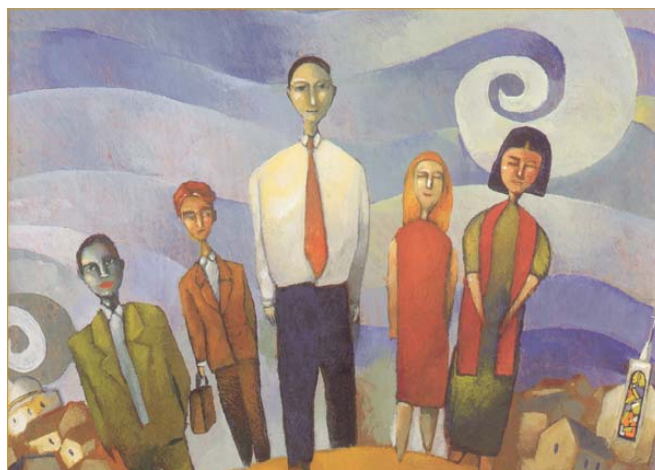


The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations



An Alban Institute
Special Report

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About the Alban Institute

The Alban Institute initiates discovery and learning to strengthen congregations in creative, faithful, and effective ministry in the world. The Alban Institute is an ecumenical and interfaith not-for-profit that strengthens congregations by conducting research on the most pressing and critical issues facing congregations; publishing resources; offering educational and training events; providing consulting services; and advocating for the role of congregations in their local communities. The Alban Institute is financed by revenues from fees for products, services, and memberships, by grants, and by contributions.

About this Special Report

The Alban Institute is making a major new commitment to building the leadership resources of American congregations. We have heard from many that leadership is the crucial issue facing congregations, and we feel called to make it our central work in the coming years. This report contains an overview of current reports on the status of congregational leadership and outlines the challenges to developing new leadership for congregations. The members of the Leadership Initiative Team include James P. Wind, President; Gilbert R. Rendle, Director of Consulting and Education; John R. Wimmer, Director of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations; Ian Evison, Director of Research and Resource Development; and Lisa Kinney, Associate Director for Periodicals.

Join the Discussion

The Alban Institute is looking for partners in this emerging work. If you know of further studies on congregational leadership, want to share your advice about considerations regarding leadership, or want to be kept up to date on our activities, please contact us at leadership@alban.org.

Copies of this report may be downloaded for no charge at www.alban.org/leadership.pdf.

Printed copies may be purchased for \$10 each prepaid. Please send a check or money order to Christine Willey, The Alban Institute, 7315 Wisconsin Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814. For more information, contact Christine at cwilley@alban.org, 301-718-4407 ext. 239.

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INTRODUCTION

If someone were to write an article for one of our major newspapers or newsmagazines about the leadership situation facing American congregations and their leaders, what would the headline be? Preliminary research at the Alban Institute suggests “A Sea Change in American Religion: American Congregational Leaders Face Great Ferment and Turmoil.” In our conversations with religious leaders around the country, we have participated in a strong debate as to which word or phrase best describes our reality. Some of these leaders focus on turmoil, saying that we are in a time of great crisis and that American religion still has not faced up to the depths of its predicament despite mountains of statistics about decline and countless stories of institutional pain. Others say that we have been blinded by all the turmoil and crisis talk and have missed the ferment, growth, and new vitality emerging in many places in American religious life.

In our own conversations, we have been deeply pulled by both sides of this argument. In fact, we find ourselves coming to the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that both realities—turmoil and ferment, crisis and opportunity—constitute the depth of the sea change that we are now experiencing. Indeed, it is the paradoxical character of this period of great transition in American religion—one filled with emergent vitality on the one hand and systemic dysfunction on the other—that makes ours such a complex time. Keeping both sides of the reality in responsible tension as we describe the situation is one of the greatest challenges when discussing the need for renewed leadership. We believe that to stand on the side of ferment includes acknowledging and even embracing the reports of crisis, for these are the signs of a system grappling with deep issues—a system that is fundamentally healthy enough to put up a fight.

The Field of Inquiry

In traditional Alban Institute fashion, we began our efforts to probe more deeply into this complex leadership situation by talking to practitioners and experts who have considerable wisdom about what is happening in congregations and in the larger context of American religion. We began with interviews of a select group of religious leaders and experts who represent the worlds of congregational ministry, judicatory administration, denominational research, theological education, philanthropy, and consulting.¹ As our inquiry broadened, we tested the results of our initial research with numerous groups of religious leaders in a variety of educational and public settings. We read reports and available research and searched broadly for more. We then tested our learnings against our own practice and experience with congregations across North America and across many different faith traditions.

The Research Base

As we searched for data and spoke with practitioners and experts, we quickly realized that there is *no coordinated, systematic research base* from which to draw specific conclusions about the leadership situation in American religion. We found that those whose careers are devoted to funding and conducting research on American religion stressed this fact most. Instead of a solid research base, these people pointed us to a variety of isolated reports that they felt revealed certain key realities. So there are many pieces of evidence, but they are of uneven quality and do not fully cover the area of inquiry. The implication is clear: *We lack thorough, high-quality, empirically based research on this important topic.* This was especially true as we looked for studies or research within ethnic minority congregational and denominational systems or within the evangelical church tradition.

As we continue to search for this information, we find that in all of these areas, including the mainline Protestant traditions, no single study or group of studies pulls together the various elements of our current situation and allows for a coherent set of generalizations and impressions. This is a situation we plan to address in our continuing work on congregational leadership. Meanwhile, we are left with a set of sightings and soundings from various places in the American religious ecology. We intend for these observations to be just the beginning of an important conversation, and we hope that it will continue among all who care for our congregations.

Laying the Groundwork

It is interesting that the turmoil and crisis side of the story was much more prominent in the interviews and discussions we had than the conversation about ferment. Clearly, there are major immediate challenges facing American congregations and their leaders. As the rest of this report will show, we know much more about the crises that drive us than we do of the fuller power of the sea change. For this reason, Part 1 of this report describes these crises as reflected in a scattering of available reports on this dominant interpretation of our current setting. Yet our discussions with others also lifted up the lesser-known reality of the ferment in our sea change and encouraged us not to be so fixated on the crisis at hand that we miss the larger reality. Part 2 of this report will turn to this part of our discovery.

