

Recognizing, Equipping, and Sustaining the People God is Calling to Pastor Smaller Churches

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Recruiting, educating, and resourcing pastors for small churches present some unique challenges – unique to this size church, although not unique to the Nazarene denomination. Findings from Nazarene research as well as in other denominations suggest that there is a group of Nazarene churches and pastors in the United States who may need some special planning attention.

Most protestant pastors serve in small congregations: A United Methodist researcher recently noted that “Seventy-one percent of United Methodist congregations have 100 or fewer regular attendees, and it is close to that for most other Protestant denominations.” He went on to say these statistics are important because “They provide essential information about the congregations in which a majority of clergy will serve for a significant portion of their ministries. Protestant clergy will mostly be pastors of small to mid-sized congregations—often in small town and rural areas where 52 percent of all congregations are located.” (Jackson Carroll, Williams Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society, Duke Divinity School, *Reflections of a Clergy-Watcher*, Retirement Lecture, April 18, 2001, pages 8-9, <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/clergywatcherlecture.pdf>).

The pastor shortage is focused in the smaller churches: Jack Marcum, Research Services, Presbyterian Church (USA) recently observed that the perceived PC(USA) shortage of ministers was probably not a “shortage of pastors, pure and simple,” but rather a matter of a “growing number of tiny congregations and increasing constraints on the calls ministers will consider”. He said, “The difference is important, because it affects how the PC(USA) responds. If we perceive a shortage of pastors, pure and simple, then the logical response is to recruit more candidates for ministry. But given the complexity of the problem, a blanket ‘recruitment drive’ would do little to fill existing vacant pulpits and might result in a large pool of alienated individuals unable to find suitable calls.” (*Parsing the Pastor "Shortage,"* Jack Marcum, Research Services, Presbyterian Church (USA), September 3, 2001, <http://www.pcusa.org/research/monday/shortg.htm>)

Pastors experience ministry at different levels: A Lutheran Church Missouri Synod study found about 30% of their ministers expressing “great joy in their ministries.” Another 30% “had mixed feelings about their ministry.” “An additional 20% are moderately distressed and are approaching burnout.” The other 20% “are severely depressed, highly distressed, and experiencing advanced stages of burnout.” (Alan C. Klaas and Cheryl D. Klass, *Clergy Shortage Study*, Mission Growth Ministries, 1999, page 15, <http://higher-ed.lcms.org/pdf/clergy-shortage-study.pdf>). Among the factors that separate pastors at the “joy” level from those at the “distressed” level are financial and other kinds of support.

Some Nazarene research data:

1. 39% of U.S. Nazarene congregations have 50 or fewer participants on an average Sunday morning. This is quite similar to other Protestant denominations. (*See figure 1*)
2. The shortage of Nazarene pastors is greatest in the churches with fewer than 50 participants. (*See table 1*) This focused shortage is similar to the Presbyterian Church (USA).
3. 34% of recent ordinands report no formal Nazarene educational preparation for ministry. (*See table 2*)
4. 31% of all Nazarene pastors have a salary, benefits, housing allowance, and parsonage rental value from the church that total lower than the poverty level. (*See table 3*)
5. Between one-fourth and one-third of Nazarene pastors say they are bivocational. This is about the same proportion as the Southern Baptists. (*See tables 4 and 5*)

Some Nazarene Issues:

1. **Legitimacy of small congregations:** Having observed that “Protestant clergy will mostly be pastors of small to mid-sized congregations—often in small town and rural areas where 52 percent of all congregations are located,” Jackson Carroll stated the value judgment that, “*Clearly there is nothing wrong with this.* Such congregations deserve excellent leadership as much as any other, and they can be just as rewarding a context for a fulfilling ministry as a large urban or suburban congregation.” (Retirement Lecture, page 8, *emphasis added*)

The Nazarene culture may not agree with Carroll’s value judgment that “Clearly there is nothing wrong with” most pastors serving small to mid-sized churches “often in small town and rural areas.” Small churches sometimes appear to be understood among Nazarenes as inferior, not quite legitimate. If we disagree with Carroll and instead believe something is wrong with these churches, our sense of ethics will surely make us reluctant to intentionally recruit and appropriately prepare ministers for these churches.

