

**NONSTIPENDIARY and/or NON-M.DIV. PASTORS for SMALL CONGREGATIONS:
EDUCATION, OVERSIGHT AND IMPACT ON COMMUNITY AND COVENANT
WITHIN THE JUDICATORY**

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Foreword:

In the last research report, regional leaders' problems and solutions were outlined in finding pastors for congregations which can pay only a part-time salary if that, particularly those in more rural and small town areas. These solutions included using nonstipendiary or part-time paid fully ordained clergy who have other "day jobs", or "retired" clergy, or sometimes clergy from other denominations. Solutions discussed also included finding interested lay members in these small congregations who, with some regional training for ministry, can serve as pastors (lay certified or ordained to lesser orders) in these locales.

This present report is concerned with the reasons for or against judicatory programs for training certified lay or local pastors, and some potential consequences for community and covenant within the judicatory.

Loren Mead raises the "troublesome" question of why the "pastor-centered paradigm" as the ideal remains strong in congregations and denominations, despite the fact that the economic basis for congregations each having a full-time paid seminary-educated pastor "is breaking up and sinking under the weight of unsupportable economic realities", and despite the proliferation of judicatory programs for training nonstipendiary geographically-restricted clergy and certified lay preachers. The continued dominance of this M.Div. pastor-centered paradigm, Mead argues, stifles trying to find alternatives and answering other more important but equal troublesome questions about congregational leadership, such as: *What does constitute effective ministry in a congregation? How do we develop norms that support a model of ministry based on that new understanding of effectiveness? What institutional forms do we need to accomplish this?*¹

**Judicatory Programs Preparing Lay Persons of Small Churches to Be Their
Preachers and Pastors**

Barker and Martin in a recent report on their survey of judicatory training programs which prepare lay persons for "commissioned, licensed, ordained or otherwise authorized ministries"² make a number of summary statements about the perceived positive and negative aspects of such programs:

- Locating a program of theological study close to where the graduates will serve as pastors

makes it more likely that the training will be relevant to the real ministry needs in that locale.

- These low-cost, judicatory programs make it possible for qualified lay persons to gain the needed competence to become good pastors for their congregation, which otherwise would not have as good pastoral leadership.
- There is also likely to be great variation in the quality of these programs (although little systematic evaluation has been done) and these programs may be marginal and isolated even within their judicatories.
- Seminary educated clergy may downgrade the abilities, resent the possible competition for church positions, and generally resist the proliferation of judicatory-trained ordained and certified lay pastors.
- These judicatory programs, very few of which have formal links to seminaries, may have a better chance of “revitalizing the church” in educating pastoral leaders than more traditional academic programs.

Judicatory Training Programs: Why, No, Yes and How

Judicatory executives I interviewed for this study in 2001 made many of the same points as those listed above. Executives who had a substantial number of small relatively isolated congregations with empty pulpits, were understandably among those most likely to be experimenting with designing their own programs for training members of such congregations to serve as their certified or ordained locally-restricted pastors for little or no remuneration.

I re-interviewed a few of these executives (one to three from each of four denominations) in October-November 2002 to find out how their judicatory programs were going and other matters. A couple of executives of judicatories which had a mix of urban, town and rural areas found it more feasible to exercise a “triage” approach and close or merge many of the smaller congregations, thus reducing the need for finding or training pastors for these churches. A couple of executives of judicatories composed mainly of farms, forests, mountains, and tiny towns, rather saw keeping their many small churches viable as a core mission to preserve a sense of community in the judicatory and in specific locations. As one executive put it:

“The church may be the last institutionalized expression of community in those small rural towns. Nobody wants to lose the church. They have lost the school; the grocery store is gone; all the businesses have left or shut down; they really want to hang on to the church.”

Regional judicatories which hold this value, however, are going to have to find ways to

provide pastors to their many such small churches in areas declining in population and economic vitality. This need makes a training program preparing certified lay and local pastors appear a feasible judicatory investment.

Setting up a judicatory school for pastors is easier for judicatories which have a suitable seminary within their boundaries, particularly if they can pay a small honorarium to instructors. One fortunate executive with these resources has been able to get seminary professors to teach classes in biblical exegesis, theology and church history, augmented by some pastors who have doctorates teaching other courses. Another judicatory without a seminary of any denomination within its boundaries, in nonetheless able to get seminary faculty from a denominational seminary in another state to come and teach in its program, in part because the whole denomination officially approves of licensed local pastors to serve specific, small congregations, and encourage seminary professors to travel for this cause. In another denomination that is not yet shown much enthusiasm for having any but M.Div. clergy as pastors, one judicatory also without a seminary of any denomination within its borders, still has a flourishing lay ministry training program due to the commitment of its M.Div. pastors to teach in the school, mentor and supervise its graduates.