PART 1: REHEARSING THE CRISIS

The first part of the story is the prevailing sense of crisis about established religious institutions. A large scholarly literature exists about certain aspects of this crisis, such as membership decline in mainline denominations. But other parts of the crisis are not as widely known and we want to point to three—shortage of clergy, quality of clergy, and retention of women in ministry—that can tell us a great deal about the larger crisis.

It is not surprising that these indicators are related to the current clergy leadership system in American religion. The state of clergy recruitment, preparation, and deployment stand as bellwether indicators for many religious leaders. This is consistent with Alban Institute experience, which recognizes that while there are multiple factors influencing the vitality of congregations and congregational systems, clergy leadership is a central point of attention and diagnosis. Alban's experience of working with congregations underlines the reality that congregations cannot rise above their leadership, that faith communities cannot develop large visions without visionary leaders.

Many in the American religious ecology who are more sensitive to and aware of the crisis side of the current sea change have produced numerous studies that probe various parts of the crisis more closely. Since these allow us to take deeper soundings, we will briefly summarize important insights from several such studies in the pages that follow.

Indicator 1: Shortage of Clergy

A key finding in our interviews was that most of the major Christian and Jewish denominations are experiencing or soon will face a shortage of clergy to meet current congregational demands. (Not all denominations are presently experiencing a shortage; the Unitarian Universalist Association, for example, reports a surplus.) In some cases, like Roman Catholicism, this shortage has been long recognized. Researchers from within the **Roman Catholic Church** provide ample evidence. R. Scott Appleby, from the University of Notre Dame, offers a telling summary footnote that describes the leadership sea change that has occurred in his church body during the past 40 years:

In 1960 United States Catholicism boasted the low-cost, labor-intensive dedication of 52,689 priests and 164,922 nuns. More than 30,000 young men filled diocesan and religious-order seminaries. . . . Since 1960 the Catholic population has grown from 40 to approximately 55 million, but the number of priests (45,000 in 1994) and women religious (90,000) has declined as a result of resignations, retirements, and thinning ranks of recruits. By 1994 the number of seminarians at all levels of study had

dropped to about 5,100, hardly enough to replace the wave of retirements on the near horizon, much less to keep up with the increasing size of the laity.²

What does this mean for the average Catholic parish? In May 2000, researchers Jim Castelli and the Rev. Eugene Hemrick released results of the *National Catholic Parish Survey*, which concluded that:

- The average parish, which has 2,831 members and 5.1 ministers, is served by 1.8 ordained priests.
- 19 percent of those priests are either retired or living in residence in the parish but serving in another role elsewhere.

Moreover, since 1982:

- The number of priests serving the average parish has fallen by 28 percent.
- The number of religious serving the average parish has fallen by 33 percent.
- The number of deacons serving the average parish has fallen by 33 percent.
- The number of lay ministers serving the average parish has grown by 54 percent.³

These momentous changes in American Catholicism do not have exact parallels in other parts of the American religious world. Interestingly, just a few years ago many Protestant denominations expressed worry about clergy oversupply. But our informants indicate that many other denominations now find themselves sharing this concern over clergy shortages with the largest religious community in America. For example, in 1997 the Rev. Rolf Memming, in his study of the trends in ordination and clergy careers for Division of Ordained Ministry of the **United Methodist Church**, reported a six-year slump in the number of ordinations of clergy in that denomination beginning in 1989.⁴ This slump produced a downward trajectory that has left some wondering if there will be enough United Methodist clergy to serve the church in coming years.

Similarly, the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America** (ELCA) reports in *Ministry Needs and Resources in the 21st Century* that “the number of pastors in the ELCA has declined slowly over the past decade so that some synods now experience a near critical shortage.” A key part of the ELCA story is “an increase in the number of smaller congregations with very limited financial resources.” More precisely, the report stated:

- From 1988 to 1998, the number of smaller congregations with average worship attendance of 50 or fewer increased from 2,058 to 2,329 (21.4%).
- In 1998, 4,000 (36.8%) congregations reported 75 worshipers or fewer.
- 5,453 (50%) congregations reported 100 or fewer worshipers in 1998.⁵

The report goes on to state that these small congregations are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain ordained clergy, that pastoral vacancies are increasing and lasting longer, that ministerial supply is not keeping up with demand (the February 2000 candidate assignment process for new seminary graduates had 211 available candidates for 445 positions) and that “the number of clergy leaving ordained ministry through on-leave-from-call, resignation, removal and retirement” was putting additional pressure on the clergy deployment system.

According to the recent **National Congregations Study**, one of the richest and most comprehensive contemporary studies of American congregations, this ELCA picture is remarkably similar to a larger pattern within the reality of congregations in American life. The survey reports that the American religious experience still is heavily skewed toward small congregations in which the median worship attendance is 75 persons.⁶ This would suggest that the ELCA pattern of small congregations’ difficulties in recruiting and retaining ordained clergy is, or may be soon, more widespread.

The **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)** has a similar story. Kurtis C. Hess, a professor at Union Theological Seminary-Presbyterian School for Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, reports that the number of church professionals available for church positions in his denomination is decreasing fairly rapidly. The decline has several dimensions:

- **A smaller number of people entering congregational ministry.** Presbyterian placement officers reported in 1999 that “only 50-60% of our [Presbyterian] students are going into parish ministry.” In marked contrast to 15 years previously when the norm was between 80 percent and 90 percent, the “national offices in Louisville verified that only 50% of the 1998 graduates went into parish ministry.
- **Retirement of clergy.** Hess’s report states: “The ranks of retired clergy are increasing rapidly. 8,800 out of 10,300 will have retired by 2025; 1/3 of those currently in seminary will retire by that date.”
- **Shorter clergy-career tenures.** The denomination’s Board of Pensions found that “pastors remain in the parish for an average of only 17 years.” Further, Hess states that the PCUSA is “approaching the sad fact that almost 20% of those who enter parish ministry will leave the pastorate within 5 years of ordination.” All of this adds up to an ominous bottom line. From 1993 to 1998, the denomination lost an average of 111 clergy per year. In 1998, 33 percent of PCUSA congregations did not have an installed pastor. If present trends continue, the supply of clergy serving congregations in this denomination will have declined from 8,739 in 1993 to 5,500 in 2025.⁷

From a supply perspective, the graying of the ministerium that has been noted for some time seems to be an important prevailing trend. This trend carries with it these three implications:

1. We will face many retirements.
2. The people who choose to follow the retirees will often have shorter pastoral careers due to later age of entry in the profession.
3. More laypeople will be claiming places in congregational leadership.

