



## **The Smaller Congregation— Pathways in Challenging Times**

**by  
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## **About this Report**

This special report defines the "smaller congregation," explains how small congregations can be vital, and examines the challenges and options facing small congregations—including the options of shifting to part-time clergy, merging two or more congregations, clustering, securing lay pastors or local clergy, growing, or "ending well."

## **About the Author**

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## Introduction

This report explores the many ways smaller congregations adapt to resource challenges in the current economic climate. It is designed to help two audiences:

- Smaller-church and smaller-synagogue leaders—lay, licensed, and ordained, and
- Partners of smaller congregations—including denominational staff, consultants, and potential participants in co-operative ministry arrangements.

We hope that this resource will help you and your congregation to fulfill these purposes:

- Widen your view of the options available to smaller congregations that find themselves struggling to sustain a vital life and ministry;
- Deepen your understanding of particular options, when they might be useful, and what is required in order for them to succeed;
- Share knowledge easily with others, without financial barriers, by referring them to this site and its contents.

## What Are "Smaller" Congregations?

There are many ways we might define "smaller congregations." Frequently-used measures include (1) average number of weekend worshipers; (2) number of regularly participating adults; (3) number of members listed on the rolls; and (4) number of dues-paying households (the usual measure for synagogues).

In the Protestant world, the number of members listed on the rolls was once the most common measure of size, and is still a benchmark for denominational assessments. While this may be a meaningful number within an individual congregation or denomination, it is less helpful when comparing to others, since the definition of "member" and the care with which members are counted can vary dramatically from place to place.

### "Smaller" Protestant Congregations

According to the [FACT Study \(2005\)](#), 53 percent of "oldline Protestant" and 47 percent of "other Protestant" congregations reported an average of 100 or fewer "weekly worshipers." This whole group might be characterized as "smaller Protestant congregations"—a key audience for the present discussion of alternative pathways.

Using language first popularized by church sociologist Arlin Rothauge, we might say that slightly more than half of Protestant congregations are either "family-size" (1-50 in average attendance) or "smaller pastoral-size" (51-100 in average attendance) churches. To learn more about these frequently-used size categories, see [chapter one](#) of [Raising the Roof](#). For a more comprehensive review of size categories most frequently cited in congregational development literature in the last forty years, see chapter ten of [Taking Your Church to the Next Level](#) by Gary McIntosh (2009).

If slightly more than half of American Protestant congregations fit our working definition of "smaller" churches for the purposes of this article, what do they have in common? I would identify two main characteristics they share. First, they tend to be organized "relationally"—which means that maintaining emotional ties usually takes priority. This orientation expresses itself in a number of ways:

- **Pastor's role:** The pastor is primarily expected to be a caregiver, not a leader.
- **De-facto leadership circle:** Regardless of who holds the formal titles, the de-facto leaders tend to be individuals, families or subgroups recognized as "pillars of the church"—those with a reputation for supporting, protecting, and directing the congregation through thick and thin.
- **Tight-knit core:** Long-standing personal ties (family, friendship, shared memories of the church's past) often hold this core leadership group together, and may make it difficult for active newer congregants to gain influence in the life of the church unless they are "adopted" individually by the informal leadership circle.
- **Informal modes of decision-making:** The kitchen table is usually more influential than the board table in driving congregational decisions. Board actions often ratify decisions already determined by the *de-facto* leaders

within their own relational interactions, and will generally be reversed or ignored if they conflict with the wishes of the informal core.

- **Short-term planning horizon:** In line with the informal, relational style, these congregations do not tend to create or adhere to longer-term plans; rather, the informal circle of leaders will handle emergent questions as they come up.
- **Small leadership pool:** Since these systems are small to start with, and since potential leaders must wait to be "adopted" by the *de-facto* leadership core, it is often hard to find the needed gifts for particular ministries. Availability is often the top criterion for important roles. Given the high value placed on maintaining relationships, individual leaders may not be held accountable—even for highly negligent or destructive behavior.

To read more about the relational orientation—and how it differs from programmatic and organizational orientations of larger churches—see Gary McIntosh's [Taking Your Church to the Next Level](#), chapter eleven.

The second characteristic many smaller churches share is a need to find alternatives to a "conventional" ministry model—one which pre-supposes that each congregation will have its own separate facility and be served by a full-time, salaried, seminary-trained pastor. While there are some exceptions (including small churches that draw routinely from endowment funds to maintain a full-time clergy position), congregations with an average weekly attendance of less than one hundred usually find it difficult or impossible to support a full-time pastoral position from their own resources.

Many small congregations have never (or have not in anyone's memory) had a full-time, salaried pastor. The array of alternative ministry arrangements pioneered by these congregations is broad, inventive, and constantly changing. Any "model" identified in this article will have dozens of variations and widely-differing results.

For one more perspective on size in the Protestant world, we can draw upon the findings of the [U.S. Congregational Life Survey \(2000\)](#). This study reported the average worship attendance (persons 15 and older) within different segments as follows:

Mainline Protestant: 127  
Conservative Protestant: 120  
Historically Black Churches: 255

This survey includes [additional details regarding size differences among congregations of all kinds](#).

## "Smaller" Catholic Parishes

The average Roman Catholic parish is much larger than the average Protestant congregation. The [U.S. Congregational Life Survey](#) reported an average weekend Mass attendance (persons 15 and older) of 715, as compared to an average worship attendance of 127 for mainline Protestant congregations. A steady inflow of

immigrants has caused Roman Catholic parishes overall to keep pace with US population growth. Consolidations within Roman Catholicism are driven as much by a widespread shortage of priests as they are by a shortage of congregants in certain locations.

Nevertheless, "smaller" Catholic congregations face some of the same challenges and experiment with some of the same options as their Protestant counterparts. Here are a few relevant findings from Sister Katarina Schuth's study, [\*Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes\*](#):

- U.S. Catholics (Roman rite) worship at 20,668 parishes and missions.
- 44 percent of these share a pastor with another parish or mission.
- While such clusters vary in size from two to five congregations, 70 percent of them are two-parish configurations.
- "Regardless of the number of sites, only 6 percent of clustered parishes have more than one priest assigned."
- Within her research sample of congregations in cluster arrangements: 43 percent had 100 or fewer families on the rolls; 26 percent had 101-250 families on the rolls.

So, in the Catholic world, our term "smaller congregations" might apply to parishes or missions with fewer than 250 families on the rolls.

**"Smaller" Synagogues:** For non-Orthodox synagogues (Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist), "smaller" might mean fewer than 250 dues-paying households. Because Orthodox families tend to have more children than families on the other movements, a "smaller" Orthodox *shul* might be made up of 100 or fewer dues-paying households.

## Does Size Indicate Vitality?

Size is not a reliable indicator of a congregation's spiritual vitality. Vital congregations come in all sizes (as do moribund or troubled congregations). Somewhat surprisingly, [George Barna reported in 2003](#) that adults under 35 in his study were "more likely than are older adults to attend small churches." He speculated that this was because many of these younger adults did not have children (and so didn't join based on the quality of children's programming), and also because they were interested in being personally known and connected.

