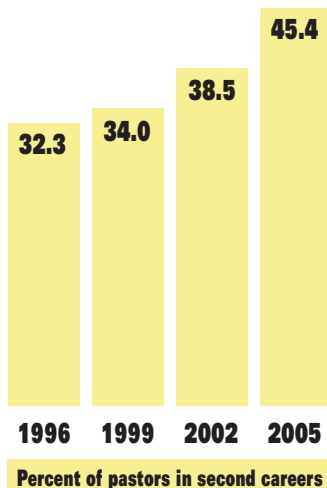


GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM

ILLUSTRATION BY ANITA DUFALL/AGRAPHICS BY KATE ANYAN



Second-career pastors in the PCUSA

In the March 2005 Go Figure I looked at the growing numbers of women in ministry in the PCUSA. Such a historic change has justifiably received a lot of attention, but a parallel change over the same period also merits attention: the increasing number of people entering pastoral ministry after serving in another field.

These second-career pastors comprise 45 percent of the active (non-retired) pastors.* While some of these individuals were in prior fields only briefly, others have spent years, even decades, in them. On average, second-career pastors were in their previous careers for 10.4 years. Twenty-eight percent were in another field for 15 or more years, including 17 percent for 20 or more years. The average age at ordination is 36 for second-career pastors, 29 for others.

Fifty-five percent of women pastors are in second careers, compared to 42 percent for men. Women were also in their previous field longer: an average of 11.8 years compared to 9.6 for men.

Second-career pastors were only a third of the total (32 percent) in 1996, rising to 34 percent in 1999, 38 percent in 2002, and 45 percent in 2005. At this rate of change, a

majority of pastors will be second-career by 2008.

Other than the gender and age disparities, already noted, the only demographic difference I found is that relatively fewer second-career pastors grew up Presbyterian (54 percent, compared to 66 percent for first-career pastors). There are no significant differences by political preference, marital status, number of children, household size, family income or size of community.

Theologically, more second-career than first-career pastors believe that “Jesus will return to earth someday” (82 percent, compared to 77 percent) and “all different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth” (10 percent and 5 percent), while fewer believe that the Bible is literally true (3 percent and 6 percent). On other faith issues, ranging from frequency of Bible reading to whether belief in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, differences are even smaller or nonexistent.

What the research shows

For such an extensive and growing phenomenon, we know relatively little about the consequences for the church of having so many second-career pastors. One can make good arguments for why such individuals would be particularly valuable in parish ministry, e.g., their greater life experience and familiarity with the occupational world of laity. While testing such possibilities would take us far beyond the data at hand, we can use the 2005 survey to look at a related question: Other than their older average age, do people called into pastoral ministry after another career differ in any significant ways from pastors who went straight through college and seminary?

On most factors, second- and first-career pastors look alike. Of 35 comparisons examined, only 5 revealed statistically significant differences. In contrast, when I conducted the same analyses between men and women, 24 were significant. This disparity suggests that the growing numbers of women pastors may be more consequential than increasing numbers of second-career pastors—and substantiates the greater attention that the changing gender composition of the PCUSA pastorate has received. □

Jack Marcum is associate for survey research, Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Ky.

*All findings are from Presbyterian Panel surveys.