

Jesus took time for friendship,
worship, prayer, silence,
and even play. Which of these
suffer when we are stressed?

The Renewal of Ministers

Houston, Texas is being renewed. Well-landscaped city parks are replacing vacant lots. Beautiful trails for hiking and biking lead to secret gardens downtown. Air quality is improving as public buildings and homes meet national benchmarks for energy efficiency.

It wasn't always this way. Al Gore's national television spot during the 2000 presidential campaign, suggesting that the entire country might become like Texas, was a wake-up call for civic leaders. The statement, "Texas ranks last in air quality," ran while viewers gazed at dismal pictures of Houston's dark and billowing smokestacks, widespread oil refineries, and a parent caring for a sick child.

"While none of this was news to Houstonians, the concern of mortified community leaders was that the ad was also running in cities from which they were trying to lure businesses," wrote Mimi Swartz in her *Texas Monthly* article, "How Green Is My Bayou?" Leaders "finally realized that the bargain they had made—to accept an ugly, polluted city in return for a booming business climate—was a losing one in the 21st century. If Houston didn't change, new

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businesses wouldn't come here, old businesses wouldn't stay. . . . What has happened since has been an all-out effort to change Houston's identity."¹

Imagine a similar scenario happening to the church and its ministers. Picture a pastor and congregation that are being renewed. Personnel committee meetings become dynamic, in a good way, as they engage the question, "How can we ensure that our staff is more spiritually mature and vibrant five years from now?" Church staff meetings become lively, in a joyful way, as leaders envision where God's Spirit is leading the church in every area and seek the best ways to equip the congregation to listen, discern, and respond. Youth see fresh possibilities for using their gifts in ministry and then pursue those callings to further God's mission through the church.

We know that church isn't always this way. Current research about the reasons clergy leave the ministry, horror stories rising from local church life, and the disturbing trend of the declining number of young adults who are willing to pursue vocational ministry have become a wake-up call for church leaders. While some experts do not think the church is presently in crisis mode, others say that some of the current statistics about ministers and congregational ministry are as much a warning sign for the future of church life as the polluting smokestacks in those political campaign ads were for the future of the Houston community.

When Jackson Carroll researched his book, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*, he found data that supported both of these diverse perspectives concerning the current health of ministers and the church's vocational ministry. Before he started his research, Carroll expected to find dismal statistics that would support the idea that ministry is currently in crisis. What he actually found, however, was that the majority of responses given by those he surveyed supported the view that ministers find ministry to be a deeply satisfying calling that is worthy of one's life. "Overall, America's clergy express a high degree of commitment to their calling," writes Carroll.² That's the good news.

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At the same time, some of Carroll's findings did suggest troubling developments for churches and their ministers. "The data suggest that the problems are not as widespread or bleak as some reports maintain. Even so, they should not be ignored, because they can have a significant negative impact on clergy, their congregations and their families."³ Inadequate compensation, conflict and criticism within the congregation, stress from the challenges and demands of the job, issues involving the pastoral role, and loneliness and isolation are concerns that contribute to ministerial trouble.⁴ Such issues have caused young ministers fresh out of seminary to decide they are just not minister material after all. Others decide that their ministries need to take a different form; they feel they are not church staff material after all.

The upside to this more troubling data that Carroll uncovered is the opportunity that comes with it for churches to make these congregational situations better than they were before. When communities address issues that have caused them pain and conflict, they often dream, discuss, and implement a vision of a better way for life to be. Like leaders in the city of Houston who faced the negative consequences of neglecting the environment and made choices that transformed pollution into air fit to breathe and concrete wasteland into lush city parks, we learn that life works better when we believe in the possibilities of renewing our resources rather than simply disposing of them or ignoring them altogether.