However, smaller congregations typically have a hard time reaching and retaining adults with children, because small churches have so much difficulty attaining "critical mass" in activities for children and youth. Parents who don't see a consistent group of youngsters in their child's age-group will often look elsewhere for a religious connection. Difficulty reaching younger families is a challenge that tends to compound itself. The Fact 2008 study shows that congregations with a larger percentage of older adults are less likely to grow numerically. (See figure 8 of Fact 2008 "[First Look](#)".)

Further, if smaller congregations have not discovered stable arrangements for maintaining an appropriate staff and facility, they tend to become preoccupied with survival and to behave in ways that diminish vitality:

- Focusing energy on internal concerns rather than on an outward-looking mission.
- Viewing guests and non-members as persons who might *meet their needs* (for money, bodies, leaders) rather than as persons who might *receive spiritual sustenance* from a vital faith community.

Certain smaller congregations, however, leverage their "survivor" identity as a spiritual strength and a ministry focus. During their research in the early 1990's, Carl Dudley and Sally Johnson noticed one group of smaller churches—often located in declining urban neighborhoods—that became beacons of endurance in the face of hardship. The personal struggles of members, and the shared struggle of the congregation to survive, actually helped such congregations to identify with their neighbors.

Drawing upon moderate-to-evangelical theologies and a high-commitment style, such churches provided members and neighbors alike with the spiritual strength to live one more day and to hold on "against the odds." Whereas other congregations with more liberal theologies (and a degree of social distance from the poor) may have advocated for policy change or run social service programs to assist people in dire circumstances, these close-knit churches help members and neighbors alike to face the crisis of the moment with the power of faith.



# Challenges and Options

## What Challenges Press Smaller Congregations to Adapt?

**Broader long-term trends:** Some of the pressures experienced by small churches have been in place for a long time, and are broadly shared with congregations of other sizes:

- The overall cultural expectation that a family will participate in a congregation (Protestant, Catholic or Jewish) has declined dramatically since the 1960's.
- People have become more mobile, disrupting previous patterns of church and community relationship.
- North American religious groups have experienced significant upheavals and realignments around issues such as civil rights, the war in Viet Nam, liturgical change, roles of women, clergy sexual abuse, and the incorporation of openly gay persons into membership and leadership.
- The fastest-growing segment on religious surveys is "no preference and not interested."

These factors have varying degrees of impact on smaller congregations. Take mobility, for example. Census 2000 showed that about one in seven Americans was changing residence in a given year. However, the figure was only one in fourteen for homeowners and one in twenty for people over 65. This mobility data cuts both ways for smaller churches with high concentrations of older, home-owning members. On the one hand, these congregations often show greater stability in membership and attendance; on the other hand, their ways of being church may be ill-suited to the style and needs of younger adults who will dwell for a few years in an apartment building next door to the church. For a story about building bridges across the divide of age and mobility, see "[Getting Neighborly: Finding Abundance in the Gifts of the Spirit.](#)"

**Recent Pressures:** The recession that began in 2008 affected giving in smaller congregations more than middle-sized or larger ones. (See figure 14 of the "[2009 Congregational Economic Impact Study.](#)") This impact is especially noticeable in congregations that were already facing relatively rapid decline in attendance—those who had lost more than 10 percent in attendance (total) over the previous five years. (See figure 22 of the [same study.](#)) Significantly, the financial health of American congregations as a whole was already on a steady decline before the recession hit. (See figure 2 of "Fact 2008 First Look.") Other signs of vitality (attendance growth, spiritual vitality, clear mission and purpose) have also been falling. (See figure 1 of "Fact 2008 First Look.") So the particular crisis of the moment may, in many cases, precipitate a "tipping point" that forces congregations to face up to longstanding realities. Particular expressions of this crisis may include

- Loss of value in endowment funds;
- Unemployment and underemployment for some members;
- Fear of layoff for many other members;
- Loss of the congregation's best givers (elders who were formed in strong giving habits but who are now facing incapacity, illness or death) at the same moment when working-age people feel less able to give.

Smaller congregations with full-time clergy are under particular stress, as they struggle to meet increases in

- Minimum salary guidelines;
- Pension and health care benefits;
- Property and other insurances;
- Wide fluctuations in energy costs.

And, because positions in smaller congregations are often considered "starter" positions in which clergy do not expect to stay for long, it is hard for congregations to maintain a particular developmental path.

While smaller congregations with part-time clergy still face the same cost pressures, they may find themselves with greater flexibility as they put together a package they can afford. Such flexibility is limited by the pool of seminary-trained clergy available for part-time work in their geographical area. In a major metropolitan area, churches may find a significant number of recent retirees or clergy with secular employment who are available to serve a congregation part-time. In other areas, the choices may be few and far-between. This shortage often causes congregations to look more seriously at alternative models, such as multi-parish clusters or lay pastors.

## **What Options Are Available to Smaller Congregations?**

From time to time, smaller congregations find themselves facing choice points, that is, moments when their current ministry arrangements break down and alternatives must be considered. The most important advice we can offer leaders is this: **Stop and look at *all* the options—no matter how far-fetched or unpalatable some of them may seem.** You may still proceed with your first idea, but you will be much clearer about why you are doing it and what it will take to make that option work well.

What follows is a basic list. As you refer to each option, you will find a fuller discussion and references to additional resources you might find helpful.

Option 1: Shift from full-time to [part-time clergy](#)

Option 2: [Merge](#) with other congregation(s)

Option 3: Join a multi-congregation [cluster](#) (sometimes called an "area parish" or "regional ministry" model)

Option 4: Work with your denomination to secure an authorized [lay pastor or locally ordained clergy](#)

Option 5: [Grow](#) to a size where you can afford full-time clergy

Option 6: [End well](#).

## Option 1: Shift from Full-time to Part-time Clergy

A smaller congregation may occasionally hit a temporary rough patch, cut back the clergy position to three-quarters or half-time, and then restore the full-time position when the immediate issue is resolved. Many of the challenges facing smaller congregations today, however, are less like hitting a "bump in the road" than they are like driving down a long, long grade into a mountain pass; the issues the congregation faces are long-term realities, and it often takes more permanent adjustments in thinking and practice to put the church's life on solid footing. Restructuring ministry around a part-time clergy position is one option.

[Small, Strong Congregations](#), by Kennon Callahan, identifies eight characteristics of strong small churches:

- They focus on "one excellent mission."
- They are "compassion-driven."
- They offer "widening circles of belonging."
- They maintain a "consistent spirit of self-reliance."
- Their worship "lifts heart and hope."
- They consistently "live and share as a team."
- Their facilities are "just enough" for their one excellent mission.
- They open "many doors of giving."

In his discussion of "living and sharing as a team," Callahan emphasizes that a congregation can have "too much pastor" for its own good. How can that be? Isn't more always better?

For a small congregation with a clear, if modest, mission in its community, the answer may well be "no." Small strong congregations know how to define and maintain a vibrant, small-scale ministry which is carried out primarily by its members—not its staff.

If the people truly have a heart for one well-defined mission in their community, the challenge is to have "just enough" building and "just enough" pastoring to support the members in this outward-oriented ministry. It is not easy, of course, to let go of burdensome (if memory-laden) facilities in favor of an affordable gathering-space. And (if the congregation is accustomed to a clergy-centered way of operating) it is not easy to let go of the idea of the pastor as the one who "provides ministry" here.