On the other hand, if in the Nazarene culture some balance of larger and smaller congregations were perceived as normal and good, we might be more likely to develop strategic methods for making small churches viable. For example, we might recruit and prepare bivocational and lay pastors as part of a strategic plan for expanding the church and making small church ministry viable.

2. **NewStarts and small congregations:** If we start 1,500 new churches over the next few years, the distribution of sizes among the new starts seems likely to be similar to the existing pattern of Nazarene and other protestant churches. This reality may cause a reluctance to start new churches because some, perhaps many, will be small.
3. **The tier of small congregations:** The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod study, quoted above, suggests the possibility that there may be something like a three tiered system of churches. If so, Nazarene pastors in the lowest tier may have needs which are not particularly well addressed in current strategies of recruitment, education, and resources. The Nazarene data above seem to suggest that perhaps one-fourth to one-third of our churches in the United States may fit this description and therefore might benefit from a reexamination of approaches to recruiting and preparing pastors who will serve in this tier.
4. **Financial viability of small congregations:** As insurance and other costs increase, it may become even more difficult to place and support pastors in the bottom tier of churches. Lay ministers and bivocational pastors may become increasingly important as an intentional strategy.

Some Possible Nazarene Strategic Options

If there is a shortage of ministers willing and able to serve small, often rural churches, recruiting new people for other sizes and locations will not solve the shortage. The following possibilities may respond to the need for ministers willing and able to consider calls to these churches.

1. Recruit ministers specifically for these ministry settings
 - Challenge youth and students to prayerfully consider careers of service in what they may otherwise consider as unsuitable or financially challenging circumstances, including small churches, rural communities, and bivocational situations, as well as missionary service and ministry in urban settings, minority churches, or blue-collar neighborhoods.
 - Encourage students who already have established one vocation not only to use that vocation to work their way through ministerial education, but also to prayerfully consider using it to support their ministerial vocation as they begin to pastor.
 - Challenge some lay members to prayerfully consider God’s call to lead their congregation as “pastor” while they continue their established vocation.

