attention to nurturing young people’s call to ministry, in part by highlighting positive ministerial role models; foster awareness of the spiritual and psychological hazards of ministry and offer more support and training to help pastors deal with those; promote career flexibility rather than demanding or assuming that pastors will be in lifelong leadership, since that may put off viable candidates; and urge congregations to allow clergy time for continuing education courses and occasional retreats and sabbaticals.

Some small churches that do not reasonably have a future and cannot sustain viable leadership should close; clergy should be trained to assume a higher-level leadership profile and a directive role that is more like that of a “rancher” than that of a “shepherd”; clergy should be empowered to be missional and to help

congregations reach out; and denominational leaders should accept that the church will continue to need a range of clergy education levels and leadership training methods.

Perhaps Witham would disagree with how I have summarized his implicit strategies, but that reflects the evocative strength of his book. He has brought together an impressive array of documented narratives, perspectives and statistics from which readers can construct their own applications and hypotheses. Witham values the church. He wants it to succeed and is asking the right questions. It would have been useful to see his analysis of the church set in a global rather than just a U.S. context, but he has done excellent spadework from which all Protestants and Catholics thinking about the future of the church in this country can benefit.