Congregations that know how to be "small and strong" are most often found in more isolated settings, where they have learned how to be the church consistently, with or without a pastor. They call on one another in illness or bereavement, pray with one another, reach out to neighbors, learn together in simple ways, and hold worship whether the preacher shows up or not.

Part-time pastors (who may serve more than one church, maintain secular employment, or serve the church after official retirement) may be a good fit for a church with a clear ministry focus within its community and a deeply-self reliant attitude.

For congregations "cutting back" to part-time ministry—perhaps for the first time—the transition to part-time ministry is usually very difficult. Churches often change

the number of hours they finance *without* changing their understanding of clergy roles and responsibilities. This has several possible results:

- Clergy working full-time on a part-time salary. (This may create the impression that "part-time works fine" until the current pastor has to secure additional employment, or until a new pastor arrives who isn't willing to silently subsidize the church in this way.)
- Nagging criticism of the clergy for not "being there" in the same way pastors have in the past. Clergy begin to resent the fact that the congregation has asked for one thing but expects another.
- Physical illness, depression, financial crisis, or conflict in the clergy family, which gets worse until the pastor finally leaves the position.
- Burn-out on the part of one or two lay leaders who are trying to fill gaps in the "old model" of ministry; other members have not really "stepped up" to share responsibility, but are still expecting one or two people to "do" the ministry for them.

In short, the first stages of transition away from a full-time, salaried clergy position are apt to be difficult and disappointing. If, however, there is consistent work to develop the characteristics of the "small, strong congregation," this pain may give way to a more sustainable way of being church together.

Beginning with the "worker-priest" movement in France after World War II, the concept of "bi-vocational" clergy has continued to develop to the present day—sometimes called "tent-making ministry" after the biblical model of St. Paul who earned his own living. Some clergy experience a strong sense of call to a role outside the church; on weekdays, they serve as counselors, administrators, teachers, scientists, shop-keepers, accountants, or full-time parents. Other clergy may feel a primary call to congregational ministry, but wish to serve in settings where there is no livable salary available; in order to fulfill this vocation, they hold a "day job" that pays the bills.

Many independent, storefront churches in urban areas are founded and pastored by such entrepreneurial leaders. Option 4 in this article identifies denominational frameworks within which self-supporting community residents may prepare to take up pastoral roles in local congregations.

Some writers are taking the idea of "bi-vocational" clergy a step further, to examine the notion of a "bi-vocational congregation." Click on "[The Bi-Vocational Congregation](#)" to explore this idea further and to read case studies that illustrate different attitudes about the role of clergy.

## Option 2: Merge with Other Congregations

When churches and synagogues face new economic pressures, they sometimes consider merging. In this section we will take up three questions:

- What different forms can "merger" take?
- What is a "successful" merger?
- What have other congregations learned about merging that might apply to your situation? ("Best practices")

### What different forms can "merger" take?

A variety of different arrangements that might fall under this general heading of merger. Keep in mind that the same terminology isn't used everywhere—you always have to define your terms for a particular conversation.

The first approach is sometimes called **absorption**. For example, a congregation decides to close its doors, but leaders want to bring a body of people and assets into the life of another congregation—one with a more robust institutional life, more viable programs, and an atmosphere of vitality. Even though it may be called a merger, one church or synagogue has essentially absorbed the other. The biggest challenge in this situation is pain—it is very hard for the weaker partner to make a decision to close the doors. But the receiving congregation also has decisions to make:

- When and how do we reach out to that struggling neighbor without seeming predatory?
- And how much accommodation should we make to the incoming group?

While many congregations see absorption as a "fate worse than death," there is some evidence that this type of merger is most likely to result in a sustainable, long-term ministry. Church consultant David Raymond sampled twenty years of data from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to identify outcomes from the three types of mergers discussed here. You can view a chart showing his statistical findings at [www.churchcollaboration.com](http://www.churchcollaboration.com).

In some cases, the "absorbing" partner offers to make changes that honor the legacy of the absorbed congregation. A clear-eyed assessment of the impact of such changes is essential; in some circumstances, a name change or shift in worship schedule could harm the vitality of the resulting entity. Instead, it may be wiser to carry forward one sacred object plus one or two meaningful practices from the absorbed partner—selecting items that will both honor that partner's legacy *and* strengthen the fabric of the ongoing entity.

The second approach may be called **continuation merger**. (Some churches and synagogues use the term "consolidation" to emphasize the equality of the partners, while other systems reserve that term for the "rebirth" option described below.) In this model, two or more struggling congregations decide to combine their efforts. Denominational staff members often promote this approach—from their regional perspective, they can see how much it costs to maintain those separate facilities and

staffs, and they can imagine what might be possible if the resources were pooled to build a stronger, more appealing program. But it entails many barriers:

- Potential partners may favor combining as long as the other partner comes to them. In effect, each wants to be the entity that absorbs the other, and is waiting for the other to flinch.
- The levels of readiness for a merger discussion may differ between the congregations. Think about what happens when two people are dating, but only one is prepared for a serious commitment. There is a lot of potential for misunderstanding, disappointment, and hurt feelings.
- Sometimes neighboring congregations have a long history of competition with each other, a strong "us and them" mentality. One church may have broken off from the other in some past conflict. Or they may have evolved on different sides of a theological controversy—high church vs. low church; or traditional vs. charismatic. Sometimes their local communities are competitive—it might be hard to merge where the two high school football teams are fierce rivals.
- And finally, if the denomination is seen as pushing the merger—or as having made the decision already—then resistance and resentment can stop things cold.

While there are certainly positive examples, David Raymond's study suggests that this type of merger is the least likely to result in a vital and viable congregating going forward. (See the chart at [www.churchcollaboration.com](http://www.churchcollaboration.com).) In this type of merger, negotiations tend to focus on maximizing continuity and minimizing pain for existing members. However, such continuity may guarantee that the downward trends precipitating the merger will continue at about the same rate—though perhaps now from a higher baseline of membership and financial reserves. Many observers report that attendance often settles out at the attendance level of the largest partner prior to the merger.

A third type might be called the **re-start** or **rebirth merger**. The emphasis is less on continuity with the past than on creating something new, fresh, and different. Both (all) the constituent congregations mark a definite ending which may include

- Legal dissolution of their corporations;
- Moving to a different location (with a new or new-to-you building), or building a brand-new facility together on an existing site;
- Relinquishing all the previous names (rather than stringing them together;)
- Bringing in new clergy leadership;
- And—perhaps most important—organizing the entire program around a new sense of purpose or mission that addresses the realities of the surrounding community in an effective way.

Raymond's study suggests that the "fresh start" quality of these mergers makes them more vital and sustainable than the typical continuation merger. (See the chart at [www.churchcollaboration.com](http://www.churchcollaboration.com).)

## **What is a successful merger?**

Regardless of the form, what would be the hallmarks of a "successful" merger? In my role as a consultant, what do I see myself working toward when congregations

ask me to help them merge? I would say that I am trying to help congregations achieve *effective* and *mission-oriented* mergers. *Effectiveness* would be measured by asking these kinds of questions:

- Is the process orderly and transparent?
- Do the partners put all their cards on the table—complete and accurate information about their situation?
- Are differences worked through, openly and creatively?
- Is the merged entity a healthy, functional organization?
- Has the early sense of "us" and "them" been transformed into a strong, new "we"?