So it can be done; but it is going to be more difficult for some judicatories than others to set up a school and credentialing process for those who might pastor their small, far flung congregations. A number of regional executives have not been able to establish training programs for pastoral leadership for their numerous geographically dispersed rural churches. Several are restricted by limited staff and financial resources to put on such programs. More frequently, executives indicated that the absence of such programs in their jurisdictions, however, is primarily due to the resistance of their national denomination and/or clergy and lay leaders on their regional boards and commissions to allocate resources to educate or support pastors who have not gone through the traditional route to full ordination. As one executive explained:

“I cannot fill many of my open pulpits. As a denomination, we are moving slowly, very slowly, on what to do about filling congregations that cannot afford a full-time pastor. Although the problem is talked about a lot (in national and regional level meetings), what to do about it has not even been discussed.”

In contrast, several judicatories which have been experimenting with their own programs to prepare lay person to become certified lay pastors or locality-restricted clergy, have experienced sufficient success over the last two years that they have expanded their offerings considerably. In illustration, one judicatory has gone from offering just a single lay theology school to now four schools in different parts of its territory. Another judicatory has increased its curricular offerings to accommodate three different levels of lay training for certified and local ordination. Another judicatory is working with several contiguous judicatories of its denomination, which also have training programs for certification of lay pastors, to both compare programs and explore future ways of sharing teachers and course offerings to further improve their preparation of leaders for small churches.

Community and Covenant with Full Time M.Div. Clergy and Other Kinds of Pastors

Loren Mead points out in Essay 2³ that individual pastors' character, competence as well as their opinions about greater connection with their judicatory, are going to affect their own and their congregations' involvement with other congregations and judicatory offices. As described in earlier Research Reports, this is mainly why regional judicatory leaders interviewed are ever searching for ways to better involve their clergy with one another and the judicatory. Variations on formats for clergy meetings and retreats, interesting guest speakers, special seminars and workshops for clergy pastoring different types of churches, clergy and spouse social events, and often near mandatory year or more programs for clergy new to the judicatory -- are among the things being tried.

Some scholars believe that seminary education gives graduates not only the classical and practical learning to be good ordained ministers (or *religious capital*), but also the contacts with other seminarians and faculty during seminary (or *social capital*) that continue to provide the interpersonal networks that support clergy connections with other clergy of their denomination. Connections with other M.Div. clergy are thought to strengthen seminary-educated pastors' commitment to their denomination and judicatory interests over those of the particular congregations they serve.⁴

There still exist judicatories in which a substantial proportion of their M.Div. clergy already know one another from their time together as seminarians. However, one judicatory executive pointed out that seminary ties are far weaker in sustaining relations among clergy in his and most other denominations than was true thirty of forty years ago; then seminarians came from college to seminary and lived on campus; now most are middle-aged, married with children, and commuting in to classes.

Some also believe that M.Div. pastors, compared to those who have been trained and approved by the judicatory to serve as pastors, will be less restrained from trying to change these small, probably stagnant churches, since they are not as likely to have longstanding ties to the members. Because of this *social factor* as well as more extensive education received in seminary than in judicatory schools, some aver that M.Div. pastors will be better able to move the congregations in new and needed directions that those raised by from these congregations and made their pastors. It further follows in the opinions of some, that M.Div. clergy, having more of a professional orientation than a local one, will be more likely than judicatory trained pastors to collaborate with other clergy, congregations and judicatory staff in joint mission and ministry programs

Are such perceptions generally true? In other words:

- Are judicatory-trained certified lay and restricted-ordained pastors less apt to interact or participate in mission projects with other clergy, congregations, and offices of their judicatory as compared to M.Div. pastors?

Although definitive answers cannot be provided by us, it would seem that these answers are

likely to vary at least somewhat by (1) whether the seminary-educated or judicatory educated pastor has a “day job” in addition to pastoring a congregation; and (2) whether such pastors are in good physical health. Tent-making pastors, regardless of academic degrees, have less time usually than full-time paid pastors to engage in activities with others outside their own congregation. Many of the certified lay and local pastors are retired from secular work, and may have limited energies.

