**LEAD ARTICLE**

**TITLE**

Congregations That Thrive Without Full-Time Clergy

**ARTICLE LEAD IN**

Jeffrey MacDonald shares the story of a Massachusetts church on the brink of closing that turned itself around by embracing a new ministry model with a part-time pastor. A key to success, he says, is shedding conventional wisdom about who is supposed to do what in congregational ministry.

**ARTICLE TEXT**

From the outside, First Parish Church (United Church of Christ) in Newbury, Massachusetts, appeared to be chugging along reasonably well after 377 years of ministry. A small group of faithful souls still gathered every Sunday morning. A preschool met in the downstairs hall on weekdays. More than forty area residents tended organic gardens out back in what had become a model project of land recovery and stewardship. Sure, the building needed a paint job, but that seemed minor ... except that it was symptomatic of a larger problem that was fueling conflict and rapidly imperiling the church's survival.

**A near-death experience**

First Parish was hemorrhaging money for one main reason: it couldn't afford its full-time pastor. Clergy compensation (salary, housing allowance, and benefits) was costing the church nearly six figures a year, yet weekly offerings totaled only a fraction of what was needed. So great was the discrepancy that, together with some hefty building expenses, the weight of full-time compensation hastened the depletion of a $575,000 endowment fund in less than four years. Finally, as Christmas approached in 2012, there was nothing left to spend. Bills were piling up. The pastor quit suddenly. Despondent parishioners prepared to disband. I received a call in my capacity as a supply preacher. Was I available to lead a few final worship services? Saddened to hear this historic church was so near its end, I agreed to help out however I could.

I'd been there a few weeks when the congregation changed its mind and decided to continue in ministry — albeit with a radically different ministry model. The pastorate would be slashed from forty hours to ten hours a week. The church administrator position would be eliminated entirely. Because I have a full-time job as a writer, I was financially able to consider this part-time call when the church offered it to me. But parishioners and I harbored many of the same questions: How could the church possibly do effective, impactful ministry without a full-time pastor? Who would organize programs, lead adult education groups, represent the church at community events, visit the sick at home and in the hospital, and perform many other ministry tasks?

None of us had any idea how this would happen, especially in a church that had long relied on a full-time pastor to do all those things and more. But the church's only choice, it seemed, was either to try a part-time model or close down a ministry begun in 1635. With more than a little hope and prayer, we decided to try.

**Experiencing vitality with part-time clergy**

It gives me joy to report that eight years later, First Parish is thriving by several measures in Newbury, and I'm still in the pulpit part-time. Finances are stable with budgets balanced (mostly) and a gift that helped restart an endowment fund. Thanks to many dedicated volunteers, our four-year-old food pantry feeds upward of 150 people a week. But I'm no rescue hero or turnaround guru with a tale of personal prowess to tell. On the contrary, I've been learning from other congregations what I wish I'd known — and what all of us wish First Parish had known before I arrived. Congregations can experience more vitality, not less, after switching to part-time clergy. They can get there by following a few tested steps and principles, no matter where they're located or what denomination they belong to. How I wish we'd had their insights when we embarked on this journey in 2012.

But they were hidden. I know because I looked online, in bookstores, and in libraries. I knew I wasn't alone in asking these questions. Tens of thousands of mainline Protestant congregations have unwittingly done away with full-time clergy in recent decades because they can no longer afford the luxury of retaining a cleric who's assigned solely to one flock. Many have arrived at this situation much as First Parish did: abruptly, with little or no planning, and with no game plan for powerfully impacting the communities beyond their walls. These churches simply fell into it after trying, as First Parish did, to hold on to their full-time pastorates for as long as possible.

**Hidden in plain sight**

I set out to dig into the lives of congregations that have done what's commonly thought to be impossible: they've attained more vitality after reinventing (or rediscovering) themselves without full­time clergy. I was convinced that even though some, perhaps most, congregations experienced decline after switching to part­time clergy, others surely did not. It turned out my instincts were right. Like a camouflaged species that blends invisibly into the landscape, these congregations are hidden in plain sight. They don't self-identify as having part-time clergy because they don't want to call attention to the fact. Even those with inspiring, instructive stories of vitality have routinely convinced themselves nobody would want to hear from them. But all this hiding in plain sight runs enormous risks for the future of congregations. Unable to find each other, they don't learn from one another's success stories and emerging best practices. They try to project a public face that implies a conventional clergy staffing level but belies the truth: this is a different breed of congregation.

