



Shifting Ministry Paradigms: From Primarily Clergy- Led, Lay-Supported, to Lay- Led, Clergy Supported

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Across the landscape of American Christianity, a leadership shift is underway in many congregations. Amidst a wider institutional decline (experienced most acutely by mainline Protestant denominations), fewer local churches are being led by ordained clergy. Some of this is due to lack of financial resources to pay clergy at full or part-time levels. It is also due to fewer clergy being available to deploy. As

Shifting circumstances and changing expectation are leading the way toward a shift in ministry paradigm, from clergy leadership of congregations to clergy supporting lay leaders in this task. This redefinition of clergy roles might seem to some as being threatening, but this shift could well relieve pastors and free them up to do more direct ministry

the baby boomers retire, the pipeline of younger clergy is drying up.¹ Here are some statistics from before the pandemic:

- About 43 percent of United States mainline congregations have no full-time paid clergy, according to the 2018–2019 National Congregations Study.²
- As of 2016, a quarter of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations could no longer afford a full-time pastor with benefits.³
- Almost half of Episcopal churches are led by part-time or non-stipendiary clergy or lay leaders.⁴

Many congregations and denominations emerged from the pandemic weaker, with diminished financial resources, and some clergy left ministry. Over half (53 percent) of clergy have seriously considered leaving ministry since 2020.⁵ Seminary enrollments have continued to decline in mainline Protestantism in particular. There are simply fewer ordained leaders available. Trajectories suggest these trends will accentuate rather than diminish in the coming years. At current rates, we are facing in some areas of the church—especially rural—a “pastor-less” future.⁶

Meanwhile, many ordained clergy find themselves depleted while trying to maintain a model of ministry that is less and less sustainable under today’s cultural circumstances. As Ted Smith explores in his recent book, *The End of Theological Education*, the voluntary association model of congregation and denomination, which emerged after the American Revolution, is in precipitous decline. These associations, which formed containers for belonging, connection, meaning,

¹ The average age of clergy in American congregations is fifty-nine. See *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, “I’m Exhausted All the Time: Exploring the Factors Contributing to Growing Clergy Discontentment,” Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations, 4, https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Clergy_Discontentment_Patterns_Report-compressed_2.pdf.

² Cited in G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Part-Time is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-Time Clergy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2020), 19.

³ Cited in Ted A. Smith, *The End of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 107. ELCA statistics are from March 2016.

⁴ Smith, *The End of Theological Education*, 107.

⁵ *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, “I’m Exhausted All the Time,” 2.

⁶ Catherine Neelly Burton, “The Future of the PC(USA) Is Pastor-Less, and That’s OK,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 2024.

and purpose across American society (think service organizations, scouting, veterans groups, and labor unions—not just congregations) are eroding under the pressures of a generational cultural shift toward individualization.⁷ Rather than join and serve voluntary associations, people are disembedding from them in order to discover and express their “authentic” individual self.⁸ The age of associations is being replaced by an age of “authenticity” shaped more by social media connections and fluid networks than the inhabiting of physical institutions.

Smith observes that ministry became understood as a profession within the voluntary association model of congregational life in America (alongside other professions like law, medicine, or nursing). Graduate professional degrees (the Master of Divinity), standardized training and credentialing, and a middle-class salary and benefits became expectations, in mainline Protestantism at least. As this model developed in the early 1800s and came to its peak in the mid twentieth century, the paradigm for what ministry looked like and who could access it narrowed. Communities of color, often excluded from this system or developed alternative versions, were typically less dependent on such an expensive business model.

Many church members were happy to defer to clergy to do the spiritual stuff for them. Professional clergy training focused on how to do ministry, not how to equip and cultivate gift-based ministry and mission among all of God’s people.

The professional model of clergy leadership (particularly in mainline Protestantism) also became accompanied in some places by a performative model of ministry, in which the spiritual work of following Jesus was primarily performed *for* the congregation by the clergy. Regular members (“laity”) primarily were expected to support

⁷ Smith, *The End of Theological Education*, 65–93. See also Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2002).

⁸ See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

the church institutionally with their “time, talent, and treasure” rather than to be fluent at praying, interpreting the Bible, or evangelizing themselves. Clergy were the “ministers” who did ministry for the whole; the social contract for church members was to provide and maintain an institutional home for them to do it in.

This is, of course, an oversimplification. Even within the voluntary association model led by professional clergy many congregations have cultivated discipleship, spiritual growth, and shared ministry among the whole people of God to varying degrees. Yet, for many congregations, the clergy-led, lay-supported paradigm played out with deeply hierarchical (often patriarchal), clerical, exclusivist tendencies. Many church members were happy to defer to clergy to do the spiritual stuff for them. Professional clergy training focused on how to *do* ministry, not how to equip and cultivate gift-based ministry and mission among all of God’s people.

