

Congregation Confronts a Changing Ministry

By George Judson

To many members of the First Church of Christ, Congregational, their small church overlooking Amity Road here is a second home, and they are all family.

ON a recent Sunday, someone new was called to stand at its head; after an 18-month search, the congregation had found a new pastor.

Bethany Congregational, as the 230-year-old church is known, had found the search long and confusing. Its last pastor had stayed 17 years, and those years had wrought great changes in its members' lives. Now, stepping beyond the sanctuary, they discovered that the ministry had changed, too.

Seeking a pastor who would embody tradition and offer a steady guiding hand, they encountered men and women unsettlingly like themselves, wrestling with the same social moral and religious issues that perplexed the congregations looking for leadership.

Sin is an Issue

Many ministers were divorced, and many were women. Many dealt with the pressures of a two-career family, or of being a single parent. A growing number had come to the ministry as a second career. Some were battling alcoholism or depression, and others doubts about their faith. Some – though it seemed old-fashioned to say so – had sinned.

Ministers also had questions about Bethany, most pointedly about how ready the church was to confront the changed world beyond Sunday morning. And in a society in which the rush of daily life can leave few moments for reflection, the questions required its members to stop and ask who they were, what they believed in, and whom they were willing to become.

Each year thousands of Protestant and Jewish congregations enter the job market to find new spiritual leaders. The major exception is the United Methodist Church, which like the Roman Catholic Church, appoints pastors to their parishes.

In practice, churches assign the hard work of the search to a committee of a dozen or so members. These committees work in secrecy, but Bethany Congregational agreed to allow an observer to sit in. In doing so, it opened a window onto a pursuit so intimate that its result, the matching of congregation and pastor, is described by experts as, finally, a matter of falling in love.

The Congregation A House Faces The Work It Needs

On an evening in July 1991, Arlene Durley and Roberta Shotwell were writing scores on a large chart taped to a blackboard in the Sunday-School room.

The search committee's 10 members had worked since January on a profile of the church and what it sought in a pastor. Now they had begun grading ministers' profiles - their descriptions of who they were.

While the chairman, Rick Jones, added the scores, the others talked. Some candidates had no experience. Others seemed too accomplished.

"There were some I loved, but I thought 'Are they too good for us?'" said Mrs. Shotwell, a teacher's aide at Bethany Elementary School.

Most of all, they talked about wanting to be fair. For they were about to send out the first rejection letters.

Long Standing Tradition

The United Church of Christ is descended from the Congregational Church of the Puritans who founded Massachusetts and Connecticut, Harvard and Yale. The fire of Cotton Mather is long gone, but the free church tradition - the idea that each congregation chooses its own pastor and determines how it worships - lives on. Membership in mainline denominations like Bethany's fell sharply after the mid-1960's as the baby-boom generation left church. Those children, now adults with their own families, have begun to return. The church now has 1.6 million members nationwide in more than 6,300 congregations in its 169 towns and cities.

At Bethany, the committee had received profiles from 33 ministers, most of them knowing little more about the church than it was near New Haven. Those who made the first cut would be sent the church's profile. In it, they would find these facts:

The town of Bethany had 4,608 residents, 96 percent of whom were white; good schools, and a rural atmosphere. Of the church's 209 members, 50 percent had college or graduate degrees, 27 percent were retired, and about 70 parishioners came to worship on Sundays.

The church was concerned about caring for its older members, keeping its children involved and attracting new members. It wanted an effective preacher who was compassionate, emotionally secure and good with children.

"The Church," the profile said, "approaches the ideal that the congregation is an extension of the domestic family."

In all that, Bethany was fairly typical. What was not stated, but also typical, was Bethany's ideal of a minister: a man in his 30's or 40's, married, with young children.

The committee did not expect the wife to stay at home; its six women all worked. Divorce was not disqualifying, either, because it, too, was familiar. And yet, if they could, the church members would choose a minister out of their own youths, a Ward Cleaver in a preacher's robe.

The profile also gave few hints of the personality of the church and its community.

The town of Bethany is a refuge of sorts. Much of its land is public watershed. There is no downtown, nor even a supermarket. It is the kind of place where people encounter one another mainly at the elementary school, the recycling center, or one of the two churches.

Bethany Congregational can also be private. While its members cherish the sense of community, they join as individuals. "They're looking for a church to help them in their lives, not change their lives," Mrs. Shotwell explained.

