Take this job: Satisfactions of ministry

by L. Gregory Jones in the August 14, 2002 issue

"Ministry a satisfying vocation.” Headlines like this one appeared in newspapers, church periodicals and elsewhere this past spring, as Duke’s (Lilly-funded) Pulpit and Pew Project reported the initial findings in a national clergy survey. It was not the only, or the most important, finding of the survey. But it was the one that reporters and editors found most fascinating and newsworthy. Why?

Perhaps it was because the news sounded so different from the dominant religious news story of scandal and cover-up in the Roman Catholic church. Perhaps reporters were grateful to report on good news about the ministry, and grateful for the opportunity to reassure churchpeople that the clergy are still committed to their vocation and find it fulfilling.

Yet others questioned the results. How could ministry be seen as satisfying, given the reports of burn-out and other morale problems? Not to mention the high drop-out rate in the first five years of ministry, financial struggles among clergy, splits within congregations and denominations, and the reluctance of clergy to encourage others to consider ordained ministry as a vocation. The news seemed Pollyannaish, if not deceptive.

The report seems even more baffling when viewed in the light of the clergy’s answers to other questions. Most troubling is that over half of the clergy across the denominations reported that among their greatest daily problems is the “difficulty of reaching people with the gospel today.” How could ministry be a satisfying vocation for clergy if ministry’s central task is so difficult?

Might it be that in spite of the enormous obstacles and systemic distortions, clergy find ordained ministry to be a satisfying vocation in principle?

To be sure, there are small yet significant ways in which ministers reach people with the gospel. Having been parish pastors, my wife and I know how rewarding it is to

share in the lives of other people. Ordained ministers are invited into the most intimate times of people's lives—the joys of marriage, new babies, anniversaries, promotions and new jobs; the griefs of broken relationships, deaths, the loss of work and tragic systemic injustices.

Ordained ministers have the opportunity to be in solidarity with those on the margins as well as to offer counsel to the leaders of a community. They explore the challenge of forming faithful children while respecting and caring for all generations.

At their best, ordained ministers and their congregations cultivate a life together that reveals and reflects the abundant grace and love of God. This is why we are so touched and nourished by powerful depictions of ministry—by pastoral memoirs such as Richard Lischer's *Open Secrets* or collections of sermons such as Barbara Brown Taylor's *Gospel Medicine*. This is why people are drawn to congregations where the presence of God in Christ is clearly present in life-giving ways.

We should not be surprised that people recognize that ordained ministry is a satisfying vocation. But we should be surprised and troubled that this vocation is beset by challenges, obstacles and systemic distortions that make it difficult to experience satisfaction in the daily practice of ministry.

What are the problems—in our seminaries, in our congregations, in our discernment and recruitment of potential clergy, in our evangelistic outreach, in our readings and engagements with cultural changes—that make it so difficult for clergy to reach people with the gospel today?

What is happening that so many clergy feel that they are unable to support themselves and their families with the kinds of material resources to enable a well-lived life? Why are there not enough books, films, music and art to sustain and support the pastoral vocation—and why are the clergy not turning to those available resources that might nourish them more deeply?

Why are many clergy so lonely, so lonely that they become involved in serious misconduct or drop out? Why are clergy finding it so difficult to distinguish the urgent from the genuinely important in their work? Why are we not telling more stories of the places where ministry is faithfully flourishing? Why do we so often ask clergy to become amateur therapists or politicians or managers, rather than encouraging them to cultivate a genuinely pastoral intelligence shaped by the crucified and risen Christ?

The Pulpit and Pew project is gathering and analyzing data in order to address such questions. To be sure, many of the questions are not new, and we ought not pretend that there was once a golden age for pastors from which contemporary clergy have fallen. Nor should we pretend that the present state of ordained ministry is where it should be, or lament the present as if there were no hope for the future.

Rather, we ought to be encouraged that ordained ministry is so deeply satisfying a vocation. At the heart of this vocation—with the friendships, practices and treasures that sustain ministry's work-—is the opportunity to reach people with the gospel in both small and significant ways, and bear a life-giving witness to the gracious love of God in Christ. What can we do to make the ministry as satisfying in practice as it is in principle?