This is unraveling today in many places. The voluntary association paradigm for belonging in American life is collapsing along generational lines (baby boomers are the last generation in which joining and serving voluntary associations is normal). The professional model of ministry is coming undone under economic pressures and a lack of candidates entering it. The programs, activities, and committees of voluntary association congregations (and regional church systems and denominations) aren’t sustainable without volunteers, and as this work falls increasingly on the shoulders of clergy, they feel the weight of it.

There are deeper questions to raise. Is all of this faithful to what it means to be church in our day? Many clergy find themselves consumed with administrative tasks, managing what are often under-capitalized small non-profit organizations. The programs and activities characteristic of the voluntary association model of church (committee meetings, rummage sales, women’s guilds, men’s breakfasts, etc.) weren’t necessarily designed to form Christian identity and make disciples in contemporary cultures.

Most importantly, the performative model of ministry is not what we find in the New Testament, where Jesus’s followers are all invited into the transformational journey of following him and where the church is animated by the working together of all the gifts the

Spirit distributes among the community.⁹ The depletion many clergy are experiencing today is bigger than the pandemic or the decline of institutional church structures; the basic model we have inherited warrants deeper reexamination. As painful as it is (especially for those who have found meaning in this model and whose livelihoods are tied up in it), the present unraveling is also a gift and opportunity.

REDEFINING ROLES

The clerical paradigm of ministry is a product of Christendom, when Christianity became a territorial and tribal faith. Rather than a subcultural community embodying an alternative way of life in a wider pagan society, Christianity embraced social, political, cultural, and economic privilege. There is not space here to rehearse this historical trajectory, which brought both benefits and liabilities, but the era of Christendom in western societies is now over.¹⁰ The church must discover how to embody a distinct and countercultural way of life and witness from the margins of society rather than the center.

This begins with cultivating and animating discipleship among the whole people of God. This is the foundation of Christian life—being “in Christ” through faith, following Jesus in the power of the Spirit, and growing in spiritual maturity and Christlikeness as we are freed to love and serve our neighbors.¹¹ Discipleship involves a change of life—both initially and continually.¹² It involves obeying God’s leadership in our lives, not simply affirming and elevating the individual self as the ultimate authority, as late-modern western culture would have us do. It unfolds in communities of practice in which Scripture functions as the normative story.

Amidst the larger cultural unraveling of voluntary association institutions, many mainline churches are shrinking and dying because they are not focused on cultivating discipleship in contemporary cultures. Much of the energy in these congregations is focused on other ends—institutional maintenance, cultural or social activities, or

⁹ Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:7–16.

¹⁰ For a deeper exploration, see Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Waynesboro, PA: Paternoster, 2004).

¹¹ See 2 Corinthians 5:7 and Ephesians 4:13.

¹² Martin Luther’s discussion of a daily dying and rising in his Small Catechism is one way to think about this.

community service that may be only implicitly connected to discipleship. Some people join and remain in mainline congregations because they know that the church won't ask too much of them in the way of spiritual transformation. When the cultural and social supports for voluntary association church membership fall away, it is no wonder that these churches are struggling, even as increasing numbers of people who want to follow Jesus faithfully can't find a church that they feel will help them do so.¹³

Now is a time to refocus and reorient church toward cultivating discipleship and growth into spiritual maturity among the whole people of God so that they can embody a distinctive witness to the gospel of Jesus in a pluralist culture. This means embracing the gifts for ministry of all of God's people, with a focus on exercising those gifts in daily life. Before turning to redefining the work of clergy, it is important to explore first what redefining the ministry of the laity might mean.

The discipleship dimensions of this approach have often tended to be implicit at best, however. How does serving on a property committee or as church treasurer help me follow Jesus in daily life? How is it different than serving on committees or as an officer at Rotary, a garden club, or the American Legion?

FAITH AND WITNESS IN DAILY LIFE

If the church is a community of people claimed and united in Christ by grace through faith and sent to bear witness to the gospel in the whole of their lives, focusing lay ministry on supporting the institutional church isn't sufficient. The Spirit gives gifts to the whole body of believers for the building up of the body and for service to the

¹³ See Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with Church but Not with Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2015).

common good in love (1 Corinthians 12–13). The professional, clerical model of ministry restricts these gifts in ways that disempower ordinary believers. Rather than a community where everyone is invited to discern and utilize their spiritual gifts and to contribute their voice, clergy can monopolize the spiritual work. This has led to a deep passivity and lack of ownership among the wider body of Christ for spiritual growth and discipleship.