These are very important outcomes to work toward. But effectiveness is only half the equation. A merged congregation may still continue down the same path of long-term decline. In that case, merger ends up being a way to buy a little time, or to shore up an eroding foundation for a few more years.

Unfortunately, some mergers produce an even more inward-looking church or synagogue. Blending the communities can become the primary mission—once the merger has taken place, all the available energy goes into negotiations about which candlesticks or torah scroll we will use for the major holy days this year.

When working toward a *mission-oriented* merger, success would be measured by a different set of questions:

- Does the merged congregation have a fresh sense of identity and purpose? Sometimes this is symbolized by a new name—not just a blend of what came before, but a name that captures the new intention, the new commitment of this faith community.
- Are people telling a new story about themselves? Not the old lament about decline, but a fresh story—focused on today and tomorrow—with some excitement about what this church can do, what this synagogue can be.
- Does that new story have legs? Are congregants already doing some things together that neither congregation ever did before? Are they already learning new ways of practicing their faith? Are they already moving outward to meet people and situations that they didn't touch before?
- And, is the merged entity addressing the demographic and cultural challenges head on? For example, instead of just complaining about Sunday morning soccer, has the new entity made a clear decision about how it will respond to that trend? In that situation, one church might create radically flexible programs for children and youth, while another might do the exact opposite—identify itself as a high-commitment faith community with firm gathering times, knowing that this won't reach everyone but that it will make a huge difference in the life of any family that accepts the invitation. Either way, the new congregation is taking a clear stance toward a cultural challenge. While there's no guarantee that their selected strategy will work, it does allow them to focus all their energy in one coherent direction—and that makes them much more likely to succeed.

## **What are some best practices for merger?**

If we are seeking to create an effective and mission-oriented merger, what could

help us get there? The following steps are ones to consider. For a discussion of these steps in relation to synagogues, see an article by Alice Mann and Bob Leventhal in the publication called [Synergy](#). We are indebted to synagogue executive director Harvey M. Brenner, from Temple Har Shalom Warren, New Jersey, for many of the suggestions included here.

**Step One: Explore all the other options first.** Merger is a strategy that brings dramatic—and in some ways traumatic—change. As soon as this becomes apparent to members, they are going to ask, "Why do we have to do this?" and "Why aren't we solving our problems some other way?" These are good questions.

It helps to start with the widest list of options, and explore them with some care before narrowing down the list. This is a place where the denomination can help. Rather than prescribing or promoting a specific strategy, help congregational leaders look at the whole list. This work can begin at an educational workshop, where lots of different congregations are represented, to create an open atmosphere and bring a wide variety of viewpoints into the room.

But local leaders can do the same thing—before or after identifying potential partners. They can insist that step one includes looking at *all* the options, and to involve the congregation in the conversation before the list gets narrowed down.

What options should be on the list? Merging and clustering should be there as two different approaches to co-operation and cost reduction. Some other options should be on the big list, too.

- **Moving to a new location**—to connect better to our natural constituency, who may have moved away from our area; to trade in an albatross building for one that fits us better today; or to be more visible to the religiously unaffiliated population in our community.
- **Changing leadership.** This is a sensitive matter, fraught with potential conflict. But merger is guaranteed to raise those leadership questions—there's just no avoiding this issue if the congregation is going to take new steps toward vitality.

When I say "leadership," I mean *both* clergy and lay leadership. There is a tendency for congregations to think that all problems would be solved if we had a "better" pastor or rabbi, and this is clearly not true. But it is true that clergy with the appropriate gifts and energy level can make a big difference. If this question is being avoided, merger talks are not a very good vehicle for confronting it—the merger angle will only make it messier, and more confusing. Find a respectful and principled way to put the leadership issues on the table *first*. Once church leaders are discussing this frankly, within proper channels, merger may still turn out to be a good option to explore. Mergers tend to work best when all the partners join together to choose new clergy for the new entity.

- **Closing our doors now.** This is the option of a holy death. Instead of expending time, money and energy on "making things work," it can be a relief to ask whether it might be time to stop—while we can still celebrate all that has been in the past, and while we still have resources to devote to ventures that fit our deepest values. As we already saw, making this decision sooner



rather than later might mean bringing a substantial body of people and money to another congregation that most of us will now join. Or, if members will be scattering in many different directions, it might mean making a bequest to some religious or social cause of great meaning to the congregants—some purpose that would be a worthy expression of all the past sacrifice and commitment people put into this synagogue or church. This can help a congregation to feel they are ending strong, and leaving a significant legacy.

- **Continuing on the same path we are on now.** This should always be on the list, because it is the default option anyway, the one people will mentally compare other options against.

You'll notice I did not say, "Keep things the way they are now." In a declining situation, things will not stay the same—they will get progressively worse. I usually ask, "If you keep doing what you are doing now, how long do you have?" Often, the treasurer has a pretty precise answer to that question—but no one has dared to ask it, at least out in the open. Confronting this information squarely will help the discussion of any other option to go better.

Sometimes, as sad as it is, people actually feel relieved that we are finally admitting what we all knew or feared to be true. If the news looks dire, there will be grief to deal with—but here it can be addressed directly, and not tied up in complicated merger proposals. William Bridges's [advice on transitions](#) can be very helpful here.

So, the best preparation for merger talks is to work through this whole list—and maybe some other options as well. Partners that have taken this step will come into the talks clearer about their motivations and more realistic in their expectations. They will be better prepared for the level of change merger will entail.

***Step Two: Assess our own strengths and liabilities as a potential merger partner.*** If the previous step has surfaced "merger" as an option you want to explore, take a sober look at yourself as a congregation. In the ideal case, you have already confronted the financial realities in the previous step, and you have started to think about what kind of leadership you may need at this stage of your life together. Now there are some additional questions to consider, as you create an honest and balanced congregational profile:

First, how healthy are the patterns and dynamics of your congregational life? For example, how well does your congregation

- Build a team relationship with pastors or rabbis?
- Handle conflict, difference and change?
- Face difficult facts?
- Make room for the newcomer, at all levels?
- Keep power and influence out in the open, where all can see and participate in the decision-making?
- Handle anxiety when things seem to be going wrong?
- Maintain a healthy relationship with your denomination or movement?
- Manage tensions among different generations or subgroups?
- Express generosity and social concern beyond your own walls?

Second, what would merger mean for our current staff and lay leaders?

- What formal agreements, or denominational requirements, do we currently have with clergy and other staff?
- What ethical responsibilities would we have if we decided not to continue with present staff members?
- Which lay leadership roles would be likely to change or be eliminated in a merger?
- How prepared are the incumbents (in staff and volunteer roles) to work with the change and uncertainty that merger negotiations would bring?
- How deep is our leadership "bench" when it comes to change management, and sensitive handling of personnel matters?

