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America's new ministers: a shift in thought

In a fundamental shift in American Protestantism, hundreds of churches across the country are allowing people in the pews to handle pastoral duties, such as delivering sermons.

G. Jeffrey MacDonald

February 6, 2017 Bethel, Vt.—After a week of painting art by day and playing saxophone in a funk band by night, Katie Runde still manages to roust herself for church. One big reason: On any given Sunday, she's either giving the sermon at Christ Episcopal Church in this central Vermont town, or she's listening as a friend takes a turn from the pulpit.

As two dozen people gather for worship and face each other in rows of cushioned chairs, they're looking at the corps of preachers. The keyboardist, the social justice activist, and Ms. Runde, a young artist, are just three of the 10 who take turns giving the weekly sermon. This isn't how anyone here experienced church growing up, when a familiar priest or pastor gave a seminary-shaped message from the pulpit every week.

"If I'm in a rut, sometimes I'll sign up for preaching, and it always helps," says Runde. "You're keeping the congregation in mind while you're writing it. You have to reach out, not just turn inward."

Christ Church is tapping the preaching talents of members of its congregation because, like thousands of churches that have had to slash costs in recent years, it has done away with full-time clergy. Christ Church has no paid staff. Its priest, the Rev. Shelie Richardson, is an insurance agent who got ordained in order to serve her home church as a part-time volunteer cleric. In addition to celebrating the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper) regularly, Ms. Richardson preaches several times a year, but isn't expected to bear the duty alone. That's for the congregation to do together.

"It's up to us to keep the church alive," says Runde. "In some ways, it's more alive because every member is active."

What's emerging at Christ Church is an example of a quiet but revolutionary shift under way in American mainline Protestantism. Across the country, hundreds of long-established congregations are finding new roles for laypeople as the churches undergo a fundamental change from full-time to part-time clergy.

In many cases, the members of the flock never saw themselves as shepherds. But they are now stepping up to save their churches from closure — and to take a personal risk for the Gospel. The trend is helping to redefine what it means to be a parishioner and a pastor in a Protestant movement that encompasses 36 million members in the United States.

"It's people saying, 'we need to take ownership of this if the church is going to continue to serve people and be a worshiping community,'" says Doug Dunlap, co-director of the Small Church Story Project, which collects tales of tiny Maine congregations without full-time pastors.

The implications are far-reaching. The move is not only changing how churches operate: It is altering traditional rules and practices, including who delivers what's most valued in religious life. Laypeople

now carry out ministerial duties formerly associated with clergy, from pastoral care and evangelism to distributing sacraments. What had been the full-time cleric's realm of authority and influence is increasingly spread across an entire congregation.

The shift is also helping the faithful find meaning in new roles. Some say it is bringing worship closer to an ideal that was envisioned a half-century ago.

"Today, sheer force of necessity impels churches toward what was in the 1950s and early 1960s promulgated as the meaning of the church – that is, the active ministry of the laity," says E. Brooks Holifield, professor emeritus of American church history at Emory University in Atlanta and author of "God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America." "It didn't catch on then, but it's catching on more now."

The trend toward using part-time clergy, who often work second jobs or serve multiple congregations, is affecting church life in every major mainline Protestant denomination in every part of the country.

From 2010 to 2015, the number of churches led by part-time clergy jumped from 29 percent to 38 percent, according to a Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Thirty-eight percent of mainline congregations had no full-time paid clergy in 2012, according to the latest National Congregations Study from Duke Divinity School.

Using part-time clergy has, in fact, become the dominant practice in some regions. Some 70 percent of the United Methodist congregations in New England, for example, rely on part-time ministers – up from 55 percent just five years ago. In northern Michigan, none of the Episcopal Church's 24 congregations has a full-time priest. The same goes for two-thirds of Episcopal churches in New Hampshire and Pittsburgh. Among congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in South Carolina and greater Kansas City, more than 80 percent rely on part-time pastors.

Financial pressure is the main force behind the change. Between 2010 and 2015, the median number of people attending churches in the US dropped from 105 to 80, according to FACT. Median budgets shrank from \$150,000 to \$125,000 as young adults shunned going to church and older members died off.

To afford a full-time pastor, a congregation generally needs at least 130 attendees on an average weekend, according to Rick Morse, vice president of Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation, a consultancy for mainline congregations. But 80 percent of American congregations now have attendance below that threshold. That means thousands of churches that haven't yet switched to part-time clergy are likely to give it serious consideration next time they have pulpit turnover, says Mr. Morse.

The financial pressures are great enough that the Christian ministry as a profession may be disappearing. It's giving way to older models of church leadership that date to a preindustrial era.

"The Industrial Revolution really produced the professional guild that we call clergy, and that's actually the thing that's breaking apart," says Cameron Trimble, chief executive officer of the Center for Progressive Renewal, an Atlanta-based nonprofit that does consulting for mainline churches. "The industry of paid clergy, and all the institutions that produce these paid clergy, are collapsing under their own weight because the financial model is so broadly broken."