There are generations in the church who have been formed in a social contract where their primary responsibility is to join, participate in, and support a voluntary association institution. For some, this has been a source of meaning, connection, and sacrificial service. They have found community and purpose there. The discipleship dimensions of this approach have often tended to be implicit at best, however. How does serving on a property committee or as church treasurer help me follow Jesus in daily life? How is it different than serving on committees or as an officer at Rotary, a garden club, or the American Legion?

Over the years, I have worked directly or indirectly with hundreds of mainline congregations seeking to help ordinary members discover simple spiritual practices, talk about their faith, and experiment with investing presence and relationship with neighbors outside the church. Many of these people are faithful church attendees who have spent their whole lives over many decades participating in congregations. Yet when asked to engage the Bible directly through simple methods of imaginative interpretation, talk about their spiritual experiences, pray in public, or engage neighbors in basic listening and conversation around spiritual experiences, they struggle. These are things that church has never asked of them. They are happy to defer to clergy to do these things, but they do not feel equipped and empowered to do them themselves.

The flip side to this is heightened expectations on clergy for ministry performance that can feel overwhelming. A pastor in one of our Faith+Lead clergy learning community initiatives used the metaphor of a baking show, where she felt like she was constantly expected to show up with a perfectly crafted ministry “cake” for everyone to judge. She felt like this cake was always about to cave in and collapse, given the cultural changes and institutional stresses taking place right now. The congregation was an audience for her performance, not a community of shared spiritual growth, discovery, and mutual equipping.

In order to get beyond this model and its co-dependencies, we must take into view the primary arena for the ministry of the body of Christ as a whole—daily life in the world. Disciples of Jesus are called to serve as ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–21), people who bear God’s Word to their families, workplaces, neighborhoods, networks, societies, and spheres of influence. They are to embody an alternative way of life that calls into question the broader culture’s narratives, assumptions, and systems when they conflict with the gospel of Christ.

The church will not have a faithful and effective alternative witness without its ordinary members living that witness in the places God has put them. If we look primarily to institutional structures and clergy to perform Christian witness, the church will fail. In a time when institutions of all sorts are coming under deep suspicion and withering criticism (sometimes for good reasons), people are far more reluctant to trust a religious institution than a person in their life who embodies an alternative way of life and love. The most effective Christian witness will come through organic relationships and practices of presence, generosity, forgiveness, peacemaking, justice, grace, and unconditional love in spaces of daily life. This cannot be delegated by the church to its clergy, staff, or institutional structures. Rather, those leaders and structures must equip the whole people of God to live Jesus’s way in the power of the Spirit.

Within the biblical framework of spiritual gifts and holistic discipleship, leadership comes from many places and people, not just a few. Rather than monarchical human leadership concentrated on one pastor or a clergy team, the New Testament lists many different roles and gifts that work together in complementary ways to foster the community’s growth and flourishing. Ephesians 4:11–13 is a key instance:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of faith and of knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT IS POLYCENTRIC, MULTIVOCAL, AND COLLABORATIVE.

What this looks like in today's church might mean team-based approaches to various dimensions of ministry, such as pastoral care, education, proclamation, fellowship, evangelism, and service, according to spiritual gifts. Initiatives for ministry might emerge from a variety of places within the local church as the Spirit moves the community, with agency and ownership coming from disciples gifted and called to this work. Clergy should not be expected to do it all.

REDEFINING CLERGY LEADERSHIP

What then are clergy to do? This whole conversation about shifting toward a lay-led, clergy-supported model can seem threatening to clergy, who might not only worry about their livelihoods but also their identity and relevance. I want to argue that the gifts that clergy bring are vital and that shifting paradigms frees them to inhabit a more life-giving role than the clerical/professional paradigm usually allows.

The core functions of clergy, who have specialized theological training, are to exercise theological and spiritual leadership within the church and to equip the people for ministry. Clergy are typically educated more deeply in the theological tradition than average people in the church, and that grounding in theology is essential for Christian communities to navigate faithfully the challenges of Christian identity and witness in today's cultures. Proclaiming the gospel clearly and faithfully is essential to the church's life. There is an apostolic function to this role—preserving, guarding, and passing on the faith of the apostles across the boundaries of time, space, and culture. If the church is to retain its unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, there are members of the community who need to exercise oversight and care of the church's theological identity, life, and witness. This is not the exclusive purview of clergy—lay leaders are also capable of this kind of leadership—but clergy in their ordinations are explicitly accountable to the tradition and wider church for this dimension of ministry and normally trained accordingly.