This graying of the ministerium and the growing clergy shortage is matched by the dearth of young clergy leaders available in many of our denominations. Recently an issue of the Alban Institute magazine, *CONGREGATIONS*, focused on the lack of young clergy and received a surprising response from concerned and alarmed readers. Much of the response focused on the reporting of denominational statistics that showed alarming drops in the number of clergy age 35 and younger. Comparing statistics from the mid-1970s to the present moment, there were notable decreases in the percentage of clergy in the 35 and younger category—from 24 percent in 1975 to 7 percent in 1999 for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), from 19 percent in 1974 to 4 percent in 2000 for the Episcopal Church, and from 18 percent in 1980 to 8 percent in 2000 for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.⁸

Whatever the long-term effects of these changes may be—and they are still unknowable—it is clear that many of the assumptions about clergy leadership in congregations require reexamination. Not so long ago, some denominations urged candidates for the ministry to get “real world” experience before ordination; today, they decry the paucity of young clergy. The role of lay professionals in the church is also changing, with many moving from support functions to leadership positions that would have previously been filled by clergy.

Indicator 2: Quality of Pastoral Leadership

Recently a group of presbytery leaders from around the country concluded that “a crisis in pastoral leadership is sweeping across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).” “This crisis is not only a shortage of women and men to fill pastoral positions in congregations; it is also a decline in the quality of those whom the church is calling to the office of minister of the Word and Sacrament.”⁹ This concern with clergy quality is widespread across denominations and faith traditions.

For example, American Judaism also is responding to a similar sense of crisis in rabbinic leadership. According to the recent report of the **Reconstructionist Commission on the Role of the Rabbi**, the clergy shortage is related to discomfort with the role of ordained leadership within the congregation. “Rabbis and rabbinical students increasingly indicate a reluctance to serve in congregational settings. They cite several common concerns: that the job is simply unmanageable; that boundaries between personal and professional time cannot be established; that the variety of roles they must fill creates unreasonable expectations and confusing standards of evaluation; that an absence of efficient and effective models of decision making, communication and leadership hinders their work.”¹⁰ Clearly the conversation about the quality or competence of

leadership oscillates between an exploration of the quality of the person, along with his or her preparation for the role of leader, and the lack of clarity or reasonableness of the role of leader itself.

Related to the shortage of clergy noted previously, this concern over the competence of people who are entering ministry was expressed by our informants in several ways. Some were worried that new clergy simply do not have the talents, skills, and knowledge they need to become effective leaders. This deficit was at times attributed to certain lacks in the talent pool; at other times it was laid at the door of the seminaries. This concern about the quality of ministerial candidates has been recurrent since the 19th century. Others were worried that seminary students often enter denominations in which they have little experience. They expressed concern that students came to seminaries with low levels of religious literacy and with high personal and therapeutic needs. Still others noted that a large number of seminarians are not interested in seeking congregational leadership positions.

Recent statistics from the **Association of Theological Schools** (ATS) helped sharpen this reading about the supply pipeline:

- Of the 3,009 students graduating from 90 seminaries in 1999, 60 percent were in the M.Div. track.
- An important part of this supply portrait has to do with gender: males composed 65 percent of these graduates, females 35 percent. (Remember that these figures include Catholic seminaries—mainline Protestant denominations have seen a more rapid influx of women in the past 40 years than is indicated by these numbers.)
- Of those in the professional track for ordained parish ministry, 61 percent of male graduates and 54 percent of female graduates were expecting to serve as full-time parish clergy.
- When asked about their plans five years down the road, only 53 percent of male M.Div. graduates and 48 percent of females expected to still be in parish ministry.
- More than 40 percent of M.Div. students were age 40 or older.

The ATS survey also tells us that the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of students preparing at our seminaries does not keep pace with the increasing diversity of our population as a whole.

As to assessments of competence, the ATS has tracked GRE verbal scores. From 1981 to 1987, prospective women M.Div. students consistently scored above the mean for all examinees (in one year just barely). Male students consistently scored below the mean. The range of scores for women was from 500 to 520, for men 485 to 495.¹¹

Individual denominations have their own ways of tracking declining quality. For the **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**, this issue is addressed in the *Presbyterian*

Outlook article on the crisis in pastoral leadership cited at the beginning of this section. The writers of this article expressed concern about the “unacceptable failure rates on standard ordination exams, especially in biblical exegesis (31 percent in February 1999 and 39 percent in September 1999), theological competence (40 percent and 31 percent in 1999) and church polity (36 percent and 38 percent in 1999).” They noted with concern that presbyteries could not obtain “standard ordination pass-fail rates of each Presbyterian theological institution” and the “temptation of presbyteries to circumvent ordination requirements through the use of ‘extraordinary’ clauses and oral exams.” When looking at the pool of ministerial candidates they found “Certain attitudes and behaviors of some recent seminary graduates which undermined or impeded pastoral ministry: inability to analyze and understand congregations as systems, poor interpersonal skills, poor leadership skills, lack of maturity, failure to keep ethical norms and boundaries, and failure to take responsibility for self, including personal health.” It was time, they concluded, for the denomination to raise its standard and recruit the “brightest and best.”¹²

The **United Methodist Church**, in reviewing its own trends of decreasing numbers of ordinands, questioned the quality of the people who responded to the call of ministry seeking ordination. Quoting Perkins School of Theology professor Schubert Ogden, Rolf Memming’s report observed that “fewer and fewer undergraduate students who graduated at the top of their classes are coming to theological classes. They are going on to other professions and careers.” The study also cited evidence of reluctance among some United Methodist clergy to encourage others to enter ministry, suggesting a breakdown of both formal and informal channels of calling “the brightest and best” to leadership.¹³

A recent study conducted by the **Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education** further refines our picture of the supply side of the congregational leadership story. Auburn’s careful survey of seminary students looked across the spectrum of American Theological Schools at students beginning seminary education in 1998.¹⁴ The study indicates that a major shift is taking place in the supply pool for American clergy. A different kind of student is entering the seminary today, bringing different kinds of resources to the leadership pool. “Students entering theological schools today are—as so many have observed—older than students are reported to have been in the past. On average they are much older than students entering medical and law schools, which have collected recent data describing their students. Women, who were a tiny percentage of students in the early 1970s, now make up about one-third of the entering student body, and as much as one-half in some religious sectors. Racial and ethnic representation is comparable to that in other professional schools, but African-Americans and Hispanics are significantly underrepresented compared with their presence in the general population.”

