

Job description: A purpose for the ordained pastor

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

Does life have any direction or purpose, any telos? A significant part of the popularity of Rick Warren's "purpose-driven" books is his strong conviction that God provides direction and purpose for each of our lives, as well as for the church and local congregations. Many of us are uncomfortable with Warren's specific formulation of God's purpose or plan for people. But he is clearly on to something. His argument responds to the deep yearnings in American culture for some sense of direction—for a guiding light.

Nick Hornby's latest novel, *A Long Way Down*, narrates the perspectives of four people who meet on the top of a London building on New Year's Eve, all of them intending to commit suicide by jumping off the building. They discover connection in talking with each other, and decide to keep living—at least temporarily. Eventually, however, the connection begins to fragment. One of the characters, who had contemplated suicide because his band had broken up and his girlfriend had left him, reflects about the fragmenting relationship with his newfound companions: "There was a breakup coming, you could smell it, and no one was saying anything. And it was for the same reason, which was that we'd taken things as far as we could, and there was nowhere for us to go. That's why everyone breaks up, I guess: bands, friends, marriages, whatever. Parties, weddings, anything."

Is there anywhere for us to go? As people, as communities, as the world? One would think the church, bearing witness to God and God's good news in Jesus Christ, would provide a beacon of light to the world and a clear sense of direction. And at its best, the church does offer such light and direction. It is a beautiful community that offers the life that really is life (1 Tim. 6:19). Yet too often even the church seems to have nowhere to go.

Insofar as we have a clear sense of the purpose of the church and the telos of Christian life, we will be able to articulate a clear sense of the purpose of Christian

ministry. Ironically, the people we would most imagine as resources for people in despair—Christian clergy—are often depressed and despairing. In the marketplace of professions, clergy may feel as if their vocations are amateur, second-rate versions of more distinguished vocations. Yes, they are therapists, but not they are not quite what doctors and nurses are. They are teachers, but not scholars and professors; they are leaders, but not politicians and business executives; they are communicators, but not performers and writers. Unsure of their own vocation, they become what Stanley Hauerwas has described as “quivering masses of availability.”

To many discouraged Christians, laity and clergy alike, the job description for ordained ministry reads like a depressing want ad:

WANTED: Person to fill position that involves important but undervalued work; exact job description unclear. Long hours; must work weekends and holidays. Low pay. Master’s degree required; doctorate preferred. Must be accomplished at multitasking, including running an organization without clear authority to do so. The successful candidate will be skilled as a public speaker, manager, politician and therapist, and will devote significant time each week to pastoral visits. The position reports to multiple bosses.

Why would anyone want to undertake such work? And whom would it really serve, if there is so little sense of direction?

What if, by contrast, the description read as follows?

WANTED: Persons for a vocation that leads God’s people in bearing witness to God’s new creation revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Work schedule is shaped by relationships, focusing on what is important in people’s lives, and depends on regular rhythms of work, rest and play. Compensation is shaped by a mutual discernment of what is necessary in order for the persons (and, where appropriate, their families) to have an appropriately well-lived life. The vocation involves cultivating holy dispositions, preaching and teaching, nurturing rigorous study and shaping practices of faithful living in church and world. Lifelong education and formation is expected in order to enable others also to grow throughout their lives. The successful candidate will collaborate with others toward the same ends. The person with this vocation reports to

God.

Wouldn't such a description provide a sense of the direction that clergy need and that people are longing for? It offers an invitation into an adventuresome, life-giving journey of Christian life and of Christian leadership.

In *Pastoral Care*, Gregory the Great offers a beautiful image of pastoral ministry: "Those who carry the vessels of the Lord are those who undertake, in a reliance on their way of living, to draw the souls of their neighbors to the everlasting holy places."

The four characters in Hornby's novel, and many other people in despair, long to be drawn toward a vision of everlasting holy places, a sense of direction and a telos for the world and for our lives. May the Epiphany light draw us, and our neighbors, to such a vision.