On this night, the committee reviewed 14 candidates, including a woman who was depressed, a recovering alcoholic, a man in his 60's who had left the ministry and now wanted to return, a single woman with two teenagers and a man who included in his profile the detail that his neck was a size 19.

Eleven were rejected. The others were mailed a church profile.

The Questions A Process Fraught With Doubt

Three months later, after looking at 66 candidates, the committee had arranged to interview four. On Oct. *, it met for a practice interview with the Rev. Peter Stebinger from nearby Christ Episcopal Church.

Rick Jones, the chairman, was pushing the group. Two ministers they liked had accepted other positions. The Rev. Jack Kingsbury, Bethany's part-time pastor during its search, had advised: "If a person's high on your list, don't delay."

Traditional ministers seemed few and far between. "Isn't it sort of frightening how many have been divorced and remarried?" asked Carol Stamper, a real-estate agent.

Arlene Durley, a veteran of search committees decades earlier, had said, "I never realized there were so many women ministers." To this, Betsy Bergen, a 1985 graduate of Yale Divinity, replied, "Yale is full of us."

Female candidates, especially, seemed to pose questions: If they were married, would their husbands be willing to move? If they were raising families alone, would they be able to take care of a church, too?

'Little Funny Feelings'

They decided that having a traditional family was a plus but not a requirement. Still, some of the rejections seemed arbitrary.

"We're making a lot of decisions on little funny feelings," Mrs. Bergen said before the mock interview. "Are we looking for Jesus Christ walking on water?"

The session with Mr. Stebinger went quickly. He was youthful but serious, at ease with his faith.

Sometimes he challenged them. When Roberta Shotwell said the church felt that many people in town did not know about its "warm, loving community," he replied that many churches thought of themselves as warm and open but were perceived by newcomers as cold and closed.

If the church has not been growing, he said, "You probably have a closed orientation. That's not bad. It means you have been taking care of each other."

At the end, Elsie Schoop said, "You're hired," and everyone laughed.

But he had criticisms. The committee had forgotten to start with a prayer. The church's profile was terrible: many statistics and little soul. And it did not say why Bethany needed a new pastor.

The Candidates Perfect Match Is Elusive

The committee interviewed three men and one woman.

They followed varying paths to the pulpit. One had an interest in religion as a teenager that his parents viewed as "adolescent rebellion at its worst." Another had gone from Bahaism to ashrams to prayer groups.

They said churches had not kept up with social changes, especially those involving the family.

They revealed that congregations can be unhappy families themselves, in conflict over a pastor, divided between young and old or simply fighting over control.

Three of the ministers had served conflicted churches, and they did not want another. And so the interviews turned out how Bethany and its pastor of 17 years, the Rev. Willard Reger, had parted.

Bethany was searching because church officers had suggested to Mr. Reger that a change in leadership would benefit the congregation and pastor. After discussions, he had agreed and resigned. He had completed his own search for a new church months before Bethany had its first interview.

"We started out as a search committee with that sort of behind us," one member, Rupert Covey, later recalled.

Pastor as Parent

Within a church, however, no relationship is more complicated than that between parishioners and their pastor, who is not only a spiritual leader, counselor and role model, and friend, but also employee. Over 17 years, layers of feelings build up.

Mr. Reger had his differences with the deacons over the worship service, or how they divided his time. He inspired many people, and inevitably offended others. Like many in the church, he raised his family here, and like others, he went through a divorce. He had, at one time, talked about leaving.

"We find, more and more, its like losing a parent in a family when you lose a pastor," said Loren B. Mead, president of the Alban Institute in Washington, which works with the local congregations. "If you loved the parent, you've got one problem. If you hated the parent you've got another problem."

So the candidates wanted to know; had the pastor's departure caused problems?

The committee thought not. The church was agreed that a change had been best for everyone. With the help of the interim minister, Mr. Kingsbury, Bethany was taking care of itself. The new minister would not have to deal with the ghost of the old.

But as members examined Bethany's relationship with Mr. Reger, some conceded what was true of many churches; it had not always been a good employer.

Its religious family was fragile, based not on bedrock theology, like Southern Baptists, but on a coming together of people of widely varying faith, social views and politics. The church necessarily prized consensus and avoided confrontation.