The report moves beyond demographic realities and probes the background of these students. “Much of the evidence suggests that most of today’s students come to theological school from a congregation rather than a campus. A majority

of students make their decisions about theological study and ministry relatively late, after college graduation, and they do not major in subjects in the humanities that in the past were recommended as relevant pre-seminary study.” There seemed to be little evidence that the old “feeder system” of church-related colleges was a significant factor in recruiting these students.

What about the quality of these students? “Theological schools are not highly selective (data from other sources show that half accept 87 percent or more of those who apply). A majority of students apply to only one school. Only a handful says that they were not accepted by their first choice of seminary.” The report noted that this was a very different pattern from other professions like law and medicine, which were much more selective and competitive.

Finally, the report reminds us that not all of these students intend to serve in congregational leadership roles. “Though 80 percent say that their goal is a ‘religious’ profession or occupation, fewer (60%) plan to be ordained, and ministry in a congregation or parish is the goal of less than one-third of students.”

Looking at more seasoned and experienced clergy, a study conducted by researchers Alan C. Klaas and Cheryl D. Klaas paints a very dismal picture of one denomination’s situation. **The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS)**, which commissioned the study, is one of the more conservative Lutheran Church bodies in America and is not normally lumped together with mainline denominations. Thus it is surprising to read about a malaise and decline of troubling proportions. Beginning with the fact that the denomination had lost 1,305 clergy between 1988 and 1997, the study piles up a set of troubling statistics. The Synod’s Council of Presidents reports that 15 percent of its congregational leadership positions are vacant and that unless trends change drastically, 24 percent of its congregations will not have a pastor in 2007. Right now the church body expects the shortage to increase even more dramatically through 2017.

The Klaases set out to understand the reason for the shortage. In an amazingly thorough system-wide survey and interview project the researchers talked to clergy, seminary faculty, denominational executives, clergy family members, seminarians, their spouses, and students in the denomination’s college and high schools (what used to be the feeder system for its seminaries). They discovered a sick denominational system. They assert that “a harsh and intolerant spirit is poisoning the infrastructure of the LCMS.” They found that 30 percent of the clergy truly loved their work and served as effective role models for others who might one day enter the ministry. Another 30 percent were deeply ambivalent about their ministry. These clergy noted positive aspects of ministry but then immediately turned to systemic issues that led to expressions of “modest levels of despair—which they are quick to pull back into check and repress.”

Another 20 percent are in what the Klaases term “advanced stages of burnout.” That means that over 1,000 clergy are “in depression and despair, either unaware of or not trusting ‘official’ channels of help.” The remaining 20 percent are “well on their way to burnout.”¹⁵

As an overall indicator the researchers pointed to the response they received to what they felt was a simple and neutrally worded question, “What is it like being a parish pastor these days?” Two-thirds of the responses were negative and these were given with denominational officials and other clergy sitting at the interview table with them. The Klaases conclude their report with a list of problems they have identified that are factors in explaining why the Synod faces its clergy shortage. They include:

1. people beating on each other;
2. mismatch of pastors and congregations;
3. the difficulty getting help to pastors;
4. poor support for clergy wives and children (the Synod does not ordain women);
5. low clergy income;
6. grossly unreasonable expectations of pastors;
7. fighting and sick congregations; and
8. congregations where a few members dominated the vast majority.

The Klaases also list a series of problems related to the recruitment of new ministers.¹⁶

To risk a vast understatement, this is a very troubling portrait of an American denomination at the turn of the century. To be sure, there are specific factors in this story peculiar to this one denomination’s history (the deep and ongoing struggle in the church body to maintain sound doctrine and practice based on inerrant Scriptures) that others do not share. And the researchers’ agenda and methods may have something to do with the outcomes. But it is interesting to us that our informants, none of whom were in this denomination, knew of this study and felt that some of what is described here—especially the separation of clergy into positive, ambivalent, and deeply troubled cohorts—rang true in other parts of the American religious environment.

The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod is not the only place where warning signs about clergy morale and health surface. A recent mailing from PastorCare: The National Clergy Support Network, a group devoted to helping “needy pastors,” reported on findings from a 1991 survey of 1,000 U.S. pastors conducted by the **Fuller Institute of Church Growth**. Among the troubling findings:

- 80 percent of pastors believe their pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families.
- 75 percent reported a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.

- 50 percent felt unable to meet the demands of the job.
- 90 percent felt inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands.
- 70 percent have a lower self-image than when they began their professions.
- 50 percent had considered leaving the ministry within the three months prior to completing the survey.¹⁷

Our own experience at the Alban Institute, while it cannot confirm or refute these statistics, gives additional evidence of the pressures on clergy. Both our consultation and educational work on the one hand, and the inquiries we receive for information about resources to help clergy deal with “burnout” and to help create centers that can deal with clergy health issues on the other, suggest that many clergy are clearly struggling. The fact that many of the denominations have launched major clergy wellness initiatives provides further evidence that there is great pain in the clergy system.

When raising the question of competency of clergy leaders, it is necessary to look at the systems in which those leaders are placed for support, accountability, and development. While the full research base is unavailable to describe our current setting, once more there are examples of individual studies that can deepen our view. In this case we turn to the **Project on the Spiritual Development Needs of Mid-Career Clergy**. This report, done under the auspices of the Toronto School of Theology, provides another angle of vision on the denominational systems in which clergy live. In this report William Lord and John C. Bryan deliberately set out to survey and interview clergy who “were not currently in crisis mode” about both their sense of adequacy in meeting the spiritual needs of their church members and about their personal spiritual needs. They worked with a small sample (80 surveyed and 45 interviewed) of American and Canadian Protestant clergy who were nominated by judicatory leaders because they met the criteria of being mid-career (at least 15 years in ministry and at least 10 more years of active ministry anticipated), effective, and successful.