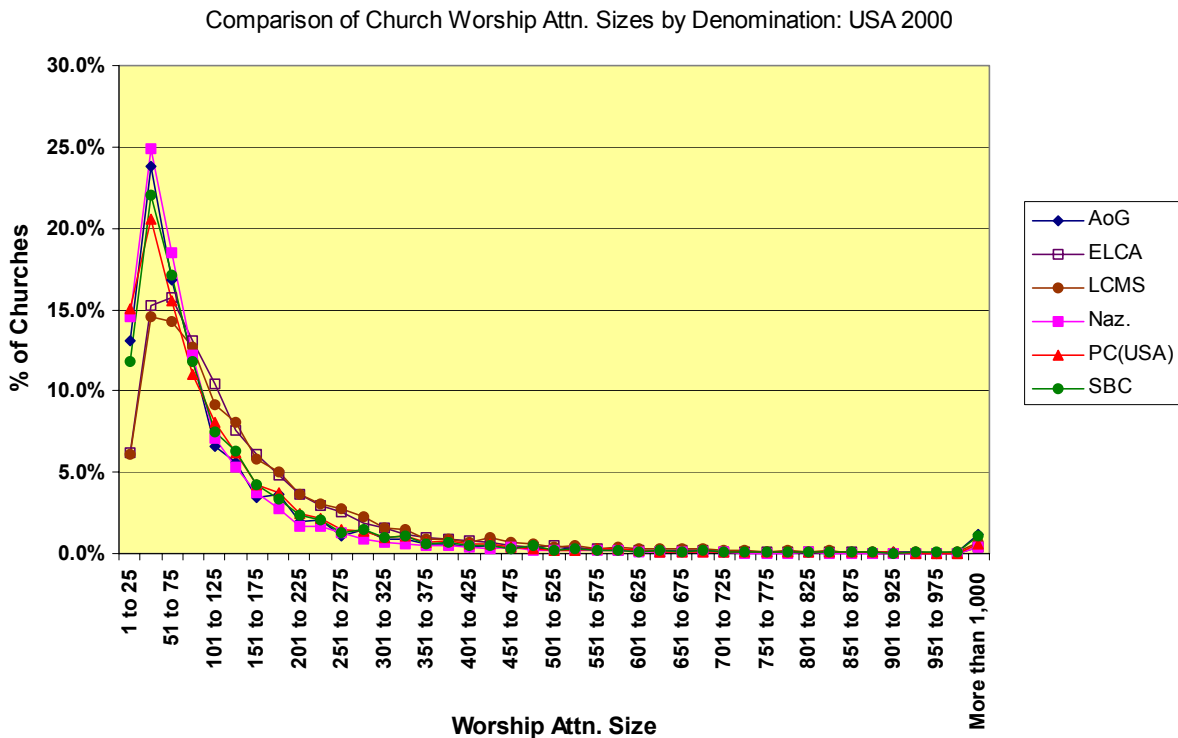
2. Educate and resource lay ministers serving churches in settings where they have already established another vocation
Develop and encourage participation in educational options tailored to lay ministers' needs.
Provide resources to lay ministers in order to improve their effectiveness in ministry.
3. Educate and resource bivocational pastors
Recognize that in order to achieve the Nazarene mission in the United States we probably have needed and will need a corps of 1,000 to 2,000 bivocational pastors.
Identify second vocations that may facilitate or enhance ministry.
Design educational programs to provide academic preparation for both vocations.
4. Affirm spouses whose employment income makes the pastors' full-time ministry vocation viable
Further research may be needed to determine the extent of this support, however it is clear that some smaller churches are able to afford a pastor only because his/her spouse effectively subsidizes the ministry income from the church.
In churches that extol the virtues of single income families, this spouse role may need special affirmation and support.
5. Affirm lay and clergy ministers whose retirement income makes ministry viable
Further research may be needed regarding the use of this option, however it seems likely that a significant number of congregations are able to enjoy the services of a minister with little or no salary expense because the minister has retirement income.
As the large "baby boom" cohort approaches retirement and the church encourages significant increases in NewStart congregations, this option may be providential.
Retired laity prayerfully recruited to this role may need specially designed educational opportunities and resources.

Distribution of Churches

Jackson Carroll wrote, “The career path that many envision goes something like this (and I was no different when I graduated): a first assignment in a small congregation or as an associate in a large one, then service as solo pastor in a mid-sized congregation, and finally one or more assignments as senior minister in large, multiple staff congregations in an urban or suburban locale. Although a small percentage will follow this path, the size distribution of Protestant congregations makes it highly unlikely for most.” (*Reflections of a Clergy-Watcher*, page 8, <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/clergywatcherlecture.pdf>).

Richard Houseal has recently compared the distribution of congregations in several denominations by the size of their Sunday morning worship attendance. The most striking thing about the resulting distribution graph, below, is the similarity in distribution of Assembly of God, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Church of the Nazarene, Presbyterian Church (USA), and Southern Baptist Church congregations. There are differences, to be sure, but the pattern among Protestant denominations described by Jackson Carroll is supported by the graph. His description certainly fits the Nazarene distribution.

Figure 1



Nuances of the Shortage of Ministers

80% of the pastoral vacancies in Nazarene churches in the United States on December 31, 2001, were in the 70% of the congregations with 100 or fewer participants. Churches with 50 or fewer worshippers on an average Sunday morning account for 38% of the congregations and 51% of the vacancies.

On any given day about 10% of the Nazarene congregations in the United States are without a pastor. Many of these are in the relatively short time period between the leaving of one pastor and the calling and arrival of a new one. However, some vacancies are longer term. Table 1 suggests that the longer term vacancies tend to be in the smaller churches. Difficulty in filling these longer term vacancies may be the source of the continuing perception among Nazarene leaders that there is a shortage of pastors.

In comparison to the Presbyterian Church (USA), noted on page 1 above, a much smaller proportion of Nazarene congregations are without a pastor. However, the Nazarene “shortage” of pastors also appears to be focused in the smaller churches. As with the PC(USA), a general recruitment drive among Nazarenes might also fail to fill existing vacancies and instead result in a pool of surprised and frustrated individuals unable to find suitable calls.