**Breaking away from rigidly fixed roles**

I found churches thriving after full­time clergy and warming to the idea of sharing their stories. A sample of ten grew to twenty, and that was still just a slice of the landscape. As I visited these churches, I began to notice surprising themes. I found, for instance, that vital congregations are shedding conventional wisdom about who's supposed to do what in a congregation. They part ways with a pack that tends to assume rigidly fixed roles for clergy and laity. Conversely, a congregation won't thrive if it assumes that only clergy can do a host of duties. Yet such predictable decline is exactly what happens in scores of congregations that go part-time and then won't reconsider who can and should do what in light of diminished resources.

Local variation in approach is of course necessary, but congregations can follow a system that helps. They can ask particular questions to identify their unique gifts, assets, and mission. They can design pastorates that aren't beholden to prior models used in their congregations, but instead reflect a pastor's gifts and a community's needs. They can develop latent potential within the ranks of laity. They can forge strategic partnerships. They can advocate for renewed relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ, who are in positions to help build them up and help them flourish as precious members of the one body.

**ATTRIBUTION**

This excerpt is adapted from *Part-Time is Plenty: Thriving without Full-Time Clergy*(Westminister John Knox, 2020)by G. Jeffrey MacDonald. Used by permission. The book is available through Cokesbury and Amazon.

**QUOTE**

Congregations can experience more vitality, not less, after switching to part-time clergy. They can get there by following a few tested steps and principles, no matter where they're located or their denomination.

**RELATED RESOURCES**

Leading Ideas Talks Podcast Episode 65: Churches Thriving with Part-time Pastors featuring Jeffrey MacDonald

<https://www.churchleadership.com/podcast/episode-64-churches-thriving-with-part-time-pastors-featuring-g-jeffrey-macdonald/>

The Soul of the Small Church

[https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/the-soul-of-a-small-church/](about:blank)

Two Churches – One Pastor

[https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/2-churches-1-pastor/](about:blank)

**METATAG SUMMARY**

Jeffrey MacDonald says churches can succeed with a part-time pastor if they shed conventional wisdom about who is supposed to do what in congregational ministry.

**KEY WORDS**

Part-time pastor

**AUTHOR**

G. Jeffrey MacDonald

**TAGS**

General, Congregational Revitalization, Pastoral Ministry, Staffing

**PODCAST PROMO**

Leading Ideas Talks Podcast: Episode 65

**“The End of Youth Ministry” featuring Andy Root**

How can youth ministry be more than fun and games? In this episode we speak with Andy Root about how youth can find identity and deep joy in shared narratives and intergenerational connections.

**Listen now or read transcript.**

URL TBD

**SECOND ARTICLE**

**TITLE**

Participation is Up but Giving is Down for Many Congregations During the Pandemic

**ARTICLE LEAD IN**

A Lake Institute survey reveals that the impact of the pandemic on US congregations has been mixed. A majority of congregations (52%) reported an increase in participation but a plurality of respondents (41%) experienced a decrease in giving.

**ARTICLE TEXT**

During these unprecedented times, how have congregations responded? Through a recent survey of congregational leaders from across the country, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving asked: How have congregations encouraged giving and managed their resources in the midst of the pandemic? How are they looking to the future in terms of giving trends, budget planning, and reopening for in-person services?

A July 2020 survey of 555 congregations found that congregational giving declined by 4.4% on average from February through June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, the survey found. A plurality of congregations (41%) reported experiencing a decrease in giving, while more than a quarter (28%) said giving increased.