The researchers discovered that significant percentages of these clergy “did not feel adequately prepared to help their parishioners” when approached for guidance on

- personal/psychological issues (31.8 percent of the time)
- marriage/family/relationship issues (40 percent of the time)
- work and employment issues (37.7 percent of the time)
- senior-related issues (53.8 percent of the time)¹⁸

They also found “a high degree of mistrust and cynicism about the official church structures and officers, which usually were not perceived as being useful sources for one’s own spiritual growth.”¹⁹ The clergy talked openly of their “loneliness, frustration with the ambiguities and stresses of the ministerial role, and a sense

of never having enough time to attend to themselves, their families, and their own spiritual lives.”²⁰

The researchers identified five principal needs in the testimony from these clergy:

1. greater clarity and integration of professional roles;
2. recognition and affirmation;
3. a place to be dependent and/or a person to depend upon;
4. a community marked by learning, trust, and affirmation; and
5. knowledge of and experience with spiritual disciplines.²¹

Just as in the study of Methodist clergywomen that will be noted in the next section, here the theme of a need for a safe place emerged. Like the Methodist women, these respondents expressed a strong desire for a place outside the normal denominational system. The respondents were looking for “a longer term, structured, high quality program which involves a continuing community of learners working together.”²²

Indicator 3: Retention of Women in Ministry

A further clue to the state of leadership in congregations is to be found in the presence and place of ordained women in congregations and systems that claim to welcome them. Margaret S. Wiborg and Elizabeth J. Collier prepared their study on the retention of clergywomen in the **United Methodist Church** for the Anna Howard Shaw Center of Boston University School of Theology and, like the Klaas study, did so with financial support from the parent denomination. Beginning with a couple of troubling denominational statistics (“nearly one-third of United Methodist clergywomen in full connection were not serving local churches five years ago” and “women are leaving local church ministry at a ten percent higher rate than male clergy”²³) the researchers set out to discover why their colleagues were exiting parish ministry.

Like most mainline Protestant denominations, the Methodists did not begin ordaining women until mid-century (1956 in the case of the Methodist Church, the major predecessor denomination that merged to form the United Methodist Church in 1968). This mid-century entry of women into ordained ministry was a major challenge to the Methodist denominational system, as it was to all others. Stories of glass ceilings, inequity in pay, and various kinds of harassment are a part of this dramatic challenge to the leadership ecology of American religion.

The study concluded with this single sentence: “They leave the local church primarily due to lack of support from the hierarchical system, a difficulty to maintain their integrity in the current system, family responsibilities, and rejection from their congregations.”²⁴ Through this project the 1,388 women who completed the survey (out of a population of about 4,000), and the 123 who agreed to be interviewed, sent a strong message about a system that they did not

trust and that caused them pain. Most painful in the report are the firsthand accounts of mistreatment—by congregations that cut salaries, clergy colleagues who called the clergywomen “little helpers,” bishops who misrepresented congregations to the women clergy and the clergy to the congregations they were called to serve.

The report focused particular attention on the appointment system (which received a 74 percent negative response), on compensation inequities, and on bishops who functioned more like CEOs than like pastors. It also pointed out dysfunctional patterns among Annual Conference leaders and clergy colleagues. In particular, the researchers zeroed in on systemic flaws in the pattern of superintendency. On the one hand, the report argues, the *Book of Discipline* states that the superintendency “is supposed to be the space where clergy can go to receive guidance and counsel when needed.” Yet, many of the women felt that this space was not safe for them because “the district superintendent also is responsible for the evaluation and appointment of the clergy in their district.”²⁵ Congregational expectations were also a great problem these women encountered, receiving an 86 percent negative response. The report carries painful accounts of women who were told by parishioners that going on the youth ski trip counted as personal vacation time or whose personal lives were mercilessly scrutinized by church members. Many felt that their seminary education did not prepare them at all for the realities they encountered in local church ministry.

As we have seen in the Klaas study—which focused on poor clergy morale, modest levels of despair, and advanced stages of burnout—those surveyed referred to a “sick denominational system” as a contributing factor. Similarly, in the United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study there was reference to dysfunctional patterns among Annual Conference leaders, to the flaws in the superintendency system, and to unsafe denominational space. Even the hopeful Episcopal Zacchaeus Project report (which will be cited in the section on ferment below), carried with it concerns about widespread confusion over the roles and functions of bishops and ineffectual and weak denominational structures.²⁶ It is clear from this evidence, that while clergy supply is a very pressing reality, we must also attend to the systems to which we are trying to recruit clergy.

PART 2: A HORIZON OF FERMENT

While the dominant reading of the current situation casts a perception of crisis, there is in the current moment a sense of ferment that suggests transitions leading to hope, renewed energies, and a yet-to-be fully understood birthing. In 1978, historian William G. McLoughlin speculated that the period from 1960 to 1990 might one day be called “**The Fourth Great Awakening**.”²⁷ He placed the ferment of the ’60s and ’70s into the longer story of “revitalization movements” in America. According to anthropologists who study cultural transformations, these movements simultaneously carry within them a crisis of legitimacy for the old order and an effervescence of new alternative spiritual expressions. Looking at his own time, McLoughlin wondered if within the stirrings of black power, Eastern religions, the counterculture, and neo-Evangelicalism were early signs of an awakening as important as the First Great Awakening (1730–1760) in reshaping our country’s soul. It remains to be seen just how important this time of ferment will turn out to be—or if America will in fact be “revitalized” by the series of crises and the waves of ferment that continue to unsettle us. McLoughlin did not predict that this time of spiritual ferment would last as long it has. He did not anticipate all the new forms of religious community—including many within the Christian and Jewish worlds—that became more visible in the waning years of the 20th century. But he did see, earlier than most, that America was entering a time of crisis and ferment that would fundamentally change it.