Table 1

Distribution of Churches Experiencing a Pastoral Vacancy

Worship Size	All Churches*		Churches Without a Pastor**		
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent of Churches This Size	Percent of all Vacancies
1 – 50	1,855	38.0%	250	13.5%	51.0%
51 – 100	1,542	31.6%	142	9.2%	29.0%
101 – 150	594	12.2%	45	7.6%	9.2%
151 – 200	331	6.8%	16	4.8%	3.3%
201 – 250	170	3.5%	10	5.9%	2.0%
251 – 300	111	2.3%	6	5.4%	1.2%
Over 300	274	5.6%	21	7.7%	4.3%

*Active churches in the United States reporting worship attendance in 2001

**Vacancy on December 31, 2001.

EDUCATIONAL RECORD OF RECENT ORDINANDS

Overall in the United States and Canada the percentage of ordinands reporting no Nazarene ministerial education was 30% in 1990-1991 and 34% in 2000-2001. Some regions (ENC, NNU, PLNU, CNUC) experienced significant increases in this proportion while other regions (ONU, MNU, SNU) experienced decreases.

The proportion of ordinands who reported studying at least briefly at one of the U.S.A. and Canada institutions has declined from 68% in 1990-1991 to 57% in 2000-2001. This decline was dramatic on some regions but nonexistent on others. In fact, there was a slight increase in use of the colleges and seminary among ordinands currently serving on the central regions (SNU and MNU).

Recent ordinands were more likely than ordinands a decade ago to report that they used international Nazarene schools, NBC extensions, district centers, and the directed study program in their preparation for ordination. These options are included in the table below as alternative Nazarene educational options (Naz. Alt.). This increase in the use of alternative approaches may be a realistic adjustment, by preparing ministers, to the needs and resources of our smaller churches.

Table 2
Nazarene Ordinands in 1990-1991 and 2000-2001
By Nature and Extent of Nazarene Education and By Region of Assignment 2001

Region	1990-1991						2000-2001					
	No Naz.		Naz. Alt.		Coll. Sem.		No Naz.		Naz. Alt.		Coll. Sem.	
Central (ONU)	37	43%	0	0%	50	57%	19	25%	15	20%	42	55%
East Central (MVNC)	22	34%	0	0%	42	66%	20	36%	5	9%	31	55%
Eastern (ENC)	16	21%	0	0%	61	79%	29	47%	8	13%	25	40%
North Central (MNU)	15	21%	0	0%	58	79%	14	19%	0	0%	58	81%
Northwest (NNU)	5	10%	0	0%	45	90%	11	23%	3	6%	33	70%
South Central (SNU)	27	38%	1	1%	43	61%	17	24%	10	14%	44	62%
Southeast (TNU)	28	34%	3	4%	51	62%	32	37%	9	10%	46	53%
Southwest (PLNU)	20	26%	1	1%	57	73%	40	56%	2	3%	30	42%
Canada (CNUC)	4	17%	0	0%	19	83%	5	50%	0	0%	5	50%
No Assignment	16	52%	8	26%	7	23%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Overall	190	30%	13	2%	433	68%	188	34%	52	9%	314	57%

Each ordinand is included only once on this table. A person who reported part of his/her education at an extension, part at ONU, and part at NTS would only be included in the "Coll. Sem." Column.

Percentages add across in each cohort. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

No Naz. = No reported Nazarene educational preparation for ministry

Naz. Alt. = Reported International Schools, Extensions, District Centers, and Directed/Home Study

Coll. Sem. = Reported NBC, Liberal Arts Colleges, and NTS

Ministry Income and the Poverty Level

Among Nazarene churches in the United States in 2001, 31% reported paying their pastors incomes and benefits that totaled less than the poverty level*. In table 3 income and benefits include the total money reported paid for pastors' cash salary, pastor's employee benefits, pastors' actual cash housing, and the reported fair rent value of the parsonage(s).