Theological leadership is also expressed in sacramental ministry, where the faithful administration of baptism and Eucharist among the people of God is a basic and vital element of Christian community

alongside proclamation of the gospel. Pastors are called and trained for this work within the larger body of Christ, with accountability to Scripture, tradition, and the wider church. These enduring elements of theological and sacramental leadership are core to how ordained pastoral ministry has been construed since the Reformation. Together, they are ways in which clergy exercise *interpretive* leadership—helping a community make sense of its life in God.¹⁴ When so many cultural stories operate powerfully to form us, churches need leaders who can reframe, reinterpret, and reground us in God’s Word and its embodiment in sacramental life.

I want to highlight two additional dimensions that are particularly important in a time of shifting paradigms. Most ordained leaders go into ministry because they want to exercise spiritual leadership, not simply administer an institution. Yet once ordained, they often find their time overtaken by managerial tasks, and the spiritual practices that once grounded them in God’s presence and deepened their own discipleship can easily be pushed aside amidst competing demands of caregiving and institutional management. Modeling discipleship and spiritual maturity is not optional in the leadership of Christian communities if those communities are to grow “into the full measure of the stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Theological leadership must be embodied and expressed in spiritual leadership. Without a living, dynamic relationship with the triune God and the ability both to follow God’s leadership in one’s own life and help a community do so, clergy will not be able to help the church deepen its life in Christ.

Jesus’s disciples learned to follow him by literally following him around watching what he did in close proximity, then receiving opportunities to try his ministry on for themselves, while debriefing and processing regularly. It is an apprentice model more than a classroom model, far more formational than informational.

¹⁴ See Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

Second, clergy are to embrace the role of equippers and cultivators of the ministry and spiritual growth of the whole body of Christ. One cannot equip someone to do something that one does not know how to do firsthand, which is why spiritual depth and personal discipleship are essential. The New Testament models for discipleship formation are highly relational, with a focus on mentoring and practice. Jesus's disciples learned to follow him by literally following him around watching what he did in close proximity, then receiving opportunities to try his ministry on for themselves, while debriefing and processing regularly. It is an apprentice model more than a classroom model, far more formational than informational.

This means investing time and relationship with teams of leaders who observe, try on, and assume ministry tasks that clergy might have once done by themselves. Mentoring and coaching are key skills here, creating relatively safe spaces for people to learn, bring their questions, experiment, and receive feedback, encouragement, and correction. The goal should be leadership multiplication (Jesus's strategy), where lay leaders grow in their own ability to do various aspects of ministry to the point that clergy need not be present or directly involved. This can take time and requires a lot of permission-giving with strong support and accountability.

Forming a community of disciples who can faithfully follow Jesus and witness to the gospel in daily life means focusing the life of the church on the difference the gospel makes to all dimensions of human experience. Churches that empower ordinary disciples to bring their questions about what it means to follow Jesus in their workplaces, families, neighborhoods, and civic environments will discover answers to these questions in the dynamic, collaborative interplay of all members of the community. Clergy can't answer these questions alone, and neither can lay people. Together, they can explore Scripture and the Christian tradition, engage in practices of prayer and discernment, try on new behaviors, and learn together.

CONCLUSION

It would be easy to see the erosion of the clergy-led, lay-supported model of ministry simply in terms of loss. Yet shifting toward a lay-led, clergy-supported model brings new possibilities for faithfulness,

energy, and vitality. G. Jeffrey MacDonald discovered in his study of congregations that shifted from full-time to part-time clergy leadership that this transition allowed for new vitality, expressed in greater agency and ownership of spiritual growth, discipleship, and ministry among the people, greater financial sustainability, and deeper community connections.¹⁵ Recasting clergy leadership in terms of equipping, serving as an ambassador for the church in the wider community, and collaborating with a team according to gifts unleashed new possibilities.

Already in many places across the church, pastors are serving as apostolic overseers of clusters of lay-led congregations in a region, mentoring and equipping their leaders. This echoes New Testament and early church models. This is how leadership commonly functions in many parts of the global church, such as Africa, where Christianity is rapidly growing and pastors are outnumbered by evangelists and other lay leaders. It reflects how many communities of color have long organized ministry without the privileges white mainline Protestant churches have enjoyed. Redefining roles for this new season allows for discovery and rediscovery of faithfulness as the Spirit empowers all of God's people for ministry. ⊕

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¹⁵ MacDonald, *Part-Time is Plenty*.