**Step Three: Create a "Merger Exploration Committee."** Once an honest profile has been completed, and endorsed by congregational leaders as an accurate picture, each potential partner may be ready to create a "Merger Exploration Committee." This is not a decision-making body. Its only purpose at this stage is to assess compatibility with potential partners, and to bring back a recommendation about whether to start any formal merger negotiations. Setting it up this way means that each congregation can look forward to a formal "check-point"—a time when leaders and members will pause to deliberate about what they have discovered. This helps everyone manage the anxiety that the process naturally generates—members and staff feel assured that nothing will happen suddenly, before they have a chance to weigh in.

**Step Four: Negotiate the merger.** Now, instead of an exploration committee, each congregation has a negotiating team. There will probably be some carry-over from the previous group, but the negotiating team will probably be a smaller body with a more focused set of skills and gifts. This team needs process awareness and people-skills; expertise in negotiating agreements; a high capacity for discretion; and a reputation for wisdom and integrity in their home congregation.

During the negotiation stage, the teams need to have clear guidelines about communication—what will be communicated, when, and how. Many of the details of the discussions should be held in confidence within the teams. It's not helpful to recount all the reactions during the conversations—that's too much information—it can generate problems that could kill a promising relationship. On the other hand, the negotiations should not be a black hole—that will provoke anxiety and suspicion. So the teams need to develop agreed communications—flowing regularly throughout the process—in much the same way that a clergy search committee would proceed.

**Step Five: Deliberate.** If the negotiation process is fruitful, the two (or more) merger teams will work out a merger proposal to bring back to their home congregations. The deliberation process should be very well-defined.

- **A clear beginning**, where the proposal is presented and explained thoroughly. This probably needs to happen several times so that as many members as possible hear directly from the negotiating team, rather than from second-hand accounts. At the same time, full printed information should be circulated, so that people who miss the presentations can see clearly what is being considered.

- A **clear middle**—a period of time when each congregation can live with the proposal, and discuss it in an orderly way.
- A **clear end**—at the beginning, announce the date for a vote, who will participate, and what the procedure will be. Is it only the board, or the whole congregation who will be voting? How will the list of qualified voters be compiled? What does it take for the motion to be adopted—a simple majority? A certain percentage? It may be best for the participating congregations to deliberate on the same day, in order to ensure that each party reaches its own conclusion.
- **If the denomination must give approval**, show this step of the process right from the beginning, so people are not surprised.
- The merger team needs to have a **communication plan** all prepared before the day of deliberation. How will the outcome be communicated?

**Step Six: Set a definite date for the change to take effect.** Leave some time between now and then for both emotional and technical work to be completed.

- At the emotional level, the congregations need a way to discuss and reflect upon the outcome of the deliberations—whatever they were.
- But there will also be legal articles to draft to implement the negotiated agreement, and other kinds of business to be completed.

**Step Seven: A well-planned weekend of special events** to celebrate and implement the change.

Finally, I would offer a couple of general points about the merger process. First, it helps to have one or more outside resource people working with the congregations throughout the process. And second, a merger proposal rejected is not automatically a failure. If a merger resolution fails in one or more congregations, there may still be significant forms of co-operation that can go forward, powered by the vision and the new relationships that have been established during the process.

## Option 3: Join a Multi-congregation Cluster

Another related approach might be called **clustering**. Several congregations decide to combine as a single mission unit, but maintain more than one location.

- One end of this spectrum would be full amalgamation—the Roman Catholic parish in my community is a single entity, but conducts services at more than one location. And there is an emerging trend toward multi-site Protestant ministries—not driven by scarcity or decline but by a vision for larger mission impact.
- In the middle of this spectrum is the model commonly called a "cluster," "area parish," or "regional ministry"—where one staff team serves multiple congregations, each with its own name and its own governing board. This model usually includes some shared programming, and an additional council that oversees the cluster relationship.
- And on the other end of the spectrum, we find a looser association of independent units, sharing certain negotiated expenses and programs. Two synagogues may merge their Hebrew Schools in order to build a single strong educational program. Or several churches may sponsor a single youth program.

### General Characteristics of Clusters

General characteristics of the "cluster" or "area parish" model include

- **A single staff team, comprised of two or more ordained clergy, and often other shared staff, that serves all the participating congregations:** While there is some variation in the degree to which specific pastors may be assigned to particular congregations, clusters foster the notion that the whole (multi-location) parish is served by the whole pastoral team.
- **Sharing of resources and programming:** Unlike a "yoked" ministry (where clergy time is the main or only shared component), the cluster encourages congregations to undertake certain aspects of their life and program co-operatively, in order to strengthen the ministry of all. Common examples of co-operative programming would be youth activities, outreach projects, training for Sunday School teachers, and joint services on special occasions.
- **Maintaining the identity of individual congregations:** This approach is different from merger (or pre-merger co-operative efforts) in that there is usually an explicit intention to retain and strengthen the multiple locations as a positive resource for regional ministry.
- **Development of lay leadership in each local setting:** Lay leadership usually receives strong emphasis in this approach, both as a theological value in itself and as a practical necessity for congregations that do not have a resident, full-time, ordained pastor.

While these characteristics may help us to differentiate the cluster from other ministry strategies, the lived experience is much more complicated—reflecting both local variation in explicit structure and the inevitable gap between ideal and reality that would be found in any "model" of ministry.

## Benefits of the Cluster Model

Clusters (by whatever name) have some particular benefits when compared to other options such as yoking, appointment of lay or locally ordained pastors to solo ministries, merger, or closing. Typical advantages of the cluster approach include

- **Ministry in and to multiple "places":** In rural communities or in urban neighborhoods, the closing (outright or by merger) of a congregation may contribute to the decline of the community itself and cut off further opportunity for ministry with certain populations. The cluster model allows ministry to be rooted in multiple locations, while still benefiting from team leadership and co-operative programming.
- **Stability and quality of the pastoral team:** Sharing resources from multiple congregations can allow the creation of more stable full-time and part-time clergy positions than most of the individual congregations could manage on their own. Often, smaller congregations in rural and urban areas have experienced high clergy turnover due to low salaries, perpetual budget difficulties, challenging living conditions for clergy families, a tendency in some denominations to assign first-call clergy to these ministries, and the burden on part-time clergy to find complementary employment. When a cluster can offer stable positions at reasonable salary standards, the pool of applicants increases and the congregations have more choices. For some pastoral candidates (though probably not the majority), the team-ministry structure itself will be a big plus.
- **Incentive to increase self-reliance and strengthen member ministry:** While a growing spirit of self-reliance does not happen automatically, the cluster structure can encourage lay leadership development by:
  - (1) Defining new and important member roles;
  - (2) Establishing a network of peers for lay leaders;
  - (3) Creating an opportunity for shared training that would be much harder to provide individually, and
  - (4) Establishing administrative strength—in the form of capable management by the team leader, shared office staff and equipment, and help with standard tasks like newsletters, statistical reporting, and audits—that can make volunteer roles more manageable and satisfying for the average member.
- **"Critical mass" in several shared programs:** Small congregations often have trouble gathering enough youngsters for a good outing, or pulling together a large enough choir and congregation to have a glorious feast-day service. While there are limits to the number of activities congregations are willing to do jointly (while still maintaining their sense of local identity), the establishment of a few shared ventures can generate new hope, energy and effectiveness for these smaller congregations.
- **Peer support for local leaders:** Just as clergy may find ministry in the small church rather isolating, the same is true for church officers, Sunday School teachers, outreach committees, and youth leaders. Although it may initially be tough to persuade people to drive to another church location for a training event, the availability of peer support can, over time, make church leadership roles more appealing to a wider range of members, and gradually

diminish "lone ranger" attitudes that sometimes flourish in small congregations.