When budgets shrink, churches sometimes find new revenue by selling buildings and relocating to rented space, which lets them keep a full-time pastor on the payroll. But when the congregation won't part with real estate, the paid pastorate often scales back to three-quarter, half-time, or even quarter part-time work.

If laypeople don't then step in to fill the void, by helping with such things as leading prayers and delivering sermons, churches often continue to decline and eventually close, according to Darren Morgan, associate minister of the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ, an organization of 156 congregations, 68 percent of which now have part-time pastors. Indeed, if more congregants don't get involved as spiritual leaders, thousands of America's oldest churches could be shuttered in the future.

Yet when churchgoers do embrace pastoral duties, their churches often experience new vitality, adding ministries, boosting engagement, and sometimes drawing more people.

"In order to be successful, the laity have to be willing and able to do this," says Mr. Morgan.

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Last September, when a doctor referred a patient to the Rev. Rosanne Roberts of the First United Methodist Church in Hudson, Mass., for counseling about marital problems, Ms. Roberts responded with an unusual suggestion. Perhaps this woman would do better to talk with a member of the congregation instead of her. The pastor saw the situation as a fit for a layperson trained to do Christian counseling with people going through difficult transitions – what's called a Stephen Minister.

"I had an initial meeting with [the woman], but she really needed someone to speak to on a fairly regular basis," says Roberts.

The pastor wasn't shirking her duties. She took several days to pray about the referral. Once the choice was clear, she made the introduction and was able to focus on leading worship, working with church committees, and representing the congregation around town.

What's going on under the steeple in Hudson is an example of how churches are surviving under the new model of part-time pastors combined with laypeople who feel a new calling.

Despite initial fears, Hudson UMC, for instance, is experiencing something of a rebirth. The church has added 10 new members since switching to a part-time pastorate last year. Laypeople are leading a range of ministries, from a midweek adult Bible study to a Christian-based program for stabilizing personal finances.

"In a church situation where you have a larger staff and multiple clergy, you don't feel that you're contributing as much," says Sam Chapman, a native Southerner who joined Hudson UMC two years ago. "Here we feel that we're getting a lot accomplished for the pastor. The church is more than a place where I come on Sunday morning. I have responsibility that I like to have."

Pastors are adjusting how they carry out their roles, too. At Acton Congregational Church in Acton, Maine, the Rev. AbbyLynn Haskell leads worship and oversees a staff of four fellow part-timers, but congregants carry out many of the ministries with Ms. Haskell's encouragement. Laypeople take Communion to people unable to get out of their homes and spearhead special events. Average worship

attendance during the school year has grown from 45 to 55 in the past five years. In summer months, attendance tops 80. It's all part of a resurgence for a 235-year-old church that was closed 10 months a year from the 1940s until 1979.

One Stephen Minister, Maxine Crouch, started a "Circle of Hope" pastoral care group, and she counsels people with Haskell's blessing. That wasn't the case in another church she attended, where the full-time minister saw counseling as his job and discouraged her from doing it.

"Pastors have to rethink what they do" when they serve part-time, says Joyce Cunningham, a longtime member of Acton Congregational.

If any area remains largely reserved for clergy, it's the sacraments: what are considered outward and visible signs of God's grace, which the faithful receive in rituals traditionally led by pastors who are either licensed or ordained. But laypeople are increasingly involved with this ministry, too.

At St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Henderson, Nev., laypeople lead funeral services and preside at two weekday Eucharist services, where they serve bread and wine previously consecrated by their part-time priest. In Fair Haven, Vt., laity from St. Luke's Episcopal Church no longer wait for a priest to administer the sacrament of unction (last rites) because they don't have a priest. Instead they do it themselves, using holy oil that's been consecrated by their bishop.

St. Luke's has a committee that has outlined how priestly roles will be spread across the faith community. One person will oversee care for the suffering. Another will line up preachers. A third, Melanie Combs, accepted the congregation's call to become the flock's volunteer priest, after a year or two of training.

"This isn't about the size of the group," said guest priest Rolfe Lawson during worship at St. Luke's last summer. "You concentrate on being the church, and the numbers come or don't come. Who cares? It's what you're doing as church that counts in the long run."

Still, not everyone is enamored of the part-time clergy movement. Some denominational leaders believe that the size of a congregation does matter. They urge churches to maintain a full-time pastor for as long as possible.

"Anytime one of our congregations moves from having a full-time pastor to a part-time pastor, we believe they're beginning the process of a slow death of the congregation," says the Rev. Sara Anderson, associate to the bishop of the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Ms. Anderson is trying to help some 100 ELCA congregations in New England avoid the move to part-time clerics when their current pastors step down. Forty of the 183 congregations in the region have already gone to part-time clergy, she says, and all 40 of them are "fragile."

Some church authorities also caution that the success of the new lay-led ministries depends on one crucial element: trust. Unless congregants believe in what their fellow laypeople are offering, they won't take part and congregations will wither.

John Wimberly, a Washington, D.C.-based consultant to mainline congregations, finds that well-intentioned laypeople and Stephen Ministers often get fewer people to reach out to them in

congregations where clergy traditionally did the pastoral care. They fear lay counselors won't keep confidences. "Most people still want to go to the pastor," Mr. Wimberly says.

