

Needy pastors: Behind authoritarian leadership

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

"You know, Mom, the trouble with our new pastor is that he needs us to love him so much that we can't see God anymore." This was the assessment of a 13-year-old boy talking with his mother about the struggles they were having at their church. A new pastor had arrived, and in a rather short time he had torn apart the fabric of Christian community that had been nurtured in that congregation over several decades.

Most of the adults had identified the problem as something else: an authoritarian leadership style, too many changes in worship practices, an inability to listen, an unwillingness to understand the congregation's distinctive history. But once this young teenager described the issue in terms of the pastor's neediness, the other descriptions faded into the background.

"We can't see God anymore." Well, not technically—after all, whether at the table or in the pulpit, the presence of God does not depend on the holiness of the priest. This has been the judgment of the church since the resolution of the Donatist controversy. But this young teenager wasn't expressing a technical theological point. He was simply suggesting that it is much more difficult to worship God when ordained ministers are so preoccupied with themselves and their needs that God is relegated to the sidelines.

Ordained ministry needs to cultivate strong leadership that follows the pattern revealed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ—leadership that always focuses attention on God rather than on oneself, and can therefore offer a powerful, life-giving alternative to both self-absorbed and self-destructive ministry.

Self-absorbed ministry emerges out of a pastor's lack of Christian character. Whether due to an excessive estimation of one's own importance or a sense of weakness, everything revolves around the pastor's need to be the focus of attention and affirmation. This focus becomes even more pernicious when it is couched in

theological terms. So a pastor preaches a sermon on “humility and how I achieved it,” or sings as if the “Blessed Assurance” is not so much “praising my savior all the day long” as “this is MY story.”

This is a perennial problem: how does one maintain the strength of character and self-confidence necessary for leadership while also deflecting attention away from the self to God? The problem has become more difficult in contemporary American contexts even as we seek to respond to self-destructive patterns of ministry.

Too often ordained ministry has been shaped by expectations that destroy people’s character and self-confidence. A “lone ranger” mentality, for example, undermines the kinds of networks of support and community that sustain people over time. Furthermore, the character of ordained ministry as a life-giving vocation is weakened when it’s viewed as simply a particularly demanding career or, worse, a never-ending, low-paying job.

Impossible expectations, placed on ordained ministry by denominations, congregations and cultural stereotypes, presume that ministry is about denying oneself the satisfactions and rewards of other vocations. This attracts those whose needs are less material and more emotional and characterological. As a result, emotionally needy people are especially drawn to the status and practice of ordained ministry.

We have confused the recognition that Christian life is *for all persons* about dying to self with the misguided (yet often subtly hidden) assumption that ordained ministers are the designated “self-deniers.” As a result, the conditions are ripe for difficulty even among gifted Christian leaders of good character and self-confidence.

Why are we surprised when healthy and faithful pastors become excessively needy if they are lonely and isolated, or struggling with concerns about how to care for their children’s education or their own retirement? Or if they feel that their work is not honored? Why do we so often ignore the importance of friendships, material resources and educational and cultural opportunities as ingredients in a well-lived life for pastors and their families?

We might focus more on the conditions that sustain pastors through the peculiar opportunities and burdens of ordained ministry. Ordained ministers need holy friendships to challenge the sins of self-preoccupation and to affirm the gifts each pastor has to offer. They need opportunities for practicing discipleship in venues

where they are not the leaders or the organizers. They need salaries that reflect the worthiness of their vocation and enable them to care for their families. And they need educational and cultural opportunities.

We need to deepen our understanding of ordained ministry and improve our care of ordained ministers. As we do so, we'll have the opportunity to claim afresh the centrality of the gospel for all Christians, and to reshape the ways in which the ministry of the whole congregation relates to the ministry of the ordained. All Christians are called to holiness, and should be living in ways that make it possible for others to see God through them.

A renewed and vigorous commitment to the stakes involved in faithful Christian ministry, for both lay and ordained, can help us see that human neediness often makes it hard for us to see God. After all, we behold the face of God not in our egocentric need to be loved, but in the gift of loving relationships.