

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

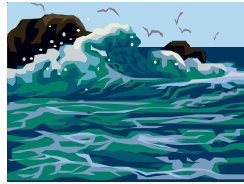


NUMBER 152 - JUNE 2005

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Vitality in turmoil

The leadership of American religion is in the midst of a sea change, say James P. Wind and Gilbert R. Rendle, authors of a recent report published by the Alban Institute. We are in a time of great crisis, Wind and Rendle believe, and American religion hasn't faced up to the depths of its predicament despite mountains of statistics about decline and countless stories of institutional pain. Many U.S. religious leaders, Wind and Rendle find, see mainly turmoil, yet others believe that talk of turmoil and crisis is blinding us to the ferment, growth, and new vitality that are emerging.



From these apparently contradictory views, the Alban report authors conclude that both turmoil and ferment, both crisis and opportunity, are present in this period of great transition in American religion. It contains not only systemic dysfunction but also emerging vitality.



Our challenge: seeing both aspects

Churches' challenge, say the Alban authors, is to recognize both aspects of the picture and keep them in "responsible tension." The turmoil shows a system grappling with deep issues, these authors believe, and the crucial question is whether the system is essentially healthy enough to put up a fight. That question is hard to answer because there is no coordinated, systematic base of information about U.S. religious leadership.

The Alban Institute is trying to develop such a base. But what can church members do? First we can become more aware of what's happening. Then we can think more seriously about what we might do to help remedy the problems and promote the vitality.



Increasing the vitality

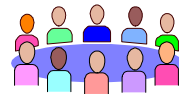
Congregations can't rise above their leadership, and faith communities can't develop large visions without visionary leaders. That's what the nondenominational Alban Institute finds from its extensive experience working with religious groups.



In most mainline churches, the top denominational and congregational leadership positions are reserved for clergy, so having top-quality clergy leadership needs high priority. Now that there is a shortage of clergy in many U.S. churches, however, many lower-level positions formerly filled by clergy must now be filled by lay professionals and volunteers. But this may be a needed change. We shouldn't expect clergy to do all the ministry for us, or to provide all the leadership. God calls every Christian to some kind of ministry.

Making help available

Lay members' roles can include being leaders themselves, but their role also includes helping their churches to have first-class clergy leadership. One way in which we lay members need to play that role is by ensuring that pastors get the necessary time and funds for continuing education and for sharing with other pastors. We need to insist, too, that pastors get continuing education aimed at their particular shortcomings, rather than merely getting required credit by attending whatever events the pastor happens to find convenient.



We can also help to provide programs outside of our denominational systems and geographic areas, for giving our pastors top-quality continuing education, spiritual guidance, and opportunities to share safely with peers. For some lay church members, this means making significant monetary contributions to such programs, since much of their purpose is defeated by having to depend on the denominational system for funds.

What else might you do, if you're a lay church member, to help the church become healthier and increase its vitality?



A prevailing sense of crisis

In interviews and discussions with religious leaders from many denominations and many parts of the U.S., Alban finds that the turmoil and crisis side of the church picture is mentioned far more often than the ferment side. Among most of the leaders Alban has interviewed, from bishops to local pastors and staff members, a sense of crisis prevails.



Alban finds that there is quite a bit of information and scholarly literature about membership decline in mainline denominations, but other aspects of the crisis are less widely recognized. Three especially stand out, and all three relate to the current clergy leadership system.

■ A shortage of clergy

Most of the major Christian and Jewish denominations, the Alban Institute finds, are facing or soon will face a shortage of clergy to meet current congregational demands. Fewer people are entering congregational ministry, and clergy retirements are increasing. Also, more persons entering the ministry are waiting until mid-life to enter, giving them fewer years to serve. Many denominations' statistics show an alarming drop in the number of clergy age 35 and younger.



In addition, rising costs of pensions and medical care are making fewer congregations financially able to support an ordained, full-time pastor. American religious experience is heavily skewed toward small congregations in which the median worship attendance is 75, and in some denominations the number of smaller congregations is increasing.

■ A decrease in quality

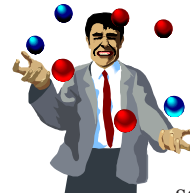
Across denominations and faith traditions, Alban finds, the decrease in the number of young people who choose the ordained ministry as their first career has been accompanied by a decrease in quality. Fewer of the top students from undergraduate schools are choosing the ordained ministry. Besides, many of those who choose it enter academic positions or ministries beyond the local church, rather than congregational ministry.



Why this decrease in the quantity and quality of people choosing ordained ministry? Apparently for several reasons. One is that the job of pastor now seems unmanageable. It has come to be a 24/7 job. Pastors no longer seem to be allowed to have any boundaries between personal and professional time.