Key findings include:

* While a majority (52%) of congregations reported an increase in participation, a plurality (41%) experienced a decrease in giving.
* Catholic parishes and small congregations (fewer than 50 weekly participants) reported declines in participation and giving more often than any other group.
* Sixty-five percent of congregations surveyed received federal Payroll Protection Program loans. Just 14% of all congregations reported having to make reductions, layoffs or furloughs of staff.
* Thirty percent of congregations raised funds to support other congregations and nonprofits in need.
* Just over half (53%) of congregations reported that they had already resumed in-person services or anticipated doing so by September 1. One-third of congregations indicated that they did not know when they would reopen.
* Congregations’ political orientations appear to have a greater effect on reopening than do public health or financial considerations. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of conservative congregations had reopened or planned to reopen by August for in-person religious services, compared to 20% of liberal congregations and 49% of moderates.
* None of the congregations surveyed expected to increase its budget during the next year. The majority (52%) plan to maintain their current budgets, while 48% anticipate reductions, with most of those anticipating cuts in the 5% to 10% range.
* Congregations that continue to face a financial shortfall going forward plan to continue to reduce administrative expenses while developing new fundraising appeals and drawing down from their financial reserves or endowment.

The full COVID-19 Congregational Study <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/23791/lake-covid-report2020-2.pdf>

Is available online.

**QUOTE**

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**ATTRIBUTION**

This material was originally published at Lake Institute on Faith & Giving ( <https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/institutes/lake-institute/covid-study.html> ). Used by permission.

**RELATED RESOURCES**

3 Ways to Reset Your Stewardship Ministry in the Midst of COVID-19 by Clayton L. Smith

<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/3-ways-to-reset-your-stewardship-ministry-in-the-midst-of-covid-19/>

7 Ways to Keep Revenue and Donations Flowing During the COVID-19 Crisis by Rob Blezard

https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/7-ways-to-keep-revenue-and-donations-flowing-during-the-covid-19-crisis/

**METATAG SUMMARY**

A Lake Institute survey reveals a majority of congregations have experienced an increase in participation during the pandemic but 41% experienced a decrease in giving.

**KEY WORDS**

Congregations Giving Pandemic

**AUTHOR**

Lake Institute on Faith and Giving

**TAGS**

COVID-19; Funding, Giving, Participation

**RIGHT QUESTION**

Leaders are adept at coming up with ideas they hope will excite others. But leaders need to remember that if they want others to be excited about their passions, they must show interest in the ideas of others. This question may help.

What is an idea, goal, or hope among the people with whom I work that I can work to achieve just as I ask them to support my ideas?

**QUOTE**

In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.

Dag Hammarskjöld

[source: Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 122.]

**PROMO 1**

**Learn Strategies for Fruitful Annual Financial Campaigns**

Did you know that church members who pledge give 30 percent more than those who don't pledge? And congregations that seek annual financial commitments have significantly higher levels of overall giving? With the ***Optimizing Annual Financial Campaigns* Video Tool Kit** you will learn to reap the harvest of generosity through best practices to make your annual financial campaign more effective.

**Learn more and watch introductory videos now.**

https://www.churchleadership.com/product/optimizing-annual-financial-campaigns-download/

**PROMO 2**

**50 Ways to Strengthen Adult Education**

Vital churches provide ways for people of all ages to grow in faith through learning. These 50 ideas can help your congregation build a strong program of Christian education for adults.

**Read now and download free.**

https://www.churchleadership.com/50-ways/50-ways-to-strengthen-adult-education

**PROMO 3**

Video-based Adult Study Curriculum

**Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense**

**Presented by Biblical Scholar N. T. Wright**

This ten-session video-based congregational study addresses questions of the reasonableness of the Christian faith in the modern world. ***Simply Christian*** is an excellent course for both established believers and seekers and is ideal for your congregation's online or in-person small groups, adult Bible studies, and Sunday School classes.

**Watch a sample video and learn more now.**

https://www.churchleadership.com/product/simply-christian/

**PROMO 4**

**Free Video: “Why Giving Matters and Clues for Improving It”**

To encourage the spiritual gift of giving, watch this eight-minute video by Lewis Center Senior Consultant Lovett H. Weems Jr. It provides an overview of the importance of congregational giving and ways you can improve it.

**Watch now.**

https://www.churchleadership.com/videos/why-giving-matters-and-clues-for-improving-it/