Career ministry: Two cheers for professional clergy

by Garret Keizer in the April 24, 2002 issue

"*Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old*."
—Matthew 13:52

Some years ago, after I'd given a talk at a university many hundreds of miles from my home, a man in the audience raised his hand and asked about my status as a minister.

"Now you're what we used to call a 'worker priest.' You don't earn your living from the church, is that right?"

"That's right. I'm not a professional priest, nor was I educated in a seminary. By training I'm a high school English teacher, which is how I earn my living. Essentially, I've been ordained to serve a small parish that cannot afford its own 'regular' clergy."

"Well, I think what you're doing is admirable."

This brief exchange was by no means unique in my experience. More than once I have been invited to think of my bi-vocational, amateur ministry as something more apostolic, and perhaps more forward-looking than the "old model" of a credentialed professional cleric who feeds the sheep of a single congregation in order that the sheep might also feed, house and clothe him. I have tended to regard such enthusiasms with suspicion, and not merely because I distrust the notion that cheaper is always better. Telling a poor church that it has been fortunate to outgrow its reliance on professional ministry is a bit like telling someone who can't afford a car that he'll be much healthier riding to work on a bike.

I may be especially sensitive to this issue because where I live, in the remotest corner of Vermont, many small churches are simply unable to afford full-time clergy. Increasingly one hears references to "team ministry," "total ministry," "common

ministry”—all discussed in the context of “empowering” the smaller congregation and emancipating it from the burden of supporting professional clergy. The search for a different model, either a new one or something more ancient than the old, can be an exciting process. It can lead people to reflect more deeply on their own gifts, on their solidarity with one another, and on the essential requirements of the gospel. It also has the potential of liberating the Christian body from some of the pathologies that come into play when sanctification, salary and the role of scapegoat converge on a single human being. If decreasing revenue has the potential of taking us out of that folly, then the half-empty collection plate starts to look half full.

Still, I get nervous whenever I hear someone disparage the so-called old model, especially if he holds up my own flimsy ministry as an example of the alternatives. I would feel much more confident about abandoning the old model, and much more courageous about embracing a new one, if I heard a more sympathetic assessment of what we are proposing to leave behind. For one thing, new advantages will hardly make us happy if we have failed to appreciate the old. For another, it may be possible to preserve some of the old advantages if we keep them in mind in the act of creating something new.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the old model of church structure is the encouragement it gives to lay ministry. Conventional wisdom holds the opposite view: lay ministry tends to be stunted by the exercise of clergy professionalism. Of course, the difference turns on one’s definition of lay ministry. In spite of all protestations to the contrary, we doggedly continue to think of lay ministry as laypeople filling the traditional roles of clergy in the church rather than as laypeople fulfilling their own callings in the world.

It is often alleged that career ministry amounts to the members of a congregation paying someone to be a professional Christian on their behalf. At its worst, so it is. But the danger inherent in many alternative models is that of a congregation turned in on itself, defining and redefining ministry at the expense of exercising those ministries already defined by so-called secular vocations, family responsibilities and citizenship. Most of us would be appalled by a pastor who failed to show up for the Sunday service so she could go shopping or find a bar that opened early. But no one seems to be appalled if a working mother takes an entire Saturday away from her kids to write a church mission statement—the words of the Gospels no longer sufficing for that purpose. If this is what it means to be a lay minister, then lay ministry will never be more than a counterfeit of ordained ministry, and a rather

paltry one at that.

True, the laity are often just as distracted from ministering in their homes and communities by the old model as by any alternative, especially if the professional minister is called upon to spin out events and programs to prove he's earning his keep. Laypeople then wind up deserting their spheres of ministry to help him authenticate his. At its best, however, the old model of church ministry encourages laypeople to embrace their own work in the world. In such a case the clergy man or woman functions like the angel at the tomb of Christ, who stands at the church door and says, "He is not here. He is risen. Don't think you can come here to hide. Go into the streets and look for him. Go into the prisons. Go home and help your wife fold the wash. Beat it, in other words. Live it!"

The old model also has an uncanny way of serving as the handmaid of diversity. The professional cleric has a practical interest in creating the most broad-based church life possible. Even at her most jaded, she still has to eat. Even if she lives in the upper stories of an ivory tower, she still needs fresh recruits to defend her from factions and special interests. At her best, the professional minister reaches out to youth, to children, to the elderly, because she has heard the call of the gospel, but even when she doesn't hear the call, she still needs the revenue. That is admittedly a very crass way to look at things. But a small church "liberated" from the burden of paying a full-time minister can become every bit as crass if people come to think, "We need nobody but the members of our own little group." And that is a very real temptation.

