

WHY SO MANY VACANT PULPITS? A LOOK AT THE NUMBERS

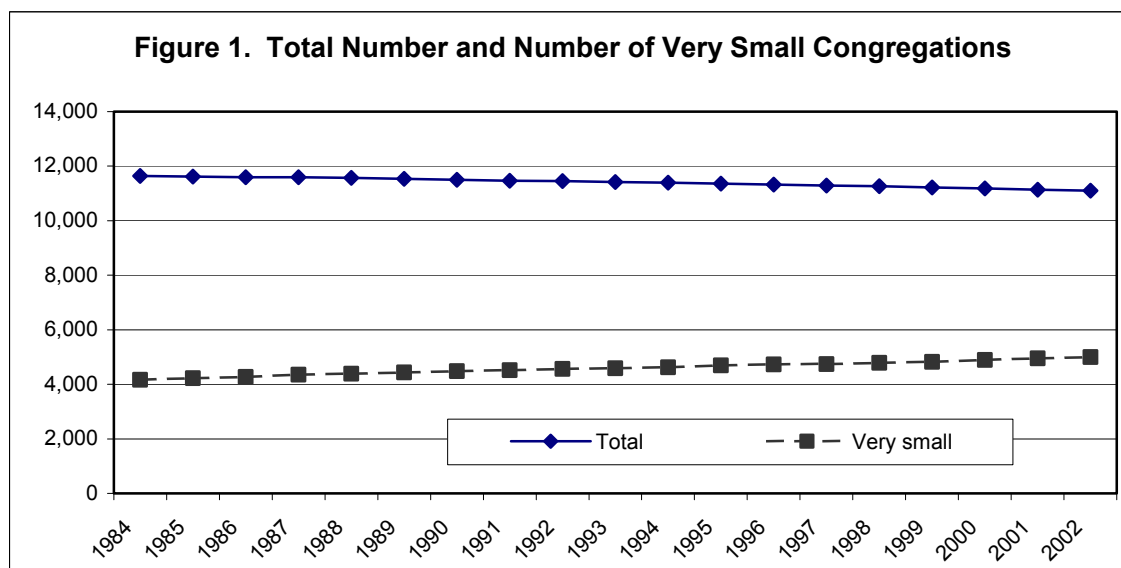
By Jack Marcum, Research Services¹

Conventional wisdom in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) holds that there is currently a shortage of ministers—how else to explain the growing number of congregations without pastors? There is some truth in this viewpoint, but only some; the full story is more complex. As I will describe in this essay, the situation is less a shortage of ministers than a coming together of related trends that result in a growing number of very small congregations with limited financial resources at the same time that dual careers and other personal considerations have made ministers without calls more selective in their searches.

THE PROBLEM

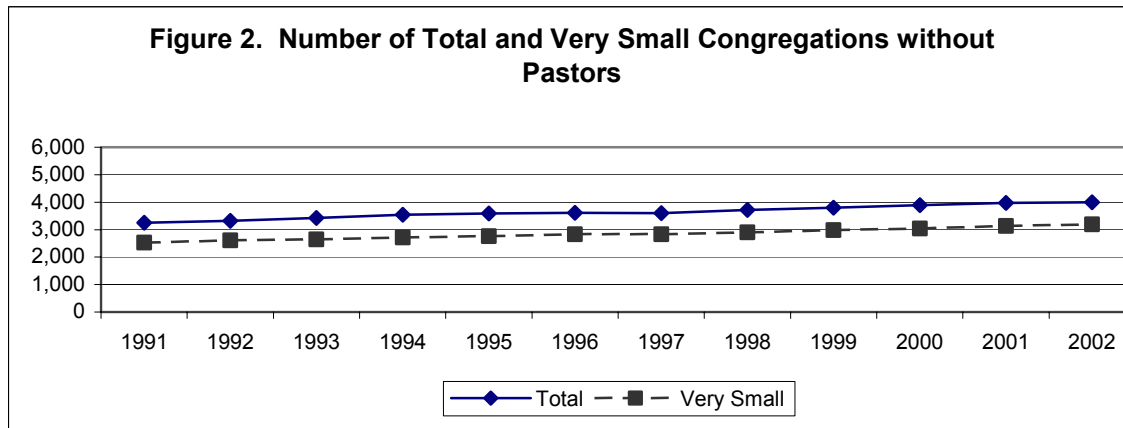
That the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations have experienced annual net membership losses since 1965 is well known, but less attention has focused on the trend in numbers of congregations. As it happens, congregations have dropped in number as well, but at a much slower pace. Membership dropped from 3,131,228 in 1983 to 2,451,969 in 2002, a net loss of 679,259, or almost 22%. Congregations dropped from 11,662 to 11,097, a net loss of 565, or almost 5%. As a result, mean congregational size fell from 268 members to 221.