The result, at Bethany, was that the hard things had not always been done. Over the years, the church had withheld both criticism and guidance. Annual evaluations had been perfunctory.

But the church, they knew, was healthy. The question for them became; How could Bethany be a better congregation to its next pastor?

The Finalists Facing Problems Of Their Own

On Nov. 1 the committee interviewed the last finalist, the eloquent head minister of a large church who wanted a smaller one where he could be pastor rather than chief executive. He and his wife had discussed the offer for a week, he said, and decided that Bethany was not right for them.

The disappointment over the man's rejection was deep. But the Chairman, Rick Jones, a business-minded mathematician, was mainly unhappy that the search was not over. He was discovering, as some search committee members do in the course of their process, that he was in the wrong church; he was considering leaving Bethany once his responsibilities as chairman were over.

"I don't have much gray hair, but I represent the future of this church," said Mr. Jones, a baby-boomer who had been drawn back into church life by marrying a member of Bethany. Yet others had rejected the candidate he thought was best for families like his.

Now none of the other three finalists seemed right either. Discouraged, the committee met with Rev. Harry Taylor, a staff minister with the United Church of Christ who works with search committees and ministers in Connecticut on Dec. 3. He said that about a fifth of all committees reach this stage of frustration, fatigue, and uncertainty.

Competition for Ministers

Ministers had become more cautious about changing jobs because of the recession, he said. And there was competition: more than 40 U.C.C. churches in Connecticut were searching. He suggested a break until after Christmas. The committee, which by now had received 89 profiles, kept working.

On Jan. 6 the committee interviewed candidate No. 89 and offered him the job.

Young, handsome, popular with teen-agers, with a wife at home with their small children, No. 89 seemed to meet Bethany's ideal. Mr. Jones, hoping to wrap things up, promoted him enthusiastically.

There was one problem: No. 89 had left his last job amid controversy over an affair he'd had with a parishioner at the church before that.

They were torn. So many candidates had been touched by some kind of upheaval; in these times, was adultery unforgivable?

Rupert Covey expressed the feelings many members had over the affair, given someone who otherwise seemed to fit their needs perfectly. "I thought, this is a real breach of ethics," he recalled. "But on the other hand I thought, well, maybe we shouldn't hang a guy for a transgression like this, as long as it was a one-time thing."

In the interview, the man and his wife assured them that the affair was over, that they had received counseling, that their marriage was fine. The committee, in voting to offer him the job, agreed that the affair was his business, to be revealed by him when he saw fit.

On Jan. 8 members were at the church preparing for a meeting when the word came that No. 89 had accepted.

Arduous Path to a Difficult Choice Along the Way, Congregation Learns to Reshape Its Needs

After a year of work, the search committee at the First Church of Christ, Congregational, recommended a candidate for pastor of the small suburban church. But word leaked out quickly that the committee had a secret.

On Jan. 13 its chairman, Rick Jones, met with church officers. He described the candidate: a man in his 30's, married, with small children. Most important for Bethany, which like many congregations is distressed that its teen-agers leave church life, he had experiences working with the young.

The "secret" he said, was that the man had had an affair with a parishioner two churches ago. The affair had affected his last job only because his superior had made it an issue, it had not affected his performance as a minister, Mr. Jones said.

There was little discussion. "God has forgiven him," one person said. But unease was evident on several faces.

A Painful Change

The next night, several church members came to the committee's weekly meeting and asked to speak. They had done some checking, and they were concerned that there was more to the candidate's past than one affair. Because of his seminary and other associations, they also feared that he was a fundamentalist and would be intolerant of the congregations diverse religious values.

Both charges- sexual and theological- struck at trust. Would you entrust your children to the moral teaching of an adulterer, or your spouse to his

counseling? Could you entrust yourself to a spiritual guide who insisted on his view of the bible?

Some committee members were deeply hurt by the challenge. Others began to think that they moved too fast with this candidate. They had taken him on the rebound after being rejected by another minister.

They called more references. Some, provided by the candidate, supported him. One said he had deeply divided his last church. And the affair had lasted three years.

The committee was sure of only one thing: its candidate would split Bethany Congregational. The job offer was withdrawn.

"It's a very sad thing," Roberta Shotwell said. "But we can't think of this man as individuals. We have to think of the church. We love our church and I think he will hurt it."