The proportion reporting a total less than the poverty level is related to the size of the congregation. Two-thirds (66%) of the churches with fewer than 50 worshipers on an average Sunday morning report incomes and benefits from the church below the poverty threshold. This proportion was also higher in churches in cultural groups other than white Anglo.

A similar 31% reported in a 1993 study (summarized on the following page) that they were bivocational. These are not, of course, the same people. Some pastors are able to serve below poverty level churches without a second vocation because their spouse is employed and supplements the family income. Others have retired and receive pension income to supplement their income from the church. Some of these churches are served by lay ministers who receive little if any income from the church. On the other hand, some pastors may be bivocational whose income from the church is higher than the poverty level. For example, a larger family, exceptional medical expenses, or children in college might raise expenses beyond those anticipated in the poverty threshold formulas.

Table 3

Proportion of Nazarene Churches Paying Income and Benefits Less than the Poverty Level*
Nazarene Congregations in the United States in the Year 2000

Worship Size	Minority Churches			White Anglo Churches			All Cultural Groups		
	Total**	Number	Percent	Total**	Number	Percent	Total**	Number	Percent
Under 50	232	194	84%	1,112	696	63%	1,344	890	66%
50 – 99	181	89	49%	1,044	149	14%	1,225	238	19%
100 – 249	83	25	30%	837	14	2%	920	39	4%
250 – 399	19	5	26%	171	0	0%	190	5	3%
400 – 999	6	0	0%	111	1	1%	117	1	1%
1,000 or more	0	0	0%	13	0	0%	13	0	0%
Totals	521	313	60%	3,288	860	26%	3,809	1,173	31%

*The U.S. poverty level in 2000 for a family of four was \$17,050 (<http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/00poverty.htm>).

**Only churches that reported having a pastor for the full year in 2000 are included in this analysis since it would be expected that a partial year's salary would be lower than normal.

Bivocational Ministry

The concept of bivocational ministry is difficult to measure, perhaps partly because there is some stigma attached to this approach to ministry, but also because the variety of vocational combinations is apparently great. Stigma may prevent some pastors from acknowledging their bivocational status. Rather than face what they perceive to be disapproval, they may be reluctant to describe their vocational realities with this label. Or their combination of vocations may not seem to them to fit the bivocational label.

In the 1993 Quadrennial Church Census of Nazarene congregations pastors were asked, “Are you bivocational?” No definition was provided. The question was asked in the context of a question about the cost of living in their community and a question about their spouse’s outside employment. More than two-thirds (69%) said “No”. On the other hand, 31% chose one of the “Yes” responses. Table 4 summarizes responses to this question.

In the 1999-2000 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study 73% of the Nazarene churches said their pastor was “Full time”. This leaves 27% who said the pastor’s income from the church was supplemented by outside employment (18%) or the pastor of the church was part time (9%). Table 5 summarizes these responses.

30% of all Southern Baptist Convention churches with a current pastor were reported to be bivocational in a study released in 1993. According to that study, bivocational pastors may not be significantly less effective than other pastors in similar settings. The study concluded that, “Churches with bivocational pastors have a slightly higher baptism rate than do churches with non-bivocational pastors.” (Stephen P. Whitten, *An Analysis of Churches with Bivocational Pastors, 1991*, Atlanta: Research Division, Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1993, pages 11-13.)

Table 4

Bivocational Ministry Responses to the Question, “Are you bivocational?”*

2,342	68.9%	No
777	22.9%	Yes, it is necessary to supplement our family income.
46	1.4%	Yes, the extra income is not necessary, but my second career makes my ministry more effective.
233	6.9%	Yes, other
3,398	100%	

*Quadrennial Church Census, 1993

Table 5

Faith Communities Today (FACT) Survey

Paid	94%	Volunteer	6%
Full time			73%
Full time, supplemented by outside employment			18%
Part time			9%
IF PART TIME does pastor also:		1) Serve another congregation?	Yes 3%
		2) Work a secular job?	Yes 87%

Responses to the request, “Please describe the current senior pastor by checking all of the boxes that apply or filling in the requested information. **If you have co-pastors**, please check here (5%) and answer the following for the older of your co-pastors. **If you do not currently have a pastor**, please check here (2%) and skip to question 3.”