

# RESEARCH NOTES

## *Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

### *The Changing Role of Clergy*

**CHANGES IN CONGREGATIONAL** culture cannot be understood apart from changes in the role of clergy. The two are not synonymous, but they are deeply intertwined.

In our first year of research, it has become obvious there is no single trend at work in changes to clergy leadership, but we have identified what we believe are salient patterns. Our goal here is to name some of these tendencies and to categorize them to test hypotheses and gain clarity. As always, we want to describe accurately, but our goal is to understand what the changes mean for congregational life.

#### **Pastoral Authority**

The first tendency has to do with *pastoral authority*: Where does it come from? How much active leadership do congregants expect? Is movement generally toward centralization or decentralization of the various pastoral functions?

or when their sermons were printed in local newspapers, are long behind us. But pastors still play important leadership roles within their congregations and sometimes within some larger community of shared interest (e.g., African American pastors as leaders in civil rights, though even this role has changed over the decades).

However, our observations suggest that the pastoral role is being decentralized to a significant degree. In large mainline, predominantly white Protestant congregations, as well as in the larger African American congregations, we are seeing movement toward leadership roles for supporting clergy or other professional staff who have significant responsibilities beyond what assistants have traditionally done. Indeed, in the largest congregations, associates are essentially vice-presidents with full responsibilities for their functions. We even see shared preaching responsibilities in some settings. We are seeing sabbaticals among senior clergy with authority transferred, at least temporarily, to top associates. In Central Indiana, the increase in sabbaticals occurs within smaller congregations as well, thanks in large measure to a clergy renewal program begun years ago by Lilly Endowment.

Even in the largest evangelical congregations we are seeing a move toward decentralization. The individual sites of multi-campus congregations are now often run independently. For instance, the many Common Ground campuses are all now “locally owned and operated,” a move away from a time when they were part of the same organization with central leadership. Cornerstone Lutheran’s campuses have their own preachers and leaders even though the campuses share a common budget. Mount Pleasant Christian Church (MPCC) in Greenwood has three “Impact” sites in addition to the main campus, but each works independently with MPCC’s economic support.



There is no question clerical authority within the larger society has receded over the past several decades. The days when pastors spoke for entire communities,

It is true that Trader's Point has one preacher giving one sermon to the all the sites simultaneously, but this seems more the exception than the rule.

In Catholic churches, pastoral associates, sometimes (but not always) nuns, are often the day-to-day operations managers. And most parishes have diverse committee structures. Priests have primarily spiritual and sacramental responsibilities in most of the congregations we have studied so far, but they often do not have primary responsibility for other programming.

In one sense, movement toward decentralization is not surprising. As we noted in *Sacred Circles, Public Squares (SCPS)*, decentralized authority is a feature of the late 20th century. The story of Indianapolis and its congregations can certainly be read as a story of diffusion and differentiation. (Of course, we also argue in SCPS that Indianapolis went to great lengths to maintain a shared core, but that is a story for another time.)

However, some scholars have suggested that disagreement about the nature of political authority is at the heart of our current national polarization. If so, perhaps we are seeing its counterpart among our congregations. But this result is difficult to pin down. Conservatives often favor strong, traditional leadership, but they are also more likely to favor subsidiarity and local control. Liberals favor individual choice, but they are also more likely to prefer a strong federal, centralized, government.

While we are all familiar with conservative religious leaders who exercise considerable scriptural and charismatic authority in their congregations, we have not, so far, seen much evidence locally that this trend is on the upswing. Even among the big evangelical congregations there seems to be a movement toward decentralizing.

This question of authority raises an important question about how clergy lead their congregations. Some seem to work as captains, literally managing their associates as officers with specific responsibilities. Others have become more like college presidents or non-profit CEOs, serving as the public (and preaching) face of the congregation but keeping an executive pastor as COO to run the daily operations. Some have taken the role of spiritual leader with day-to-day programming done by others. Pastors of small congregations must still, of course, be all things to all people. But even there, the



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question of arises of whether they can lead by directive or whether their primary role is as influencer-in-chief. What we may be witnessing at all levels, of course, is the increasing professionalization of the clergy, with its shift toward functional specialization, which is a hallmark of modern, affluent societies.

Trends in attendance—ever fewer people attend weekly—make this “how” question even more urgent: How can a pastor best influence people she might see only once a month? How much authority can a leader ever have in a group where members think of themselves more as affiliates than as co-owners?

### **Looking Outward/Doubling Down**

We have heard two different refrains about how congregations must change to meet the current environment. The first is “looking outward.” Many pastors have expressed their concern that their group has become too insular. Leaders are nudging their congregations outward, asking them to think about their local neighborhood or some wider community.

This is not surprising. The history of the past several decades in the U.S. reflects movement toward individual choice and increasing autonomy on several measures. Congregations are hoping to sustain their own communities, but they are also looking for ways to build bridges toward those around them.

