

Bishoping: Clerical title inflation

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

In a recent story in the *Atlanta Constitution* John Blake reports on what we might call “grade inflation” among pastors. Some who are not content with the familiar titles of “Reverend” or “Pastor” or “Elder” are now calling themselves “Bishop,” often explaining that God told them to do this.

Baptists used to define themselves as people who resist bishops. Yet the Reverend Miles Fowler of Big Miller Grove Baptist Church is now Bishop Miles Fowler. Some think that Bishop T. D. Jakes, superstar television preacher, started the trend in Dallas, a historically antibishop place. Professor Riggins Earl explains that “in order to compete, a reverend is not enough for their status. Even calling themselves doctors doesn’t do enough. We have to find other titles that have more of a mystical appeal.”

So Dr. Creflo Dollar Jr., with his honorary D.D. (what Henry Mitchell, who has an earned doctorate, calls a “donated dignity doctorate”) from Oral Roberts University, can hardly compete. Jamie Pleasant of Kingdom Builders Christian Center in Norcross, Georgia, is now “Apostle Pleasant,” despite his lack of any seminary training—a feature he shares with the original apostles. In Decatur, Georgia, Earl Paulk even calls himself Archbishop Earl Paulk, as sanctioned by the International Communion of Charismatic Churches.

Those of us in denominations whose bishops aren’t in “the historic episcopate” (United Methodists, most Lutherans, etc.) and who have worked to establish “full communion” with Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches, whose bishops are “historic,” sometimes are told that we have chosen the wrong century for making such a move. Don’t we know that the really booming churches—and they are really booming—around the world are nonmainstream, often nonwhite, Pentecostal, charismatic, Baptist, independent and megachurch sorts. Their members and pastors, we are told, shun episcopal concerns and don’t care about bishops.

But what Blake finds in Atlanta and Dallas and I find in the Chicago Yellow Pages (where more and more clerics seem to be calling themselves “overseer,” which means “bishop”) is a trend toward bishoping. This, Blake says, is “part of a curious transformation taking place outside mainstream churches,” especially in “charismatic, megachurches and independent congregations.”

Where might this trend lead us? Those who think that “hierarchical” refers to “higher” grades of authority—it doesn’t—will for market reasons compete for ever higher-sounding titles. Paulk set the pace by calling himself “Archbishop.” What’s left? “Cardinal” and—gasp!—“Pope.” And after that, God?

Lutherans have lived and can live with all kinds of polities. The ELCA, of which I am a part, is in full communion with churches that are episcopal, presbyterian, synodical, congregational, confessional and, if full communion with the United Methodists comes off, connectional. All polities are to be measured in respect to the servanthood of the whole people of God. There can be tyrants in all polities—my observation is that congregational versions produce most, and most easily.

Here is the Lutheran solution to clerical title inflation, which I learned from the late Heiko Oberman’s translation of Martin Luther: “Precisely because baptism is ‘democratic,’ granting everyone justification in Christ, it also gives all believers sacerdotal status, for everyone who comes crawling out of baptism has thus been consecrated a priest, bishop, and pope.” So with millions of others who have been baptized, I became “pope,” in my case on February 26, 1928. Take that, Archbishop Paulk.