



Surviving the Stained Glass Jungle: The State and Fate of the Christian Ministry

Rev. Lowell D. Streiker Ph.D.

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When I was a child, before the coming of television into our homes, my favorite radio program was the Jack Benny Show. Benny was portrayed as a penny-pinching skinflint who was tighter than Ebenezer Scrooge. One of Benny's routines is an American classic. When a hold-up man demanded of Benny, "This is a stick up! Your money or your life," he remained silent and looked away as if in deep thought, convulsing the audience. Only when the gunman repeated, "Your money or your life," did he reply, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking." I started out writing a highly personal account of Christian ministry, about serving as pastor of a small Protestant church. As we shall see, such churches are like the place mentioned in the title of the novel by Jamie Ford, *The Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. Since I was 16, I wanted to be a minister. Well, you know how it goes: "Be careful what you wish for." So, fifty years ago, I became a minister and in this calling I have used all of my talents, energy, creativity, spirituality, and maturity (and of course my lack of these). Some days have been the most fulfilling of my life. Others have been the most frustrating. Along the way, I have been a writer—40 books as author, coauthor, compiler, editor, and contributor. But until now, I have never written about the pleasure and pain of being a pastor. I have never faced up to the multitude of social crises with which ministers and churches will wrestle in the twenty-first century. What issues lie just around the corner and how will we as Christians deal with them? But first I must present a sort of an X-ray or a CT scan of congregational life as I have experienced it in the twentieth century. For many readers it may be a first glimpse of what really goes on from week to week in a local church. What do ministers do all week? Does their work week really consist of more than an hour on Sunday preaching and leading prayers? What are the social dynamics and--perish the thought!--the politics of church life? Who does what with whom and to whom in a local congregation? In telling my story I have often disturbed "the social contract," to borrow a thought from Mennonite theologian, David W. Augsburger. He which regards community as niceness, forbearance, and considerateness or, to translate these italicized words into everyday English, denial, avoidance, and distancing. The curse and the blessing of a small church is thinking positively no matter what the facts may be, avoiding confrontation even with disagreeable people, and exchanging the socially acceptable greetings with one another even what is called for is discussion of what is wrong in the congregation. For those of you currently in the ministry, you will have an opportunity to gain perspective, to see what has been underfoot and perhaps unnoticed, and to laugh and cry with one who has been ordained for more than half a century. This is also a book of previews and warnings. Here is what you are about to get yourself into, if you feel called to serve in the parish ministry. It is a record of the agonies and the ecstasies of living with "Rev" tacked on to one's name. In the final section of the book I have sought to create the context of what is happening in churches today, what challenges they face, and where as a vital part of American society they are headed. I am describing the state and the fate of the ministry in the coming years. I see ahead for clergy both perilous times and challenging opportunities. Would I return to parish ministry if I had the opportunity? Like Jack Benny, "I'm thinking. I'm thinking."

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