Recent interviews with a few judicatory executives, however, suggest that their regionally-trained lay and local pastors are equally or more likely than their M.Div. clergy to participate in social, educational and mission programs of the judicatory. This is because unlike their M.Div. clergy over whom these executives have limited control, their regionally-trained pastors usually must have regularly scheduled meetings with a supervisory official (judicatory staff or M.Div pastor), as well as attend meetings of judicatory-trained pastors. In these consultations and meetings, these lay and local pastors are often advised to engage in continuing education, cooperative outreach activities and the like if they wish to continue to be certified as lay pastors or serve their congregation as ordained local pastors.

Do they want to continue? It should be remembered that these certified lay and ordained local pastors are typically giving much or all of their time free to their congregational ministries, as well as covering most of the cost of their own travel and lodging expenses for educational events and judicatory meetings. Will they keep on wanting to give this much? Part of the answer here may depend on the extent to which judicatory leaders acknowledge the value of the ministry these lay and local pastors are doing.

Loren Mead in Essay 2 of this series warns that lay leaders’ initial and ongoing interest in connecting/cooperating with their judicatory offices and boards is shaped by their experiences with executives, staff and elected leaders. Lay leaders’ assessments of how willingly and effectively judicatory officials respond to their requests for congregational assistance, may well affect how eager they are to support (and have their congregations’ support) judicatory mission priorities. The way that lay leaders who are on judicatory committees and task force are treated by other members, also is likely going to impact their loyalty to the judicatory and wider denomination.

These observations lead to the following questions about the effects of the judicatory “community” on the loyalty and involvement of nonstipendiary M.Div. clergy, certified lay and ordained local pastors:

- To what extent have judicatory leaders been proactive in reaching out to those who serve as pastors for little or no money, to involve them in significant ways in the boards and committees of the judicatory or larger denomination?
- How are nonstipendiary pastors of all types treated by full-time salaried M.Div. pastors in the judicatory? How do nonstipendiary clergy, certified lay and local pastors feel about their interactions with judicatory officials and clergy members? Do such feelings affect their own commitment to the judicatory, the denomination or their continuing as pastors?

One judicatory executive, interviewed this fall, indicated there was presently no objection from M.Div. clergy in his judicatory to having lay or local pastors take open pulpits in small rural churches because these are openings that M.Div. clergy would avoid anyway. Should, however, these judicatory-trained pastors take positions in larger churches which could pay something, their acceptance in the judicatory community might well lessen. Then too probably, opponents would reiterate the argument that M.Div. clergy have better selection, preparation and must pass through stricter ordination gates than do judicatory-educated clergy, and perhaps the latter are no longer needed.

There should be questions raised about the quality of education, selection, and certification/ordination of those who have graduated from judicatory training programs (just as there is or should be from seminary programs!). These judicatory programs are however so experimental, diverse, and usually in the process of change, that making definitive assessments of even one graduating class may be premature. However, those interviewed in 2002 indicated that there is at least some evaluation done and in progress of their training programs. Further, on the national level, one denomination is currently studying the *possibility* of establishing clear standards for all its judicatories on criteria for the education, deployment and supervision of graduates from these judicatory programs.

The questions discussed in this report definitely need fuller answers than so far available. Some of you reading this may have some responses or insights based on your experiences. If you do, please share.

ENDNOTES

1. Loren Mead. 1988. "Commentary." Pp. 139-143 in Dean Hoge, Jackson W. Carroll, Francis K. Scheets, *Patterns of Parish Leadership: Cost and Effectiveness in Four Denominations*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward.

2. Lance R. Barker and B. Edmon Martin. (April, 2000). *Alternatives in Theological Education. An Examination of the Characteristics of Denominational Judicatory Study Programs Which Prepare Persons for Commissioned, Licensed, Ordained or Otherwise Authorized Ministries*. Monograph: New Brighton, Minnesota, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

See also the discussion by J.P. Wind and G. R. Rendle (2001). *The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations*. Bethesda: The Alban Institute.

3. Loren Mead. 2002. Essay 2 in this web-based series, "Eight Key Dynamics That Affect Congregational Autonomy."

4. Roger Finke and K. Dougherty. (2002). "The Effects of Professional Training: The Social and Religious Capital Acquired in Seminaries." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:103-120.