## Stress Points in the Cluster Model

We can also observe some common points of stress that emerge in the cluster approach.

- **Disorientation without "our pastor":** In congregations used to having a settled, full- or part-time pastor of their own, church life tends to be organized around the person and position of pastor—in both conscious and unconscious ways. The smallest congregations may never have been organized this way, or may not have had a stable clergy presence for a long time before they joined a cluster. But for congregations that have recently relied on "our pastor" to take initiative, solve problems, meet needs, and hold things together, the absence of that familiar figure may leave them anxious, confused, and persistently dissatisfied with the cluster arrangement. Some congregations adapt and mature within this new structure; others get by. But a certain number of congregations never accomplish a sufficient shift in orientation and expectations to remain connected to a cluster for very long.
- **Feelings of loss and grief:** Movement into a cluster arrangement may be precipitated by congregational trauma (severe church conflict, clergy death, clergy misconduct, financial crisis) and/or by significant changes in the community. In rural areas, community shifts may include increased pressure on family farmers, depopulation, and the closing of local schools, businesses, hospitals and human services. Feelings of profound and pervasive loss may run deep in congregations as they enter into cluster arrangements; the accompanying grief may be expressed indirectly in the form of church fights, anger toward denominational officials or pastors, neediness, passivity, or simply a lack of energy for the demands and joys of new relationships. (See [\*Managing Transitions\*](#) by William Bridges.)
- **Difficulties of negotiation:** Life in a cluster is an eternal process of negotiation. Constituencies *inside* each congregation must be brought on board and kept in the loop; relationships *between* congregations must be monitored and maintained; the cluster staff and cluster council must constantly adjust to emerging circumstances; and all must maintain a working relationship with denominational officials. Negotiation is hard work, and small congregations—accustomed to operating on unspoken and informal arrangements—may find such work especially tedious and annoying.
- **Accepting trade-offs:** One mark of spiritual maturity, for individuals and congregations alike, is to accept the things we cannot change about our own circumstances, then get on with doing what we can to make life meaningful and satisfying. Every ministry arrangement includes some downside, some trade-offs, but congregations easily forget the downside of their struggles to maintain a "pastor of their own." It is easy for participating congregations to dwell on things they have lost (whether or not the cluster was really the cause of that loss) rather than to settle into their current stage of life with a positive spirit and some degree of contentment.

- **Perceiving the gains:** From the point of view of any one person in the pew, it may be difficult to see (and feel) the full import of what has been gained by the whole cluster—and perhaps by the local communities they serve. Those who participate in the cluster council are probably most aware of the big picture and the specific accomplishments attained. Some of these deeply-involved individuals may feel as though the cluster council is their real "congregation," and may lose touch to some degree with the local ministry they represent. At the other end of the spectrum of connection, we find fringe members of a local church who may experience the cluster as an outside force that makes church life more complicated and confusing than they remember it ever being before. They are not sufficiently engaged in local church life to really "hear" the communications about cluster successes, or to participate in the enriched programming the cluster offers.
- **Wondering "What if?"** Sometimes a cluster contains a congregation that could—or could almost—sustain a solo full-time pastor on their own. Whereas a smaller congregation may be clear that it wouldn't survive without the cluster structure, a relatively-larger church will probably ask itself from time to time whether they might grow better—in size or vitality—if they struck out on their own. Since the relatively larger congregation in a cluster may serve an important "anchoring" function for the whole enterprise, there is a potential for both guilt and resentment on the part of the larger church as it ponders the possibility of operating on its own.

## First Hand Experience of Cluster Leaders

In 2008, I had the opportunity to engage in a research project with leaders from a number of Lutheran (ELCA) clusters (called "area parishes") in the upper Midwest. Here are some findings from that research about the way the cluster is actually experienced by leaders. We asked lay leaders to comment on what was working well, where they were struggling, and what "burning questions" they had about their shared ministries

In response to the question "What's working well?" lay leaders identified the following aspects of the cluster experience:

- **Joint Services:** While each cluster had its own pattern for conducting joint worship and festival services, these shared opportunities were valued as a tangible expression to the life of the larger entity. Specific examples of shared services included offerings of Wednesday or Saturday evening worship on a regular basis; Advent and Lenten musical programs or services; quarterly worship opportunities that rotate among the locations; and joint services at special times of the year.
- **Offering a More Appealing Call to Pastors:** Lay leaders felt that these ministry positions were more attractive to candidates because of the potential for teamwork, collegiality, schedule flexibility, room to "work to one's strengths," and opportunities for creative projects that a single small church might not offer. Lay leaders felt positively that they were able to meet denominational salary guidelines and provide an appealing ministry context for clergy couples.

- **Shared Cluster Programming:** Successful joint ventures lifted up by lay leaders included Vacation Bible School; training for Sunday School teachers; seasonal worship planning; Bible study opportunities; Confirmation classes; and youth activities.
- **More Volunteers for Projects:** The cluster relationships generated larger teams of volunteers to undertake community outreach efforts and fundraisers.
- **Being Connected in the Cluster Council:** Generally, two representatives from each congregation serve on this council. Lay leaders said they gained an expanded sense of community, and exposure to a wider range of viewpoints. One cluster council was pleased with their practice of reporting back—not just to each local church council, but to the congregations themselves.
- **Cluster Newsletter:** The cluster newsletter is an important vehicle for building communication and shared identity. In some cases, each congregation adds its own page of news to the cluster newsletter—emphasizing both the connection and the particularity of each local church.

Lay leaders also described areas of struggle that were specific to the cluster experience.

- **Different Levels of Commitment:** Some congregations don't seem to be as committed to the cluster model as others. Those who joined the cluster at some time after its founding may feel they had not entered "in on the ground floor." Other causes of low commitment were general unwillingness to change; transition to a "second generation" of lay leadership not involved in the founding of the cluster; fear of losing local identity; suspicion that someone is trying to close them down; not being able to point to "our pastor" any more; loss of control; jealousy; and fear of not being heard.
- **Community Experiences with "Consolidation":** In some local communities, school consolidations have occurred in which early promises to maintain certain facilities or services were not fulfilled. This leaves people with a general skepticism about such arrangements.
- **Competing Interests:** Lay leaders described a tendency for each congregation to want the "special things" to happen in their space—such as Holy Week services or Reformation Sunday.
- **Getting Congregations Together to Do Things:** While the potential for cooperation may be great, organizing specific shared ventures is a challenging task.
- **Reporting and Accountability:** Congregations that maintained accountability in the past by receiving regular reports from their sole pastor (regarding visits, weddings, miles driven for pastoral work, etc.) may feel they can no longer assess the pastor's work when it is part of a team ministry. "How do we know what the pastor is doing?"