The most exciting thing about alternative models of ministry is also the scariest: they hold out the promise of recasting the church as a disciplined cadre of committed disciples, in which everyone exercises a full baptismal ministry, everyone pulls his or her weight. It's easy to fall in love with such a model. Revolutions are made on such a model. Many in the early church (including more than one heretical sect) felt that the body of Christ was best conceived as an elite fellowship of the perfected—and more specifically of those who stood firm in times of persecution. Many since have lamented that the more inclusive membership that came with Constantine's imperial patronage led to the deterioration of Christian witness. In a world where everyone's a Christian, they would argue, no one is a Christian. In a church where membership consists of little more than walking through a door and finding a seat, the kingdom of God remains forever idling on the runway.

These are good arguments, and on occasion I've made them myself. But then I try to imagine a church that consists almost exclusively of committed Christians "fully empowered" by their "baptismal covenant"—a church with no reprobates, no rascals, no moochers, no flakes, no walking wounded, no one there with no idea why he's there except that it's a warm place to sit in December. It may sound like heaven, but it doesn't sound too much like earth—it doesn't sound like the place where Jesus walked and wept and died. This isn't to suggest that a more inclusive vision can't exist without a professional on the payroll; it's only to say that in the effort to organize an alternative we run a great risk of creating a very esoteric association—emancipated and empowered and all the rest, but also a bit boring and more than a bit smug.

A fourth advantage of the old model is that it provides a full-time watchdog for the Old Nick. It will not come as news to anyone who's attended church for more than five Sundays in a row that the polite culture and nonjudgmental ethos of Christian community often exert a powerful attraction for disturbed individuals of every kind, from the passively aggressive to the aggressively predatory. Such individuals tend to go for power vacuums with all the primal instincts of a shark. Not infrequently, they have plenty of time on their hands, making them welcome additions to churches with limited pools of overworked volunteers—and more than a match for any ministry team of distracted if dutiful people who "have lives" outside the church. The task of dealing with sinister patterns of behavior, and of doing so with a prudent awareness of the legal and psychological ramifications, is not a job best done by part-timers.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, we can praise the old model for providing clergy with an intellectual grasp of our faith. Granted, Jesus did not have an academic degree and did not need one, which is not to say that the philosophers of the Roman world could have come to Jesus and known him as the Christ. There is much to be said for the sophistication that comes with professional training—this from someone who lacks it and knows what he lacks. When I was a boy growing up in church, I was something of an annoyance in my Sunday school—ready to argue every point—so my teacher recommended that I go talk to the minister. I remember walking into his study one evening, its walls lined with books, his pipe smoke drifting in the shaded lamplight. He invited my questions as if I was a visiting scholar instead of a puerile pain-in-the-neck. I might not be in church today had I never walked into that warm and redolent space. And sometimes I wonder: If I met my inquisitive

younger self as my untrained older self, would I be able to reach him?

Of course, one doesn't and shouldn't need to be trained in a seminary in order to give a cogent account of one's religious tradition. In fact, one of the most exciting things about the alternative models being discussed around the church these days is their insistence on training the entire membership. Like Moses, who said, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets," the church seems ready to say, "Would that all the Lord's people were catechists." Amen. But a catechist is not the same thing as a theologian.

Many readers, I'm sure, will be happy to cite cases where the theological acumen of lay members in their congregations far exceeds that of the seminary-trained clergy. No big surprise. But where, pray tell, are the communities from which these examples come? On which side of the railroad tracks did you find them? On which exits off the interstate? And there is my major objection to alternative models: They tend to be tested in the very communities where they make the least sense. In other words, we hold onto clergy professionalism in congregations with the greatest talent pools of professional expertise, and abolish it in those marginal places where an educated generalist would be most prized. In the end, what the congregation needs in order to pay a minister almost always takes precedence over what the congregation needs that a minister might provide.

Ever since I began my work as a part-time lay vicar in a small church, and throughout my subsequent years as an ordained worker-priest, I have been viewed as someone standing on the creative edge of ministry. I have been told, "You're what the future of the church in rural America is going to look like." I have been invited to think of myself as the ecclesiastical equivalent of a revolutionary.

But I am not a revolutionary, certainly not in the role I play in the church. Like zeroes in a multidigit number, people like me function mainly as placeholders who give the status quo its weight and allow it to continue unchallenged in every church that can balance its budget. We help to camouflage the fact that the bottom line counts as much in Christian community as it does anywhere else, that your model of church ministry and the make and model of the car you drive to church identify the same concentrations of capital.

If there are compelling reasons besides those of economic hardship to move beyond the old paradigm of "one pastor, one church," then we must dare to scrutinize all the other paradigms as well, including the cushy paradigm of three pastors, one

church—not to forget three pastors, several buildings and a big chunk of real estate, one church. If we would redefine church structures in terms of apostolic models, then we must go the full distance. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). In other words, one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one budget, shared among more than one church, and not just by the poor churches of a given geographic district. Any meaningful discussion of new models for ministry starts there. It takes some faith to believe that a discussion based on such a premise is even possible, but the church has taught me to believe in miracles, and so I must imagine that it is.