Part of that trend is a large increase in the number of very small congregations, defined here as those with 100 or fewer members (see Figure 1). There were 4,171 of these congregations in 1984, but 5,004 in 2002—a gain of 20%. As a result, 45% of all congregations at the end of 2002 qualified as very small.



Very small congregations not only have relatively fewer members, they also typically have fewer other resources, including financial ones; median total receipts in 2002 for these congregations was

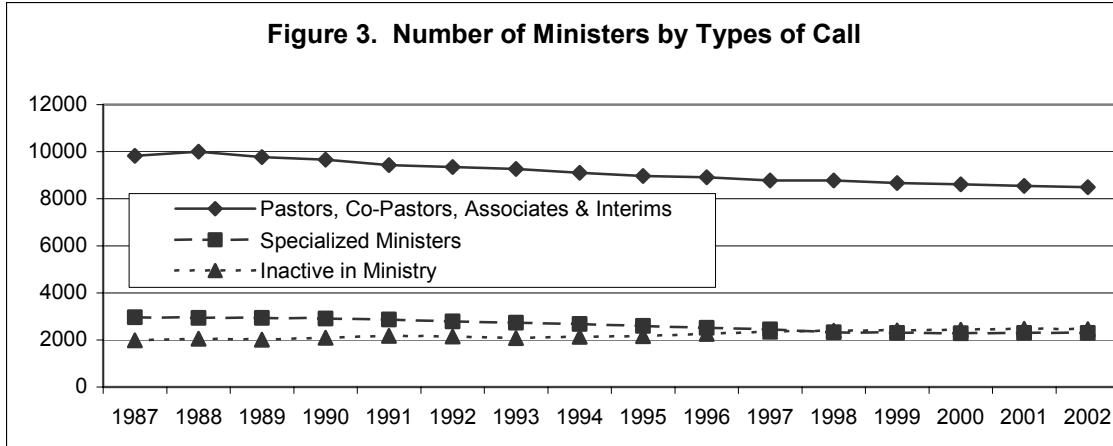
only \$44,678. Not surprisingly, then, many very small congregations have difficulty finding the funds to call a full-time, installed pastor (see Figure 2). This circumstance is not new, although the proportion of very small congregations without a pastor in 2002, 64%, has risen from the 56% found in 1991.



It's clear that much of the growth in the number of vacant pulpits owes to net membership loss and how that loss has played out in the increased numbers of very small congregations. But how much? One way to estimate the effect is to calculate the number of pastors we'd expect to have in 2002 assuming that the distribution of pastors among congregations of various sizes had shifted to its 2002 pattern but the distribution of congregations by size had stayed the same since 1991. When we do that calculation, we find an expected number of 7,462 congregations with pastors in 2002, instead of the actual 7,069.² By that reckoning, a large part (72%) of the drop in congregations with installed pastors over the last decade is due to the increase in the number of very small congregations.

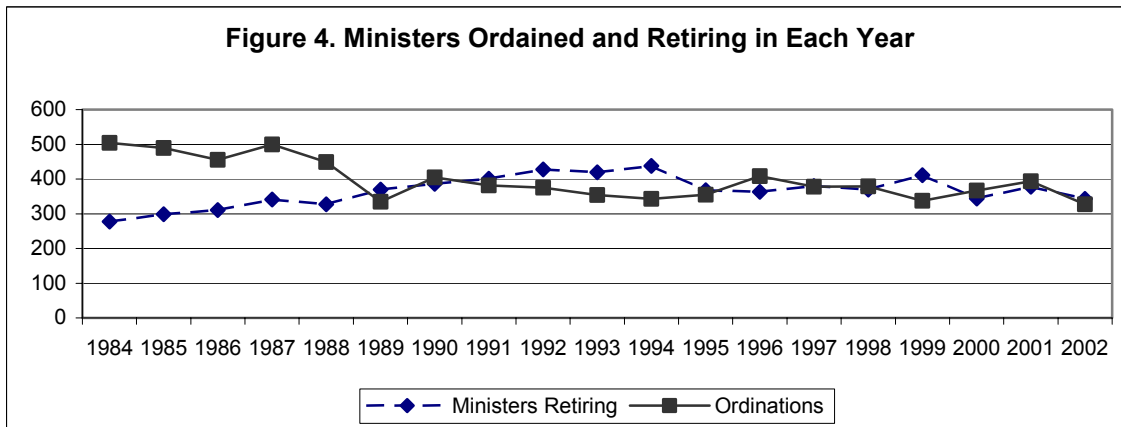
The remainder of the increase in vacant pulpits, then, is the result of a lessened ability of congregations of all sizes to call a pastor. Why this change has occurred is not clear. A variety of factors are possible, from fewer congregations conducting national searches to prospective ministers being more selective in what calls to consider. This latter possibility has a lot of anecdotal support, no doubt because of constraints seen among professional couples generally as dual-career marriages have become more common. The Presbyterian Panel found that 79% of married pastors had an employed spouse in 2002, compared to 69% a dozen years earlier. Also, in mid-2003, of the 1,371 people looking for calls through the PC(USA)'s centralized search database, only 39% were open to a call in any part of the country. In fact, 14% limited their search to a single state, and 34% to five or fewer states. Unfortunately, no trend data are available in the pattern of geographical restrictions.