Lay leaders offered several "burning questions" they were eager to talk about:



- **How do we pay for future ministry?** How do we create sustainable patterns of ministry? What constitutes a "fair share" from each congregation?
- **How do we grow and invite others?** With so much energy focused on the connections *among* the participating churches, these congregations may find it difficult to look *outward* toward incorporating people in the community who have no current church involvement.
- **How do we minister in an age of new technology?** Leaders experience bewilderment about the abundance of new communication media. They are asking whether and how they should involve themselves with new technologies. The cluster structure may actually speed such adaptation, both because it demands new forms of *inter-congregational* communication (such as email, list-serves, websites) and because it offers administrative resources (shared office staff and equipment) to implement these technology solutions.

The pastors serving on cluster staffs also provided information about their particular experience of ministry within this cluster approach. They described three aspects of the approach that are especially **rewarding**:

- **Team Effort:** This approach creates a community of colleagues with whom to plan and reflect; a diverse team whose collective gifts can meet a wider range of needs; an opportunity to offer a ministry specialty to the whole cluster; and a setting where clergy can learn from each other.
- **Member Ministry:** The pastors enjoy seeing church members share and use their gifts; the "team" aspect is not limited to the pastoral staff, but can extend to the sharing of ministry more broadly within the congregations.
- **Gift Awareness:** Pastors observed that the cluster approach encourages both the clergy and the churches to become more aware of their particular character, gifts, and unique contributions to the larger ministry.

When asked to identify specific stories that might illustrate the **greatest potential** of the cluster approach, pastors shared these examples:

- Food and shelter ministries that the congregations could never have undertaken on their own
- Sending a significant cluster delegation to a National Youth Gathering
- Robust schedule of special musical events
- Holy Week services
- Developmental work with church councils
- Prayer for one another
- Hope for the future—younger adults in our society place more value on cooperation and group effort than their baby-boom parents.

The pastors also had a great deal to say about the aspects of this ministry that they found most **difficult** or **challenging**. These included

- **Complexity:** Complexity grows exponentially as more individuals or components are added to a system; hence, a two-church arrangement would have four times the complexity of a stand-alone congregation. There is "a lot

to track and follow up on."

- **Distinct Local Dynamics:** Pastors are constantly crossing back and forth across cultural boundaries as they minister among the churches.
- **Working with Fear, Loss, and Grief:** As we have already noted, a deep sense of loss may pervade both the congregations and their surrounding communities. Pastors must be prepared for such feelings to surface at almost any time—sometimes expressed directly, but perhaps more often expressed indirectly. Maintaining an awareness of those grief reactions—and responding to them appropriately—is a key pastoral challenge in these settings.
- **Establishing New Expectations:** Signing a formal cluster covenant is not the end of the process. It may take years for church leaders and members to adjust their expectations to the new arrangement, and these expectations will need periodic adjustment as the cluster agreement evolves.
- **Distance:** Especially in the rural examples of the cluster model, clergy become acutely aware of the distances because they spend so much time on the road.
- **Communication:** One may encounter communication challenges inside even the smallest church; such challenges become compounded dramatically in the cluster arrangement.

One area of difficulty demands a section of its own—**finding appropriate leadership style(s) in relation to Area Parish and congregational size**. Pastors posed the question: "How do we lead in this environment with a mix of size dynamics?" The cluster itself may be a program-sized unit (often defined as an average Sunday attendance of 150-350 including children and Sunday School teachers).

Even if the combined attendance does not reach that level, the cluster is, by definition, a **multi-cell** system—that is, each member's primary connection is with a particular constituent congregation, and the members would not expect to have a close relationship—or even to recognize—every member connected to the cluster. For more about multi-cell systems, see [\*One Size Doesn't Fit All\*](#) by Gary McIntosh.

As a result of both the larger aggregate size and the multi-cell character of the system, the cluster functions in certain ways like a (stand-alone) program-size congregation.

- The key role of the pastor (particularly the pastoral team leader) is "administrator"
- Equipping lay leaders (as opposed to delivering ministry themselves) is a key clergy role
- Delegation is a crucial skill
- Intentional communication practices are essential.

Pastors operating in this "program" mode may function fairly comfortably with "family size" congregations in the cluster, particularly those small churches that have developed a cooperative and healthily self-reliant culture. (Such a culture is

described very well in Kennon Callahan's book [Small, Strong Congregations](#).) Sometimes, however, the long-term survival struggles of the small church have produced an angry, rigid, or defensive church culture—focused more on guarding turf than on group spirit and cooperation.

Cluster staff may have a considerably greater challenge relating to congregations with a more pastor-centered orientation. Such churches place more value on having their "own pastor" to rely upon. They are more dependent on clergy to initiate, organize, solve problems and meet needs, and they are more demanding of clergy presence at church gatherings—major and minor, business and social. Such a congregation may make a partial adaptation to its circumstances by signing a cluster covenant, but may continue for some time to expect—deep down—that the pastor will always "be there." For discussion of church size issues, see [chapter one](#) of [Raising the Roof](#) by Alice Mann.

## Option 4: Secure an Authorized Lay Pastor or Locally Ordained Clergy

Several denominations have alternative methods by which persons might be trained, ordained, or licensed to provide leadership in a congregation without seminary-trained clergy, or as part of a ministry team in a cluster situation. Generally speaking, such arrangements are most effective in regions where they are widely used, and where the denomination provides a significant resource system for congregations implementing alternative ministry structures. A wider support system is important for these reasons:

- Every congregation has a tacit "model of ministry" embedded in its culture. No matter what is said on paper, the tacit (unspoken) expectations for pastors and members have power. If a congregation already has most of the qualities identified by Kennon Callahan as hallmarks of "[small, strong congregations](#)", the alternative ministry structure may work pretty well. Those strengths include the following:
  - (1) They focus on "one excellent mission."
  - (2) They are "compassion-driven."
  - (3) They offer "widening circles of belonging."
  - (4) They maintain a "consistent spirit of self-reliance."
  - (5) Their worship "lifts heart and hope."
  - (6) They consistently "live and share as a team."
  - (7) Their facilities are "just enough" for their one excellent mission
  - (8) They open "many doors of giving."

But congregations making the shift to an alternative ministry structure often have too few of these qualities in place to succeed with the new arrangement. It often takes outside support to develop these distinctive small-congregation strengths.

- Lay and locally ordained pastors need excellent—and relevant—spiritual and practical formation for their roles. Such formation needs to be organized regionally in order to have a good-sized peer group, and to draw in quality teaching and coaching resources.
- As with any other role of leadership in ministry, lay and locally ordained pastors need ongoing support, reflection and coaching if they are to thrive in their roles. Regional support systems are crucial in order to do justice to the people who accept these important responsibilities.

In the United Methodist Church, a variety of pastoral roles are filled by clergy and laity, including

- Elders: Clergy members of the Annual Conference, ordained for Word, Sacrament and Order, and appointed by the Bishop for itinerant ministry (a minister who can be appointed to any location within the Conference by the Bishop).

- Local Pastors: Clergy members of the Annual Conference licensed for pastoral ministry. The Licensed Local Pastor does not itinerate.
- Lay Speakers: Certified for ministry in the church and community; may serve as temporary pulpit supply.
- Deacons: Clergy members of the Annual Conference, ordained for a ministry of Word and Service, and appointed to a non-itinerant ministry in the community and the congregation.
- Certified Lay Ministers: Assigned by the District Superintendent to provide lay pastoral leadership. CLMs have no clergy rights or benefits. The local church is encouraged to cover appropriate expenses of the CLM as negotiated (mileage, supplies, continuing education). This role was newly approved in 2004. To read more about it, go to "[The Certified Lay Minister](#)."