The second refrain has to do with emphasizing spiritual and religious goals as the special religious prerogative. Conservative Catholics, especially, are worried that their ministries have listed toward the secular, that they have lost touch with spiritual realities expressed in the sacraments. Doubling-down on spiritual and theological needs is a different way to emphasize what

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is distinctive about congregations as organizations and religion as an institution

These two trends are not necessarily in conflict, but they are also not necessarily overlapping. Both appear to be responses to a world that has become individualized, consumerized, politicized and even secularized. One trend calls for congregations to see themselves as worshipping communities within a larger community, one calls for congregations to see themselves as participants in a larger spiritual universe. But both call for congregants to look beyond themselves, to see something distinctive in what they do as members of a religious body.

We are trying to understand the variables at play in these decisions. Age seems to be one such variable. Several congregations in our study have recently called pastors who are considerably younger than the average age of their members. Some of these younger leaders are, not surprisingly, eager to get their congregations to “look outside,” to be less insular as they consider what it means to be part of their wider community.

**THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION** also plays a role. Sacramental traditions are likely to be in the doubling-down category. At least one Catholic church in our study has a new priest who is definitely doubling down on spirituality even as the congregation, through its various committees, is pushing to look outward.

**NEIGHBORHOOD ORIENTATION** is important as well. Our first *Responsive Congregations* was about Northside Mission Ministries at Second Presbyterian, part of an effort to look outward toward Washington Township, the area congregants identified as “in view of their steeple.” Common Ground at 46th and Illinois has a special commitment to a smaller geography, the Butler-Tarkington neighborhood, so much so that they gradually devolved the other Common Ground congregations located elsewhere. Some congregations appear to balance the wide view with one with a tighter focus. The congregations of the United Northwest Area (UNWA) such as Barnes United Methodist Church, and New Era Baptist are dedicated to their church’s local neighborhood even as they draw their members from a large geographic area. They also support ministries that are more citywide (such as Ten Point Coalition).

We do not have this figured out in any sense, but we are trying to identify the important variables that help

us understand what kind of congregations, under what kind of circumstances, develop adaptive strategies such as “looking outward” and “doubling down.” And we are especially interested in how the pastoral role is connected to these decisions.

## Changes in the Role of Support Structures

We also have heard a sentiment that appears in congregational studies literature: Denominations and judicatories offer less support than they once did. Admittedly, this is a difficult thing for us to measure, must less to demonstrate conclusively. But it seems fair to assume that if the role of umbrella or executive organizations has changed, then this has had some important effects on pastoral leadership and responsibilities.



Indianapolis is an interesting, and unrepresentative, place to study this phenomenon because we surely have the strongest congregational support network in the U.S. One of the nation’s largest foundations is in Indianapolis, with an emphasis on supporting congregations. Our advisory committee includes the director of the Center for Congregations, an organization that gave \$13 million to help 2700 congregations boost their technology capacity in the pandemic. It also includes the director of the Center for Pastoral Excellence which, among its other programs, gives several million dollars away each year for pastoral sabbaticals as part of their Clergy Renewal Program. Finally, it also includes the former director of the Wabash Pastoral Leadership program. Every congregation represented in our advisory committee has received some sort of direct support; most of the

congregations in our study have received it too. Our project works with the Association of Religion Data Archives, a group that undoubtedly provides support to denominations and congregations that frequently do not have professional sociologists and other planning professionals working for them. Missing from this mix, of course, are the judicatories, which by all accounts have experienced changes that has lessened their ability to support congregations as fully as they once did.

Even with this support network, denominations are under pressure. United Methodists are in the midst of a protracted separation. Catholics and Southern Baptists have experienced recent, very public, controversies stemming from internal disagreements. Much recent religious growth has been within independent Christian congregations, so the “market share” of the denominational organizations continues to decline.

We do not presume to have full expertise on this matter, but we are seeking to learn more about the changing role of judicatories, especially as these changes affect pastors. Traditionally, denominations provided help with preaching resources, educational literature, career development, retirement planning, and a host of other services congregations and their pastors require. If pastors now look elsewhere for these resources, this is likely to have a broad effect on how clergy do their jobs. We hope to improve our understanding of this change in the coming months.

## A Profession in Transition

As we began our project, we had hypotheses about several specific adaptations congregations were making to a changing environment. We were interested in structural changes such as technology and organizational realignment, but we were also interested in cultural changes such as anti-racism and changing family composition. It has become clear, though, that many clergy see these specific changes in a larger frame: They are concerned that congregations themselves face an existential crisis because they represent a traditional form of membership organization that has waned over the past few decades.

Their specific adaptations must be seen through this larger lens.

It would be unfair to lay all of this at the feet of pastors. No group of leaders in any organization can hold back the tide of societal change. But it is imperative for us to track the way social changes affect the pastoral role within changing congregations.

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- 1 How has the role of clergy changed over the past two decades? What explains these changes?
- 2 What variables would you identify in understanding why congregations choose strategies such as “looking outward” and “doubling down?” What other strategies would you identify as important alongside, or instead of, these two? What is the role of clergy in choosing these strategies?
- 3 In what ways has your judicatory changed, either regionally or nationally? How has this changed the role of pastor as congregational leader—and if so, how?