Congregations may also have increasing difficulty calling a pastor if the number of ministers or candidates available to consider calls drops, but there is no evidence of such a trend. In fact, the number of ministers without a current call has actually risen by 25% since 1987, from 1,981 to 2,467 (see Figure 3). Ministers without a call now comprise 18% of all active ministers, up from 13% in 1987. There may be a shortage of pastors, but there is clearly no shortage of ministers.



FUTURE PROSPECTS

The number of active ministers has dropped by an annual average of 134 since the total peaked at 15,726 in 1988. No evidence suggests that this trend will change in the near term. The number of ordinations of ministers has remained remarkably stable for many years, only slightly below that of retirements (see Figure 4). Other components of change, such as the number of ministers removed from office and the number received from other denominations, have fluctuated from year to year but none have shown a consistent upward or downward trend. In fact, the overall annual rate of net decline in active ministers has dropped from 1.2% for the period 1988 to 1995 to 0.6% for the period 1995 to 2002. A linear extrapolation of the last 14 years projects the number of active ministers at 11,050 in 2022.



At the same time, there is no indication that the trend of net membership losses—losses that have driven increases in the number of very small congregations—will end or even slow. The net membership loss for 2002, 41,812, is at 1.7%, the largest single-year percentage drop since 1981. The pattern of change in the number of congregations with 100 or fewer members has been remarkably consistent, and were it to continue, by 2022 there would be 5,848 such congregations, up 17% in a period when the total number of congregations is projected to decline by 5% (to 10,530). Very small congregations would then comprise 56% of the total, up from 45% in 2002.

By this projection, congregations with 101 or more members would total 4,682 in 2002. Based on the current number of installed pastors in congregations of this size (6,840, an average of 1.13 pastors per congregation), we would expect these congregations to have 5,284 installed pastors in 2022. The independent linear projection of ministers for 2022, presented above, is 11,050. That would mean 47% of all active ministers (5,248/11,050) in 2022 would serve congregations of 100 or more members, about the same percentage, 49%, as today.

In short, were current trends to continue, the pastoral needs of mid-size and larger congregations should be adequately met. Of course, there is no certainty that current trends will continue, and in fact two changes already underway—in the mean age at ordination and the relative numbers of ministers nearing retirement—will likely increase the annual rate of decline in the number of active ministers.

Still, a worst-case, back-of-the-envelope projection taking into account these factors forecasts 9,106 ministers in 2022, or a net loss of around 97 per year more than the linear extrapolation of the number of active ministers for 2022 of (as noted above) 11,050. So while sizable, the increase in retirements and the shortening of career lengths from older ages at ordination will not in themselves lead to a shortage of ministers. A total of 9,106 ministers is still well above the number of installed pastors—5,284—that congregations of more than 100 members are expected to have in 2022.

CONCLUSION

While the decline in the number of active ministers over the last 15 years is likely to continue and may well accelerate, there will be no shortage of ministers for mid-sized and larger congregations. Facing a smaller but still sizable pool of ministers, there may be longer searches or more vacancies at out-of-the-way locations, especially if further research clarifies the constraining role of dual-career marriages.

The situation among very small congregations is more dire. Their ability to attract full-time installed pastors, already weak, will grow weaker as they increasingly must compete with larger congregations (and each other) for pastors from the shrinking pool of ministers. Any general effort to increase the number of ministers will have only marginal effects on these congregations, since the reasons, such as inadequate budgets, that keep most of their pulpits vacant will not be changed by recruitment of more candidates for ministry.

Instead, Presbyterians need to confront the effects of decades of net membership loss. Thinking that we can lessen the numbers of pastor-less congregations by recruiting more candidates to our seminaries ignores the reasons behind the growing number of very small congregations. The problem is not so much a shortage of ministers but a shortage of members. Until we come to terms with that reality and begin to reach out to more unchurched persons, efforts to increase the number of ministers will focus on symptoms rather than the underlying problem.

¹ This essay is based on collaborative research conducted with Lucy Rupe, whose many insights inform the analysis presented and the conclusions reached. I am deeply indebted to her for these contributions.

² A more detailed description of this analysis is available upon request.