In the Episcopal Church, two different ways of training and deploying priests were laid out in national canon law in 1979. Canon 7 described a track that included seminary education and anticipated that the clergy ordained in this way would function in a paid, professional context (usually a congregation that could provide a standard clergy salary and benefits). Canon 9 described a mode of preparation that did not include a residential seminary experience and anticipated service on a volunteer basis in a setting where no seminary-trained priest was available.

As with many of the models discussed in this article, the applications of these canonical provisions in the Episcopal Church were more varied and more inventive than the canon-writers could have foreseen. In 2006, the canons were revised to provide integrated sets of provisions for priests and deacons prepared and deployed in multiple ways. In the Episcopal Church, innovative thinking about the ministries of baptized and ordained persons is sometimes gathered under the headings of "total ministry," "shared ministry," or "collaborative ministry." One website that provides an introduction and important links is [totalministry.org](http://totalministry.org).

If you aren't sure whether your denomination has provisions for lay or locally ordained pastors, you may wish to contact with a regional denominational representative for more information.

## Option 5: Grow to a Size where You Can Afford Full-time Clergy

When faced with the prospect that they can no longer support a full-time, seminary-trained pastor or rabbi, many congregations set a goal that they will grow to a size where supporting this style of ministry is once again possible. In those cases where the current financial crunch is a temporary glitch in an otherwise healthy picture of numerical, spiritual, and financial growth, a size-change initiative may be viable.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, however, the crunch has been on its way for years, if not decades, and has only reached a "tipping point" due to the latest stress on the system—an economic downturn, further population shift, denominational conflict, or internal conflict in the congregation. Setting a goal of growth in this situation may be, in effect, wishful thinking. Such goals are often set at the time a new pastor or rabbi is being selected, on the assumption that if the congregation simply had "better" clergy than before, the situation would be reversed.

Long-term trends of decline are not easily reversed. They usually signal that the congregation's whole sense of identity and purpose—which may have been well-suited to its community context in some previous decade—is no longer a viable foundation for congregational vitality and viability. In this situation, fine-tuning the program, trying a new curriculum, or bringing in guitars won't make any lasting difference to the basic trend—fundamental change will be needed.

According to [George Bullard](#), only a minority of congregations that have existed more than 25-30 years actually make the changes needed to launch a new era of vital ministry (he calls this "redevelopment"). You can visit other pages of Bullard's tutorial, called "[Spiritual Strategic Journey](#)," to discover things your congregation can do to improve the odds of successful transformation, and a list of different redevelopment pathways you may want to consider.

Often the dominant motivation for a "redevelopment" effort is to return the congregation to a remembered status-quo—and particularly, to make sure we have "our own" pastor or rabbi once again. Such thinking may betray a wish to bring back the past, or to return to a moment when things didn't seem so hard because the clergy took most of the responsibility for the congregation's life (or at least took the blame if things went wrong).

Some congregations negotiate a three-year subsidy plan with their denomination, aimed at bringing the congregation to the point where it can support a conventional structure of ministry (full-time, seminary-trained clergy; a building of our own; and a viable, if small, program of ministries.) Such plans are unlikely to lead to self-support if there is not an agreed redevelopment strategy that has been tested for realism with other church leaders who have done this work in a similar context.

A related approach is to subsidize a full-time clergy position from the endowment. In the presence of a well-researched redevelopment strategy that has the necessary political support from influential members, this could be a reasonable step—particularly if it is accompanied by a financial plan that shows how the congregation will pay for current ministry from current income in the near future.

In reality, most such plans for self-support fall into the category of "wishful

thinking"—they do not involve the fundamental changes necessary to create sustainable ministries; or they cannot be fully implemented due to ongoing resistance from influential members; or the clergy and lay leaders involved do not have the background and skills to connect with the new population groups that might make the ministry viable. As a result, such plans often amount to a decision to "keep doing what we are familiar with until we have spent down all our reserves."

## Option 6: End Well

When a congregation is considering its options, I believe it is healthy to put "holy death" on the list—to face the possibility of closing squarely and openly. There is nothing shameful in admitting that the particular purpose we were here to serve in an earlier time has now run its course, and that God has not given us—as a congregation—either a new purpose or the new energies to launch a fresh chapter in our story.

Often the conversation about ending helps a congregation to strengthen its commitment to another path. In response to the question, "Are we finished?" members answer, "No!"—and then get on with exploring the corollary questions:

- What is the meaningful work God has given us to do now?
- What energies and gifts has God given us to carry on that work?

Wrestling with those corollary questions sometimes helps a congregation to shape a meaningful next chapter. And sometimes it brings a congregation back to the main issue—"We didn't think we were finished, but in reality, we have neither the purpose nor the energy to carry on. Yes, we have come to an ending." It is painful to face these questions, but it is also painful to avoid them while the various aspects of the congregation's life wither away before our eyes, and congregational life becomes more and more depressing for the people who are left.

Denominational officials (in those religious systems where the individual church or synagogue must vote to close) are sometimes tempted to urge closing. Unfortunately, the appearance or reality of external pressure to close can sometimes rally a congregation that might otherwise have admitted on its own that it could not continue. As frustrating as it may be to wait for the moment of readiness, this may, in the end, be the most effective and efficient approach. (Denominational officials might ask themselves, however, whether they are in some way subsidizing the congregation's avoidance of reality.)

If you think that ending is an option your own congregation needs to explore, you can view an excellent resource from the Disciples of Christ called "[Sacred Stories: Continuing a Congregation's Legacy of Ministry](#)."

A fuller discussion of congregational closing can be found in [Ending with Hope](#), edited by Beth Ann Gaede.



## Resources

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**"The Certified Lay Minister"** (Flyer)  
Nashville, TN: GBOD, United Methodist Church.

**Church Collaboration** (Website)  
<http://www.churchcollaboration.com/continue.htm>.

**"Effective, Mission-Oriented Synagogue Mergers"** (Article)  
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**"Faith Communities Today 2008: A First Look"** (Report)  
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**One Size Doesn't Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church** (Book)  
Gary McIntosh, Author. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 2009.

**[Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes](#)** (Book)

Katarina Schuth, Author. Collegeville, MN: Order of Saint Benedict, 2006.

**[Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition](#)** (Book); [chapter one](#)

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**["Sacred Stories: Continuing a Congregation's Legacy of Ministry"](#)** (Article)

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**["Small Churches Struggle to Grow Because Of The People They Attract"](#)**

(Article)

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**[Small, Strong Congregations: Creating Strengths and Health for Your Congregation](#)** (Book)

Kennon Callahan, Author. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

**[Spiritual Strategic Journey](#)** (Website)

George Bullard, Author. Herndon, VA: Congregational Resource Guide, 2003.

**[Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There](#)** (Book)

Gary McIntosh, Author. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009.

**[Total Ministry](#)** (Website)

<http://totalministry.org/extlink.html/>.

**[U.S. Congregational Life Survey](#)** (Website)

<http://www.uscongregations.org/>.