Skeptics agree that certain essential jobs still need to be done by a pastor. "About the only thing a part-time pastor can do is lead Sunday morning worship and visit the sick," Anderson says. "For vital congregations ... a pastor needs to be doing less visiting and more leading and engagement with their local community."

Yet historians see the part-time model as one with deep roots in Christianity – and ripe for a revival. They note how the apostle Paul took no salary from the churches he founded and instead made tents for a living. Throughout the Middle Ages, clergy shared no common occupation. Some lived as monks in monasteries. Others worked as teachers, lawyers, administrators, and civil servants.

In America, most Protestant congregations (except in Presbyterian and Congregationalist circles) relied on part-time clergy well into the 19th century. It was a matter of numbers. Trained pastors were so scarce that they had to serve multiple congregations. Laity were expected to catechize children, visit the sick, lead devotions.

The expectation that every pulpit would have a full-time pastor gained currency among Episcopalians, Lutherans, and others in the mid- to late-19th century, Mr. Holifield says. They aspired to be like New York's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn and Riverside Church in Manhattan, where standing-room-only crowds gathered to hear celebrity preachers such as Henry Ward Beecher. Less prominent churches, especially in cities and well-off towns, hired full-timers as soon as they had sufficient funds. By the early 20th century, full-time clergy became widely accepted, except in poorer rural areas (though some worshipers, such as Christian Scientists, have always relied on laypeople to lead services). By the 1960s, however, a new ideal was taking shape amid broader cultural ferment and the questioning of authority.

"It became a theological ideal that *every* Christian is equipped, set aside, set apart by his or her baptism for ministry in the world," Holifield says. But scholars found few living up to those standards. "That's the ideal, [but] in fact the minister in most congregations ends up just about doing it all. The congregations tend to be passive spectators."

Congregations had become convinced that having a full-time pastor was the mark of a healthy church. That assumption can be hard for churches to shed, but now they are doing it out of necessity.

"We were afraid we wouldn't be a real church" if the pastorate became part time, says Ron Bookbinder, a ruling elder at Clarendon Presbyterian Church in Arlington, Va. But the congregation nonetheless made the move, which freed up funds for an administrative assistant to carry out the work that was taxing the pastor, David Ensign.

"I feel a closer connection to God and Christ because I can do this," Mr. Bookbinder says. "It's not like there's anyone between me and God."

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As congregants take up pastoral roles, they are figuring out what's required of them to carry out their new duties. Sometimes it's simply a matter of experimentation.

Runde, the artist in Vermont, affectionately describes her cohorts at Christ Church as a “rogue bunch” who take delivering sermons seriously but do it without oversight or doctrinal guidelines. At Hudson UMC, a husband and wife recently received lay preacher training and are now available to substitute for the pastor.

Tom Hall has been less formal about his preparation to mount the pulpit at Tuttle Road United Methodist Church in Cumberland, Maine. Preaching is certainly different from the day job of Mr. Hall, an engineer who works for a contractor of Bath Iron Works, which builds ships for the US Navy. But lay preachers are needed to fill in for the pastor, Linda Brewster, who works full time as a family nurse practitioner and needs one Sunday off each month.

Hall often starts his sermon research where so much begins in the 21st century – with Google. “Boy, there’s a wealth of sermons out there online,” he says, relaxing one Sunday after church while the congregation eats fruit and pastries. “A lot of them good – lots of horrible stuff, too.”

He reads lectionary texts and gathers ideas from sermons in cyberspace while being careful not to plagiarize anything. Finding material is fun, he says. It’s the delivery that is difficult. “When you look out and see all those faces out there, it brings you back to reality very soon,” he says.

In Gloucester, Mass., where three congregations on one block now all have part-time clergy, the hope is for the ordained to equip laypeople for the new frontier they’re entering. At St. John’s Episcopal Church, the Rev. Bret Hays has led a multiweek workshop for congregants to rethink what evangelism entails and learn to do it on their own.

Years ago, St. John’s parishioners relied on a priest to represent Christ and grow the church in this commercial fishing town. But times have changed. As the face of institutional religion, clergy now encounter more open hostility. Laypeople are less reviled and more apt to get a hearing, Mr. Hays says. “It’s not just a strategy of equipping the laity,” he says. “It’s also a strategy to respond to the phenomenon that makes an invitation from a layperson count for much more than an invitation from a priest.”

Church members, too, seem to be emboldened by the new experiences. Hall, for one, has advocated Tuttle Road UMC becoming a “reconciling” congregation that would welcome people of all sexual orientations and affirm their romantic relationships. “In the past, I would never have challenged the full-time pastor on any doctrinal issue or anything biblical,” he says.

In the end, while churches with part-time clergy are not for everyone, they do occupy a growing place in American religion – helping some congregations revive and bringing new diversity to the dais. “Where else can you go where you might have a different voice for nine weeks in a row from the pulpit?” asks Eric Richardson, a member of Christ Church in Bethel. “The variety is an attraction.”