If anything, the changes that have occurred in the years between McLoughlin’s writing and our own time have only intensified the effects of the transformations he identified. Mainline Protestantism recognized its “dis-establishment.” New immigration laws set in motion changes that will result in the reversal of majority and minority statuses by the end of the 21st century as Hispanic and Asian peoples fundamentally alter the political and cultural realities of our land.²⁸ The computer and the Internet have radically democratized access to knowledge and have set the new electronic information-based economy into aggressive competition with the “old” manufacturing and service economies. America is in the midst of a leadership sea change in which old established leadership patterns are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy and new spiritual effervescence abounds.

The congregations of America—and the people who lead them—are simultaneously encountering great new spiritual vitality and a crisis of legitimacy of their established leadership patterns and practices. It is important to note signals of this strong and surprising vitality. For example, in 1999 the **Episcopal Church Foundation** published its Zacchaeus Project report. The report was unique for denominational research projects in that its primary data came from grassroots focus groups of lay members, rather than clergy. The Foundation found some good news for a mainline denomination accustomed to hearing a litany of woes about membership decline (from 3.5 million in the mid-1960s to

2.3 million in 1997), scandal (financial and sexual misconduct), and great institutional conflict. Here the news was “Episcopalians celebrate a powerful feeling of ‘pulling together’ with a sense of common purpose and mutual support.” They found that “Creative ferment and vitality characterize Episcopal life in local congregations” and that “a clear sense of shared ministry of both clergy and lay leadership in local churches has been an important fruit of the Episcopal Church’s shift in emphasis over the past fifty years.” Thus at the local congregational level these researchers found a surprising ferment.²⁹

There are also sightings of vitality beyond the mainline, but each carries with it troubling leadership implications. In *Reinventing American Protestantism*, for example, sociologist Donald E. Miller looks at what he calls **New Paradigm churches**, in particular the new quasi-denominations or movements known as Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel. These new religious groups, along with better known megachurches like Willow Creek, are part of what Miller believes to be “a revolution” that is transforming American Protestantism. He asserts that “While many of the mainline churches are losing membership, overall church attendance is not declining. Instead, a new style of Christianity is being born in the United States, one that responds to fundamental cultural changes that began in the mid-1960s.”³⁰

Ferment, for Miller, is abundant, but it is taking new institutional forms. When he looks back at the mainline Protestantism that nurtured him, the implications are ominous: “I see most liberal churches missing the mark: their message is ambiguous, lacking authority, and their worship is anemic. Furthermore, they are mired in organizational structures that deaden vision as people gather endlessly in committee meetings. . . . Given the level of creativity and innovative leadership among new paradigm Christians, I do not see how mainline churches can compete with new paradigm churches unless they radically reinvent themselves.”³¹

Sometimes the ferment expresses itself outside of normal denominational and congregational structures. In another research project, Miller and several colleagues found a different kind of ferment, this time in terms of institutional creativity and civic leadership. In a study of the activities of congregations in South Central Los Angeles after the 1992 riots, they found evidence of stunning coalition building, **spiritual entrepreneurialism**, and civic leadership coming from local congregations. New not-for-profit organizations were coming to life in order to meet the deep social, economic, and health-care needs of a troubled and explosive community. As Korean, Anglo, Hispanic, and African American congregations worked together, a new “politics of the spirit” was creating a new “civic infrastructure” where none had existed.³² Again, at the grassroots there is clear evidence of vitality, although this time of a different quality. But with these new institutions and the new entrepreneurs who create them come a new set of leadership challenges: How to sustain and support such efforts for the long haul? As our nation responds to the challenges of Welfare Reform and the new set of expectations placed upon congregations and other faith-based organizations by

the U.S. government's Charitable Choice legislation, the new set of leadership challenges foreshadowed in Los Angeles multiply exponentially. These challenges will indeed deepen as congregations consider the new opportunities and responsibilities of ministry that now face them in President Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiatives program, which invites faith communities to step up to new roles and relationships in their communities.

Much of this ferment flies below the radar screen of religious experts and leaders. It occurs at the edges, or outside of, or below the established structures that we have used to organize religious life in America. For example, another sign of ferment to note here is the **emergence of "lay pastors"** in a variety of American denominations. At present we do not know how many people are playing such roles in America. Although they may be called by different names in different traditions, essentially these new leaders are laypeople who are trained to exercise some or all pastoral duties in one local setting, often a small congregation unable to support a full-time, seminary-trained minister. A recent study discovered more than 158 judicatory-based study programs that have been developed to support these new leaders.³³ The emergence of this new leadership strategy—and of a large number of new programs to train them—is, on the one hand, a sign of ferment and institutional creativity. On the other hand, as the report makes clear, this new leadership role and the new educational process pose serious challenges to existing models of theological education and longstanding patterns of preparing people for ministry and credentialing them.

If we return again to an examination of ordained clergy as a bellwether of the state of our congregational and denominational systems, there is also evidence of some ferment. Granted that the research base is spotty and that some of the studies may be disputed for methodological or political reasons, it nonetheless seems clear from the reading of crisis in the preceding section that the American clergy system is in pain. People do not feel safe in their clergy systems and they often feel alone and cynical about the systems that are supposed to support them. Nonetheless, one can easily find **clergy who are thriving**; these studies clearly point to them. For many, including those who are flourishing, these systems are problematic, as noted. Further, these beleaguered clergy systems are facing new stresses of under-supply and the many other challenges of postmodern (and, perhaps, post-denominational) religion. But religious sociologist Nancy Ammerman, for example, has concluded from her recent studies of American denominations that some clergy and congregational leaders are finding new and meaningful connections to their denominations. Those who do must confront the erosion of denominational culture and must be intentional about constructing new denominational identities—a skill frequently untaught in the seminary.³⁴ What she observes is part of a larger historic development that historian E. Brooks Holifield has described as a movement from the minister as colonial officer in the 17th and 18th centuries, to the minister as either professional or populist leader in the nineteenth century, to the minister as generalist or specialist in the 20th century, to the minister in a time of transition and confusion about role at the start of the 21st century.³⁵

Finally, consideration of the leadership situation facing congregations must include attention to the **leadership role of lay members** of our congregations in the worlds in which they live, work, and play. This great throng of people, the largest group of members of any type of voluntary organizations in this country, has become accustomed to a wide range of new leadership models and roles. They are better educated than any previous generation. Many of them recognize that the time has long passed since clergy were the only learned ones in the community and laypeople were dependent upon them. Helping these people identify their leadership roles as members of congregations and then helping them carry their religious beliefs and values out into the world as resources for leadership is a challenge of huge proportions—especially when the leadership infrastructure of their congregations is under such stress.

