

Gains and losses in the professionalization of the pastorate

Ervin R. Stutzman

Few of the many changes in the Mennonite Church in recent decades have had such a dramatic effect on congregational life as the professionalization of pastoral ministry. Along with more visible markers of societal assimilation, this development serves as one of the clearest divisions in practice between more conservative or Old Order groups and more progressive Mennonite churches.

The Anabaptist movement began largely as a lay movement, with some antipathy toward clergy in the Roman Catholic and Magisterial Reformation churches. Although the various descendants of the Anabaptist churches developed different patterns for choosing and ordaining pastoral leaders, the majority maintained a volunteer or lay leadership approach until the mid-twentieth century.

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A look at the past

A. Lloyd Swartzendruber served as bishop and lead minister at East Union Mennonite Church near Kalona, Iowa, during the 1950s and '60s. The congregation's ministers received no designated salary, so they needed to earn their living from other work. Most ministers in rural churches were farmers whose children helped with the farm work

when these men were tending to their ministerial duties. Not so with A. Lloyd, who as a young man had been called by Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities into a leadership role in a city mission. A. Lloyd served for nine years as superintendent of the Mennonite Children's Home in Kansas City, Kansas, and his wife, Mary, served as matron. They moved their young family back to Iowa in 1946, where A. Lloyd was ordained to the minis-

try a few months later. He was called by the congregation to become bishop and lead minister in 1954.

A. Lloyd worked at trades that allowed time for study, sermon preparation, and other pastoral responsibilities. Ministers were moving from being primarily preachers to doing pastoral visits and other ministerial duties. The congregation compensated A. Lloyd for his pastoral work by taking up an offering for his support every fourth Sunday of the month. The amount varied with many factors, including the price of farm goods.

In late 1957 or early 1958, as the story goes, A. Lloyd was driving a high-mileage 1950 Chevrolet. Because the area had few

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paved roads, the car took a beating on some pastoral visits. One week a visiting evangelist accompanied A. Lloyd each day to meet members of the congregation. Toward the end of the week of revival meetings, the old Chevy “blew a rod” on the way home from one such visit, disabling the engine not far from A. Lloyd’s home in Kalona. Because the engine failed as they were coming down the hill just north of Kalona, A. Lloyd and his guest were able to coast into town.

The next Sunday morning, the guest speaker began his sermon by describing his visits with the bishop, including the experience of rolling into Kalona in a disabled car. He also reported that just before the church service, he had walked around the parking lot looking at the cars. Well over half of them, he observed, were models newer than the bishop’s car. To enable the bishop to continue serving the congregation well, it would be a good thing to raise the money for a new car right then and there. He invited the ushers to distribute blank checks from area banks, and then he gave time for married couples to consult about how much they would give. When the ushers took up the special offering some ten minutes later, the congregation was delighted to learn that they had given enough money to buy a new car not only for A. Lloyd but also for the other minister, who eventually succeeded A. Lloyd as bishop. The event still stands out to A. Lloyd’s family as a sign of support and care at a time when lay leaders served without a salary.¹

What have we gained—and lost—with professionalization?

While such an event could take place today, it seems much less likely in a congregation with a professional pastor. The rise of other professions in society, and Mennonites' entrance into them after World War II, paved the way for the practice of hiring professional pastors. This change was complemented by seminary education in preparation for pastoral ministry.

For purposes of this article, we define a professional pastorate as one including these elements: (1) some level of formal training in preparation for the role, (2) ministerial credentials issued by an area conference or church, (3) specified compensation, (4) a job description or articulated role expectations, and (5) expectations of adherence to professional standards produced by the denomination. How has the professionalization of pastoral ministry changed Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of ministry? What have we gained? What have we lost? What are the unique contributions of professional pastors in the church as it seeks to be part of God's mission?

I have divided the many changes into four categories to be considered: (1) the process for calling pastors, (2) congregational expectations of the pastoral role, (3) the nature of the pastoral work, and 4) the profile of those who serve as pastors.

The process for calling pastors. The move toward a professional pastorate has dramatically affected the process for calling pastors. In A. Lloyd Swartzendruber's day, the majority of pastors were called from within the congregation. Now many, if not most, congregations invite a pastor from outside. Many congregations rely on the denominational call system, which makes available a list of potential candidates who have been approved for ministry. The call system also provides congregations with a set of guidelines for calling a pastor. Most congregations assign a search committee to the task of identifying, interviewing, and recommending someone for the pastoral role.

One potential gain from these changes is that they introduce perspectives from outside the congregation. The area conference and denomination can be involved in shaping the congregation's self-understanding and helping a church develop the best potential match from a much broader list of candidates. Second, women and other people not recognized by typical congregations are

much more likely to be considered for pastoral ministry. People with a sense of call to ministry have expanded opportunities to get pastoral training, and upon graduation to enjoy the recommendation of seminary faculty. In addition, people new to the Anabaptist way can be considered alongside insiders with many relationships and long experience in the church.

Some long-time observers complain that this self-selection process for pastoral preparation means the church is losing some of its best potential pastors to other callings. In an older calling system that involved nominations from within the congregation and the use of election or the lot, candidates felt a sense of immediacy that usually does not come with having one's shoulder tapped or hearing a suggestion that one consider going to seminary.

Further, small congregations with fewer financial resources may find it difficult to attract a professional pastor. The result is empty pulpits, a situation far less common when laypeople were called from within the congregation. Again, people within the congregation have far less expectation that a current member or someone they know will be their next pastor. The pastor may well come as a stranger who is new to the relationships and family systems in the church. It may take a new pastor years to develop enough trust to lead effectively.