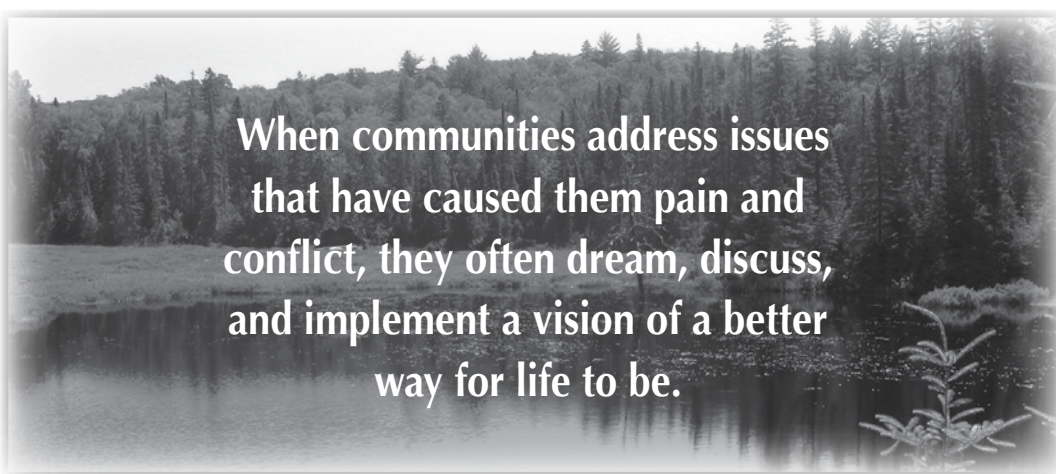
In their book, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry*, Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger used information based on surveys and interviews of more than 900 former ministers that were conducted by a Duke University research team. The team "did not assume that life for local church ministers is harder today than it was in the past . . . but it made two assumptions: that conditions of ministry have changed in the last three or four decades and that too many local church ministers leave."⁵ Most churches could create a long list of the ways the conditions of their congregation's ministry have changed in the past 30 years.

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Carroll reports that congregational conflict appears to be rising. Part of the reason for this is the pervading mentality that churchgoers are consumers who must be satisfied.⁶ Most people have numerous options from which to choose a church, and church hopping is the trend. Carroll stresses, “It is important, nonetheless, to reiterate that congregational conflict need not be negative. Indeed, it can be healthy if it is worked through constructively. Needed changes in congregational life—especially if they are important for the health and future of the congregation—rarely come without struggle.”⁷

When significant conflict rises in the congregation, ministers doubt their call either fairly often or very often. This conflict has more negative consequences for younger pastors than for older ones. “Although almost five in 10 pastors under the age of 45 reported doubting their call once in a while, only two in 10 of those over 60 reported doing so.”⁸ A commitment to renewal may mean a commitment to learn and practice new ways of dealing with conflict and its effects in the church.

While none of this may be news to seasoned church leaders, many are realizing that a new century of ministry is calling for a renewed vision for ministry. What is needed is an all-out effort to discern the ways that God might be shaping



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the church to fulfill its mission. In what new ways and in what new forms of relationship might God be calling staff and congregation to serve together? How do we renew our care for one another?

The importance of being renewed is both a current necessity and an ancient truth of the Christian faith. Scripture reminds us of this, from Isaiah's declaration that "those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength" (40:31) to Paul's assurance in 2 Corinthians, "So we do not lose heart . . . though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (4:16).

For too long, the church's practices have reflected our culture's love for the disposable rather than the longing of God's people to be renewed. We often dispose of commitments and relationships too quickly, preferring to start over with something or someone new rather than explore new depths and potential in the relationships and commitments we have already made. Churches that make a commitment to renewal rather than disposal may open themselves to fresh and surprising experiences that come from seeking God's presence and guidance rather than following their own agenda.

Churches and ministers that are committed to this life of being renewed by God find the model for their commitment in the life and ministry of Jesus. If Christ becomes our guide for ministry, God's servants will discover new criteria to evaluate the work to which they give their days. This might take the form of new questions to work on:

- Did we live out the gospel this week?
- What do we need to let go of to follow more closely, and what do we need to take up?
- Were we faithful to what we understood God to say?
- Did we listen and act and pray?
- Did we give ourselves away?
- Did we truly worship?

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With new questions for evaluating the work we do, we might imagine more fresh possibilities.

If Christ is our guide for ministry, we will recognize that all ministers need to honor the balance and rhythm of life that Jesus modeled. After spending time with crowds, Jesus made plans to withdraw to a quiet place for rest. Often the disciples would find him alone, praying in a garden. As Jesus faced stress from a busy life of ministry and the unending tension created by Pharisees who always seemed to be around, he took time for friendship, worship, prayer, silence, and even play. Jesus understood the need to renew his body and spirit. Excellent ministry requires a commitment to this kind of renewal.

When Christ is our guide for ministry, we can expect to be transformed and renewed. Authentic ministry changes those who are part of it. A church committed to God's renewal of its ministers and its ministry has the opportunity to be something much different, more than simply a religious organization with hired staff. A church like this becomes the body of Christ, alive and present to serve God in the world.

1. Mimi Swartz, "How Green Is My Bayou?" *Texas Monthly*, September 2008, 12.
2. Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 169.
3. *Ibid.*, 187.
4. *Ibid.*, 186.
5. Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), xi.
6. Carroll, *God's Potters*, 167.
7. *Ibid.*, 169.
8. *Ibid.*, 164.