PART 3: THE ALBAN INSTITUTE'S POSITION

At the grassroots level, where much of the Alban Institute's work is done, we find many signs of ferment in our own connection with congregations and their leaders. Congregations are growing, and in very new ways. New generations are coming into many established congregations, often making their presence felt with new preferences and practices. It is not uncommon—in fact, it is more typical—for us to work with congregations where the group of members and participants who have been in that congregation for less than 10 years rivals or exceeds the size of the group of members who have been in that congregation for more than 20 years. We see this as evidence of healthy and vital congregations that are reestablishing themselves in their communities with a new “generation” of participants.

While certainly not reversing the well-known trends of declining denominational memberships, such grassroots evidence of ferment is making a difference as some denominations are at least noting an increase of attendance at worship, if not membership. For example, the **Episcopal Church** noted that despite their decline in membership, average attendance increased by 31 percent between 1974 and 1997, measured by averaging the attendance at the “Four Key Sundays” during the year.³⁶ This increase was in contrast to the 25 percent increase in the general population during the same period. Similarly, the **United Methodist Church** reported six consecutive years of U.S. attendance increases and noted that in 1998 the average Sunday attendance increased by 13,000 persons.³⁷

We have watched congregations jump in worship attendance as much as 40 percent within months by adding worship services sensitive to their surroundings. We have worked with congregations to learn new ways of making decisions and dealing with differences because of their success at welcoming diversity and becoming truly inclusive. We have worked with skilled clergy and lay leaders in congregations that often do right and healthy things intuitively as leaders in complex settings. And we have consulted with, trained, and learned from committed and creative judicatory and denominational leaders who often find themselves in the very systems accurately described as dysfunctional in the earlier part of this report but who are aware of the problems and committed to making a difference.

These are days when many in our society are looking for new leadership from members of our religious communities. Our government is asking faith-based organizations and local congregations to step forward and lead in an era of devolved governmental welfare. Social commentators like David Brooks are challenging the most affluent and best-educated generation in human history, the boomers, to do one thing that they have not yet tried—take a leadership role in

the refurbishing of our public life. The affluent people he calls the Bobos (shorthand for Bourgeois Bohemians), who reconciled one of the deepest divides in modern life by bringing together the cultures of the Bohemians and the Bourgeoisie, have ended up with small moralities and spiritualities of complacency.³⁸ As Brooks seems to recognize and as others plainly see, it is this vast group of privileged Americans, many of whom have found their way back to church, that also needs new kinds of resources to lead a culture in search of its soul. What Alban does in helping to create these resources must unite practical solutions to practical problems with an understanding of the deep, sustaining sources of imagination and wisdom.

Standing on the Side of Ferment

In this report we are recognizing the necessity of risking a seemingly paradoxical perspective on the current state of the leadership situation facing American congregations. That paradoxical perspective must include an awareness of *both* turmoil *and* ferment held in responsible tension. In our exploration it has become clear to us, as it must be to the reader, that the tension is clearly tipped toward turmoil for many, if not most, of the people and the sources that we consulted. It would not be responsible to ignore this sense of crisis that has been at least partially documented as a description of our current predicament. But it would be equally irresponsible to be insensitive to the ferment that is already at hand and to fail to look for creative ways to respond to this changing landscape of American religion and congregational life. We do not deny there is a crisis; however, we do assert that in the attention given to the crisis are signs of ferment that indicate that the crisis will be addressed in new and creative ways.

It is the conviction of the Alban Institute that leaders must learn to hold the paradox of turmoil and ferment in hand, but to stand on the side of ferment. The vision for leadership of both laity and clergy in our congregations and congregational systems must be more than problem solving. The leaders who are needed to respond to the ferment that is building must have a passion for the values and truth that they find in their faith and a conviction that leaders have a voice of spiritual imagination that needs to be heard in the larger community as well as in the congregation. We are past the place of understanding spiritual leadership as a distinct role to be played within the structures and programs of an institution. Our congregations are beginning to seek people of substance and preparation that will allow them to speak the imaginative word of leadership within the broader public of which the congregation and its members are a part and in which the congregation can be seen as the platform from which the voice of faith-based leadership of clergy and laity alike can be heard.

In our historic commitment to resourcing and preparing leaders of congregations, *the Alban Institute clearly takes its stand on the side of ferment*. For us this means being even clearer about not committing our resources simply to fixing old problems and discomforts that will only return our systems to levels

of false satisfaction that mirror a time prior to our current moment of paradoxical tension. It also means following the current evidence and emerging hints of the new ferment that calls for new leadership and the preparation of those leaders. We stand looking for partners in that emerging work.

Making New Leaders: Identifying and Working the Challenges

In light of the seemingly paradoxical realities of sea change and crisis, of ferment and turmoil, those who lead congregations—as well as those who support congregations in judicatory, denominational, seminary, and independent roles—face an important set of challenges. The recruiting, training, and support of new leaders require major changes in our assumptions, behaviors, and the systems in which we live. Among the most important challenges are the following:

1. **We need to develop new, healthy, and safe environments for clergy to learn and connect.** There is abundant evidence that the old denominational systems are, for many, not providing the support, the safety, and the resources that leaders need. New spaces, both within and beyond denominational and seminary systems, need to be invented. Denominations, seminaries, and other leadership institutions in American religious life must create environments and structures that encourage leaders to take risks and that are capable of sustaining leaders when they experience failure. A key part of this challenge is amassing venture capital to support new experiments and new learning environments.
2. **New pathways and processes of learning need to be created for all congregational leaders.** Clergy and lay leaders need supportive peer learning environments, educational programs, and resources that are richly interdisciplinary in settings that enable them to negotiate the many boundary crossings that are required in contemporary culture and in most local congregations.
3. **All of these leaders need to see leadership in new ways.** Their vision and imagination about their callings and roles need to be opened. They must be equipped to read the culture critically, to read their congregations carefully, and to read their theological sources creatively and faithfully. They must learn a new set of adaptive skills that allow them to shape new patterns of congregational life and new leadership roles. And they must be helped to integrate the various kinds of knowledge and experience that flow through their lives and the lives of the people they serve.
4. **There are many leaders who feel dispirited or ill-equipped for their current roles.** A variety of resources—remedial, organizational, ethical, and theological—need to be available to help people learn in ways appropriate to their actual settings. And, where people no longer have the capacity to serve as leaders, we need to provide clear exit routes.