Congregations may be tempted to shop for pastors as though they were commodities. A congregation may even steal a good pastor from another congregation by offering better compensation. Further, the congregation may be tempted to conflate the concepts of vocation and profession, ideas that may best be kept separate. All believers, as Virgil Vogt helpfully explains in *The Christian Calling*, have a Christian vocation, a call to be followers of Jesus Christ.² Yet not all have Christian pastoral ministry as a profession. To make a living, people may have a variety of jobs, businesses, and professions.

Congregational expectations of the role. The professionalization of the pastorate has also brought significant change to role expectations of pastoral leaders. The two elements are interrelated; changing expectations brought about or hastened the process of professionalization. As A. Lloyd Swartzendruber's story indicates, the expectations for the pastoral role grew over time,

requiring adjustments to compensation. When volunteers served in the role of pastor, there were few, if any, written job descriptions. Not many ministers had seminary training, and there were few professional standards.

These developments in the twentieth century resulted in a number of gains. It is better for pastors to function with explicit rather than implicit expectations. The introduction of professional standards provides a greater degree of protection for members, who sometimes suffered ethical or professional incompetence through the ministry of untrained pastors.

There are also losses to be considered. Congregations may have unrealistic expectations of their pastor, particularly if they approach the job description and compensation of a pastor from the standpoint of getting the most for their money. The process of negotiating pastoral compensation can lead people to see a pastoral vocation as just another job. There is also the possibility that congregants expect the pastor to be available to meet all

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their needs, especially during times of crisis. Finally, congregations' heightened expectations for pastors may create a division between clergy and laity that does not fit Anabaptist understandings of ministry.

The nature of the work. In A. Lloyd Swartzendruber's day, congregations called a preacher. Today, they more often hire a pastor. One could describe the shift as a move from a largely prophetic ministry to a more

priestly role. Further, the role of the pastor has expanded to include many other administrative tasks, in a large congregation often including supervision of an administrative assistant and other pastoral workers. The increase of multiple-staff teams has led to greater specialization, and a larger congregation may have a pastor of worship, a pastor of youth, and a minister of education, among others.

From the congregational point of view, there have surely been many gains with this move. Many congregations now have a team of pastors that provides a full range of services. At least some professional pastors are trained to detect serious problems and to refer troubled individuals to trained specialists.

There may also be some losses. In order to provide a full-time role for a pastor, some congregations cobble together dissimilar or even incompatible roles, with the assumption that a generalist pastor should be able to do a broad range of work effectively.

The 2006 Mennonite member profile found a significant difference between ministers and lay members regarding role expectations of the pastor. A much higher percentage of pastors saw their role as equipping the laity for ministry, while members saw the pastor's role as serving members' needs. When the role of

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a pastor shifts largely to caretaking and priestly functions, one may lose a prophetic edge. Pastors may feel that they cannot express their honest feelings or confront the congregation without risking a bad evaluation or even losing their job.

John Howard Yoder's *The Fullness of Christ* is a study of the Apostle Paul's view of the ministry; it includes Yoder's serious critique of professional clergy as exemplified in the modern Christian church. He laments that over time the church has become increasingly clergy-centered, through a "multitude of tiny

changes, mostly in the same direction," finally leading to "a set of forms and ceremonies more like the non-Christian cults of the first century than like early Christianity."³

The profile of those who serve as pastors. In the Mennonite church of Swartzendruber's day, nearly all preachers were married white men. Professionalization gradually led to a change in the general profile of the people who are called to the pastoral role, including women, singles, and individuals from different racial/ethnic groups. So, on the one hand, there is the potential gain of a greater diversity of people attracted to and suited for these roles. Those who do not enjoy public speaking may use their gifts in administrative or care-giving roles. As the pastoral role becomes more professional, it attracts people who are well suited to professional life, and who can relate well to other professionals in the congregation, such as teachers or medical workers.

On the other hand, professional pastors may find it more difficult to relate to business people, especially those who are self-

employed or entrepreneurs. In the days when preachers were nominated and chosen out of the congregation, they were more likely to be entrepreneurial leaders.

What are the unique contributions of professional pastors in the church as it seeks to be part of God's mission?

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the move to the professional pastorate is the ability of pastors to give their full attention to the missional task. Because professional pastors often serve as generalists with a view to the whole congregation, they have the unique opportunity to assess and integrate every aspect of the church's ministry from the standpoint of mission.

Many resources are available to professional pastors, including denominational publications and support systems, continuing education provided by seminaries and parachurch agencies, as well as affinity networks to provide coaching and mentoring to help pastors lead congregations in taking the next step in missional development.

Pastors can also have a significant role in developing congregational processes of discernment, raising up new leaders within the congregational context. Through the ministry of spiritual direction and discernment, pastors can encourage members to explore God's call for their lives, including the call to pastoral ministry.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that professional pastors can make is to empower the members of the congregation for their unique calling. As part of their prophetic ministry, pastors can challenge congregants to develop and exercise their spiritual gifts in keeping with that vocation, whether in the congregational setting or beyond.

Notes

¹ This story was told to me by H. D. Swartzendruber, about his father, A. Lloyd Swartzendruber.

² Virgil Vogt, *The Christian Calling*, Focal Pamphlet no. 6 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1961).

³ John H. Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1987), 19.

About the author

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