Can't Trust Profiles

They read and reread the man's profile, comparing the description of his career with what others now said. They reminded one another that, like every candidate, he had chosen the words that had so impressed them and he had given them the names of the references that supported them.

"This is what is so discouraging about the future," Mrs. Shotwell said. "We've found out that you can't trust the profiles."

Jack Johnstone shrugged. "You can't trust the ministers, either," he said.

At the next meeting Mr. Jones quit. The only people that would object the this man because of his affair, he suggested, were older ones, and they weren't the future of the church.

"When it comes to doing something in the 21st century," he said, "the older generation is a little bit out of touch with reality."

The Rev. Sherry Taylor, a staff minister from the United Church of Christ, attended. She and her husband, Harry, are the U.C.C.'s placement officers in Connecticut.

Questions of Fairness

She tried to assure the committee members that it was not old-fashioned to object to a minister having an affair. It was not only a moral lapse, she said, but a serious breach of ethics.

She tried to explain how the church could be unaware of a sexual misconduct allegation: The denomination can't say much in these cases unless a local church files charges. Many churches are too embarrassed, she said. They simply send the offending minister on his way, to another church.

She offered advice on how to read the profiles. "I always tell candidates, you write the profile to get the interview," she said. Expect the candidates to be about as truthful as you might be on a first date, she added.

Some members were still concerned that they had not treated the man fairly.

“It’s not about fair,” she said. “If it was about ‘fair,’ I’d be able to place many wonderful women ministers, whom churches don’t want simply because they’re women. I’d be able to place many more minorities. I could place many more people over 55.”

“But it’s not about ‘fair.’ It’s about what the churches want.”

Starting Over Panel Re-examines Needs of Church

Like Lazarus rising from the dead, Bethany’s committee resumed its work.

First it added three new members to renew its ties with the congregation. A search committee, the Rev. Sherry Taylor said, must guard against taking on a life of its own; its members have shared an intense experience that other people in church have not.

The committee chose a new chairman, Rupert Covey, a methodical research chemist who took on the burden reluctantly, but was determined to finish the search by the books, with consensus at every step.

Like many search committees, Bethany’s had disregarded a suggestion that it hire a consultant. Now it engaged the Rev. Kent Saladi of the North Gulford Congregational Church. Over the next weeks he helped it re-examine the church’s needs and refine the profile sent to the candidates. He also coached it on how to read profiles and conduct interviews.

The original committee had read 92 profiles. This one would read an additional 40. Once again, traditional images would run into the reality of ministers who were women, or single parents, or starting second careers.

Shifting Numbers

Mainline denominations have seen the number of men entering divinity school plunge since the 1960’s; most there now are in their 30’s, have felt the call midlife.

The number of women has grown; they make up 53.9 percent of all United Church of Christ divinity students. Many are gifted students who follow the traditional route, entering seminary soon after college. The women who come later are more likely than men to enroll after an upheaval in their lives, especially divorce, said John P. O’Neill of the Educational Testing Service, who has analyzed seminary statistics.

As a wave of retirements arrives – the U.C.C. expects 40 percent of its ministers to retire in the 1990’s- search committees with increasingly meet this new ministry. These are nervous times, then, for it and other liberal denominations that preach nondiscrimination but leave decisions to the local congregations.

“If you were adopting a parent into your own family, you’ve got a lot of feelings about what kind of person would fit in,” said Loren B. Mead, president of the Alban Institute, which works with congregations. “SO what is right,

morally and ethically, might not feel right. The choices that are made about a pastor come out of those depths.”

More Interviews

Yearning for Past But Facing Reality

Five candidates were interviewed. Three were men about to graduate from seminary after careers as an executive, a lawyer and a social worker. Two were women, both experienced pastors.

The committee had decided that Bethany’s pastor should be a strong spiritual leader, someone who could help people explore and strengthen their faith. While it was greatly concerned about the church’s children, it had been persuaded that the real work of the church began with their parents.

The committee was touched, therefore, by candidates who talked feelingly of their own faith. The question was particularly important for the men, who had felt the call late. Did they have the spiritual depth to guide others?

They discussed what Bethany wanted. Like many mainline churches, it yearned for the irrecoverable past, when church and family were bound tightly together.

The candidates advised them to face reality; families were so busy that Sunday morning might be their only time together. In the video age, how much power does a weekly sermon retain?

