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When a congregation chooses its pastor

Bill Tammeus | May. 5, 2010 A small c catholic

For almost a year now, I?ve been doing something in my Presbyterian church [1] that Catholics don?t get (or have) to do.

I?ve been serving on a pastor nominating committee. Our job is to search for a new senior pastor and, when we?ve found one, recommend that our congregation vote to call him or her (yes, Presbyterians have been ordaining women since 1956 ? and I even know that now-retired first ordained female [2].)

The congregational vote then needs to be matched by an affirmative vote by our presbytery, the regional governing body of the 100-plus Presbyterian churches in our area.

There are, of course, advantages and drawbacks to this system. One drawback is that it often takes 18 months to two years after one senior pastor leaves before another is installed. That also can be an advantage, in that it gives a congregation a chance to reassess its nature and future and to decide on the specific skills it should look for in its next pastor.

Bishops in the Catholic church must make those decisions, and usually there is little or no space between one priest?s last Sunday and a new priest?s first Mass.

It has always seemed to me that in that kind of appointment system, there is more of a possibility of winding up with a mismatch between priest and parish. United Methodists use a similar system and this kind of complaint is not uncommon among them.

There is no perfect system for training and hiring clergy, but I?ve been thinking that both Protestants and Catholics might benefit by moving toward something like the system that some segments of the early church used ? one in which clergy in effect arise from the community they ultimately serve.

This is not a new idea with me. Indeed, in his book, *Like His Brothers and Sisters: Ordaining Community Leaders* [3], Bishop Fritz Lobinger, who before his retirement served in South Africa, suggests something quite like what I have in mind.

In a recent article [4] describing his vision of homegrown priests, Lobinger writes this:

?I know that if the church continues to admit only celibate, university-trained candidates to ordination, there will be no hope of ever overcoming the scarcity of sacraments. I equally know that the early church indeed did ordain local leaders who were married, had received brief local training, were chosen by the local community, and had proven their worthiness over some time. I am not alone. There are hundreds of bishops who feel that renewing this ancient tradition is the only solution to the shortage of priests.?

I?m not here to tell the Catholic church how to solve its priest shortage problems. But I think there are countless advantages to having clergy of all faiths with close ties to the communities they serve. Identifying members of

one?s own congregation or diocese or presbytery who might serve as ordained leaders could, in fact, lead to clergy who know in a deep and profound way the heart of the people to whom they minister. What a concept.

In any Presbyterian church there?s always a starting over that happens when a new pastor is called ? especially when, as often is the case, that pastor comes from elsewhere. My congregation called our previous senior pastor from Scotland, for instance, and the one before that from Florida. The man from Scotland worked out well. The Florida man was a disaster. But in both cases it took a good year for the pastor to have a good sense of who we were.

No doubt it will take a long time to change our systems for training and ordaining clergy, but surely we should be thinking now about how to do this better.

As Philip Jenkins says in his new Christian history book, *Jesus Wars* [5], ?A religion that is not constantly spawning alternatives and heresies has ceased to think and has achieved only the peace of the grave.?

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