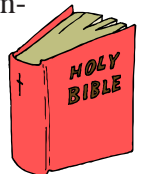


Many pastors therefore are in "advanced stages of burnout," while many others seem to be on the way to it, the Alban Institute finds. Many feel "deeply ambivalent" about their ministry. Many find their denominational system unsupportive or even dysfunctional, or unjust and untrustworthy. Many feel the system too often gives the demands of sick congregations and unreasonable members inappropriate weight in church conflicts. Understandably, pastors with such feelings aren't likely to recommend the ordained ministry enthusiastically to others.



In addition, the wide variety of roles a pastor is now expected to fill and to fill expertly creates expectations that are often unclear and are virtually impossible for any one person to meet. Members expect their pastors to be expert counselors, professional-quality speakers, and managers as skilled as the CEOs, CFOs, and personnel directors of large corporations, as well as being theologians and Bible scholars.

While expectations of pastors have increased, however, making seminaries need to provide more kinds of training, students' preparation before they get to seminaries has decreased. Seminaries are finding that many incoming students have low levels of basic religious literacy. Like much of the rest of today's population, they haven't gotten much general religious knowledge or familiarity with the Bible's contents from their homes, churches, or the surrounding culture before arriving at seminary.



Also, many haven't taken the undergraduate arts and humanities courses that students have traditionally taken in preparation for going to seminary after graduation. That means seminaries have to start with the basics, not with what incoming seminary students of earlier years were ready for. Seminaries are

essentially having to provide remedial work before starting on their real job.



In addition, seminaries now find many incoming students arrive with “high personal and therapeutic needs.” If these aren’t met, no amount of academic content and practical experience will prepare the students to be good pastors.

Also, the monetary cost of attending seminary, like other costs, keeps growing, keeping most students from attending classes full time. Seminaries, therefore, are under increasing pressure to shorten the time needed for a degree. Time pressure is especially great for second-career seminary students, most of whom have a family to keep supporting while they attend. So although pastors are now expected to have more training than in earlier years, students now have less time available for getting it.



Adding to all these factors that now affect the number and quality of clergy, society’s regard for clergy has declined in recent years. Also, monetary income for pastors, especially in the earlier years of their careers, is significantly less than for many other professionals with comparable levels of formal education. Many college students thus tend to choose other professions in preference to the ordained ministry.

■ Low retention of clergywomen

Female students now make up more than thirty-five percent of seminary graduates, but after becoming ordained they have a high dropout rate. A recent study of United Methodist clergywomen found that nearly a third of ordained UMC clergywomen were no longer serving local churches, and that women were leaving



local church ministry at a rate ten percent higher than men.

Why? The study cites glass ceilings, pay inequity, and “various kinds of harassment.” Clergywomen especially emphasized “lack of support from the hierarchical system, difficulty in maintaining their integrity in the system, family responsibilities, and rejection from their congregations.”



Among the mistreatment clergywomen reported was “being told by parishioners that going on the youth ski trip counted as personal vacation time.” They mentioned clergy colleagues who called them “little helpers.” (That reminds me of the many church members I hear condescendingly calling their pastor the “lady preacher.”) It’s no wonder that many women choose not to stay in such situations.

New life within the turmoil



In the midst of all this turmoil and dysfunction that is affecting American church leadership, however, the Alban Institute finds hopeful signs of new life. They report that the number of lay members taking initiative and responsibility for ministries is increasing. This change has been needed for a long time, but as long as clergy were plentiful, many lay members assumed they only needed to be passive spectators and receivers of ministry. Those may need to be our roles temporarily at certain times of our lives, but if we’re permanently passive, we hurt the church and ourselves.

New worship services that are sensitive to the congregation’s surroundings and to the ways in which today’s younger people communicate are also

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

helping to increase attendance and bring congregations to life.

Some congregations are radically reinventing themselves in order to increase their vitality and effectiveness, the Alban Institute finds. They're starting to express the Christian message passionately but realistically, instead of in ways so narrow and outdated they won't be taken seriously, or so anemic no one will notice.

The Alban Institute reminds us that many Christian clergy and laity are providing well-informed

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?
—Isaiah 43:19

civic leadership and prophetic voices, publicly addressing today's issues within their local communities and the wider society in creative ways. Today's lay members have gotten used to a wide range of new leadership models and roles, and are better educated than any previous generation. Most recognize that the time when clergy were the only learned people in the community is long past. It's important, therefore, for lay Christians as well as pastors to work toward increasing the vitality that's emerging within today's church turmoil.



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Connections

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Vitality in the midst of turmoil

June 2005

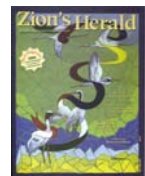


If you want the Alban Institute report this issue of *Connections* refers to, you can download it free from www.alban.org/leadership.asp.

To buy a printed copy for \$10 prepaid, phone 301-718-4407, ext. 239, or mail a check to The Alban Institute, 7315 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda MD 20814. Ask for "The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations."



You can read an interview with Barbara in the May/June 2005 issue of *Zion's Herald* magazine. See it on-line at www.zionsherald.com.



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