“The religious people are already in church,” one candidate, the Rev. Leigh McCaffrey, the pastor of a rural church in New Hampshire, told the committee about Bethany’s desire to grow. “You have to find a way to appeal to the people who aren’t overtly religious.”

Looking for ‘Something’

Several people had looked forward to meeting Mrs. McCaffrey after reading her profile.

“Most people come to church looking for an ‘indescribable something,’” she wrote. “The generation now entering middle age (and their children) do not come to church because they think they should, or because it is their habit. They come looking for something they feel is missing in their lives. I believe that ‘something’ is *community*.”

She asked if the church is open to innovation. The committee said yes., though a few members winced at her description of props- like convention-style placards placed in the pews- she used to involve her congregation in the worship service.

Bethany’s services in its small sanctuary were already strikingly relaxed, as though, indeed, a large family gathered to worship together. There were ushers, but most people seated themselves in favorite pews. Conversation was brisk until the organ began. There were announcements, when anyone could stand up and speak. Tradition was valued, formality less so.

Changed View of Women

Through the second round of profiles, the committee had continued to worry about the ability of women to care for a congregation as well as a family. But by Mrs. McCaffrey's interview on Sunday, May 31 it was well aware of the choice it had set up: the experienced finalists were the women. Would Bethany, she asked, have a problem with a woman?

Like several other committee members, Roberta Shotwell had started out wanting to hire a man. "Having a woman would be a very hard thing," she had said. But that morning, when she heard Mrs. McCaffrey preach at a church the committee visited, she had thought, "I think she can do it."

The committee, she told Mrs. McCaffrey, had agreed that sex shouldn't matter if a man and a woman were equally qualified. But, she added, it still really wanted a minister with a family.

On June 4, the committee voted. No one was greatly surprised at the result: they wanted Leigh McCaffrey. Yet there was some wonder that they were recommending that Bethany hire its first female pastor.

"We've come a long way, haven't we?" Mrs. Shotwell said.

The Right Person Candidate Feels Her Own Doubts

Mrs. McCaffrey took 11 days to accept the committee's offer. She did not feel a call. Rupert Covey was clearly puzzled. "Was it something we said?" he asked.

Some ministers, Mrs. McCaffrey said later, could "learn to love" a church like Bethany; it paid well, had a good parsonage, and was in a pretty town with good schools. But she, like many of her colleagues, wanted much more. She wanted a call, a sense that she was meant to go there.

"I really feel like I need to be clear with God about the big things in my life," she said.

On June 15 she telephoned Mr. Covey. Early that morning, she found herself writing a candidate sermon, the sermon that a minister preaches to a congregation before it votes to accept her.

"My inner voice said very clearly," she said later, "'If you're working in a candidating sermon, it's obvious you plan to candidate.' So I looked up at the mountains and knew, I've got to call Rupe."

She would preach at Bethany on June 18.

A Young Family

Bethany was getting the young traditional family it had hoped for. Mrs. McCaffrey, a 34-year-old graduate of Andover Newton Theological Seminary, where she had won the preaching prize, was married and had two children.

Her husband, Matthew, was also a minister; they had shared the pulpit of the First Congregational Church in Haverhill, NH since 1988. He was starting a

graphic design business specializing in church communications. They had two daughters, 3-year-old Hannah and 1-year-old Sarah.

In the next weeks the search committee, still a little astonished at how well everything had turned out, finally relaxed.

"It's really a wonderful feeling," Sarah Briggs said. "We kept saying the right person would come along, the right person would come along, but I never thought it would happen.

Roberta Shotwell said she felt especially close to Mrs. McCaffrey after the months of striving to be fair to everyone.

"I feel a special bond, or tie, with Leigh," she said. "I almost wonder if that's the point of the search committee, to get a basis for the new minister. I think it will be good for her to look out on Sundays and see our faces."

Seeing a Miracle

Rupert Covey had suggested, and volunteered for, a pastoral relations committee to work with the new pastor. Much of what he had learned over the last 18 months was still known only within the search committee.

On June 28, every pew was full. "I'm so glad to be here," Mrs. McCaffrey began her sermon. "There have been a number of twists and turns, and the fact that I am here is a miracle to me."

The vote was unanimous. As she was escorted in to the sanctuary, the congregation rose and gave her a standing ovation.

The next day, she told the church in New Hampshire that she was leaving. Another search was about to begin.