5. **Major attention must be given to recruiting the next generation of leaders.** Special efforts must be made to reach young people with compelling images of the leadership challenges and opportunities awaiting them in congregational life. Great attention must be paid to removing the major systemic barriers that discourage their consideration of such roles.

CONCLUSION

The Alban Institute feels called to make these realities and concerns, in all their paradoxical richness, its central work in the coming years. We know that this set of challenges is much too large for us—or for any congregation, judicatory, seminary, or denomination—to attempt to resolve single-handedly. Rather, we hope to identify others who wish to grapple with these issues and to find new and creative ways to work together to address them.

The challenge before us in a time of sea change is to shift from preoccupation with institutional problem solving to a new commitment to capturing people's imagination and providing wellsprings of hope. To make this shift requires a new calling of leaders, a new training of leaders, and a new supporting of leaders, both clergy and lay, who can stand with poise and fidelity in both the crisis and ferment of this great sea change.

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NOTES

¹ A sample of those initially interviewed include: Daniel O. Aleshire, executive director, Association of Theological Schools; Jackson Carroll, professor, Duke Divinity School; Craig Dykstra, vice president for religion, Lilly Endowment Inc.; Walter Fluker, director, Leadership Institute at Morehouse College; Terry Foland, senior consultant, Alban Institute; Michael Gilligan, program officer for theology, Luce Foundation; Kirk Hadaway, director of research, UCC Board of Homeland Ministries; Chris Hobgood, regional executive, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); David Hubner, ministerial development director, Unitarian Universalist Association; Jack Johnson, United Methodist district superintendent; Glenn Matis, Episcopal priest; Paul Menitoff, executive vice president, Central Conference of American Rabbis; Steve Ott, director, Center for Career Development and Ministry; Janet Peterman, ELCA pastor; Leonard Thal, vice president, Union of American Hebrew Congregations; David Wolfman, regional director, Union of American Hebrew Congregations; and Mary Wood, Episcopal priest. Each of these individuals spoke freely and frankly with us. We assured them that, while we would make use of the substance of their responses, we would not attribute any quotations to them without their permission.

² R. Scott Appleby, "Surviving the Shaking of the Foundations: United States Catholicism in the Twenty-First Century," in Katarina Schuth, ed., *Seminaries, Theologates, and the Future of church Ministry: An Analysis of Trends and Transitions* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 2, n. 1.

³ Jim Castelli and Eugene Hemrick, *National Catholic Parish Survey: The New Church Emerges* (Fairfax Station, Va.: Castelli Enterprises, Inc., April 2000), pp. 1–2.

⁴ Rolf Memming, "United Methodist Ordained Ministry in Transition (Trends in Ordination and Careers)" in William B. Lawrence, Dennis Campbell, and Russell Richey, eds., *The People(s) Called Methodist: Forms and Reforms of Their Life, United Methodism and American Culture*, volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 129–130.

⁵ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Ministry Needs and Resources in the 21st Century* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2000), pp. 3, 8. Available online at www.elca.org/dm/candidacy/resource.html.

⁶ Mark Chaves, *How Do We Worship?* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1999), p. 8.

⁷ Kurtis C. Hess, "Trends & Transitions Facing the Church," (Unpublished report, January 2000), pp. 1–3.

⁸ Hillary Wicai, "Clergy by the Numbers." *CONGREGATIONS*, vol. 27, no. 2 (March/April 2001), p. 9.

⁹ "A Crisis in Leadership: A Letter to the Middle Governing Bodies, General Assembly Entities and Theological Institutions of the PC (USA)," *The Presbyterian Outlook* (September 25, 2000), pp. 10–11. Available online at www.pres-outlook.com/crisis_letter.html.

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¹¹ With the exception of the GRE scores, these statistics come from the ATS 1999 Graduating Student Survey, which Daniel Aleshire graciously made available to us. The GRE statistics come from "Academic Preparation of Master of Divinity Candidates," *Ministry Research Notes* (Fall 1990).

¹² "A Crisis in Leadership."

¹³ Memming, "United Methodist Ordained Ministry in Transition (Trends in Ordination and Career)," pp. 130, 144.

¹⁴ Barbara Wheeler, "Is There a Problem: Theological Students and Religious Leadership for the Future" (New York: Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, 2001), p. 3. Available online at www.auburnsem.org/studies/pubs.shtml.

¹⁵ Alan C. Klaas and Cheryl D. Klaas, "Clergy Shortage Study," (Smithville, Mo: Mission Growth Ministries, 1999), pp. 47–48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 56–65.

¹⁷ PastorCare mailing.

¹⁸ William Lord and John C. Bryan, "Project on the Spiritual Development Needs of Mid-Career Clergy: Report of Findings" (Toronto: Toronto School of Theology, 1999), pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 27.
- ²² Ibid., p. 36.
- ²³ Margaret S. Wiborg and Elizabeth J. Collier, “United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study” (Boston: Boston University School of Theology, 1997), p. 1. Available online at www.bu.edu/sth/shaw/retention/.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 57.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 43.
- ²⁶ Thomas P. Holland and William L. Sachs, *The Zacchaeus Project: Discerning Episcopal Identity at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (New York: The Episcopal Church Foundation, 1999), pp. 10, 15. Available online at www.episcopalchurch.org/zacchaeus/.
- ²⁷ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Social Change in America, 1607–1977* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp.179–216.
- ²⁸ See Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).
- ²⁹ Holland and Sachs, *The Zacchaeus Project*.
- ³⁰ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 1.
- ³¹ Ibid., 187.
- ³² John B. Orr, Donald E. Miller, Wade Clark Roof, and J. Gordon Melton, *Politics of the Spirit: Religion and Multiethnicity in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1994).
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