

# THE POET AND THE TEMPLE PERSON

REASSESSING THE ROLE OF CLERGY AND LAITY IN A PANDEMIC CULTURE

**GIL RENDLE**  
JUNE 2020



**TME**  
*Stewarding Potential*



I was in the air on a west-bound U.S. flight on September 11, 2001, when the terrorist flights hit the World Trade buildings, the Pentagon, and the empty field in Shanksville, PA. By the end of that day, I was over 1,700 miles away from home needing to drive a rented car back home three days later when my work was finished and the airline industry was shut down. An embedded memory from that drive home was the experience of following radio stations from area to area as I drove through their broadcast ranges, the loss of one station requiring me to search for the next available station. No matter where I was and which station I could catch, I remember that there were essentially only two formats available – either classical music or church programming (worship, choirs, or preachers). Entertainment, advertising, even the news gave way to people’s desire, need, to make sense of what happened. It seemed as if the whole nation was giving space to the church and the synagogue – to the music, the worship, and the leaders of Christianity and Judaism – in search of some meaning to an unfathomable event. Church and synagogue attendance spiked.

The space given to the church was short-lived. Americans were encouraged to fight terrorism by going shopping, that is, by returning to the normalcy of our daily lives in defiance of what had happened. Church and synagogue attendance quickly returned to its shrinking trendline while entertainment, advertising, and the news recovered their voices. There was, of course, a new normal to air travel. Otherwise, the interruption, as sobering as it was, became brief for most people.

Not so the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. As I write from my Philadelphia area home, I have already completed more than 80 days of careful sheltering at home; of being sequestered away from family, friends, and everyone except my wife who lives in the house with me. Projections of when this pandemic will “end” range from just a few more days as restrictions are lifted, to 18 to 24 months when testing, vaccines, and renewed outbreaks are all under control. As I work on this writing the daily newspaper has an article saying that it will be two years before it will be safe to have congregational singing in churches, even after we can return to gathering. The old normal is gone, the new normal is not yet to be seen.

What then does this suggest for religious institutions and the need for a voice speaking about meaning when the normalcy we once assumed is so quickly dismantled but has no timeline for being reestablished? Remember that the Israelites were in the wilderness for forty years. They entered the wilderness as slaves and emerged as a nation. Their extended disruption of their old normal fundamentally changed them. They too sought meaning for what they were going through, as did their successive generations – a search for meaning that pervades the Psalms:

*“I cry out loud to God – out loud to God so that he can hear me! During the day when I’m in trouble I look for my Lord. At night my hands are still outstretched and don’t grow numb....”*

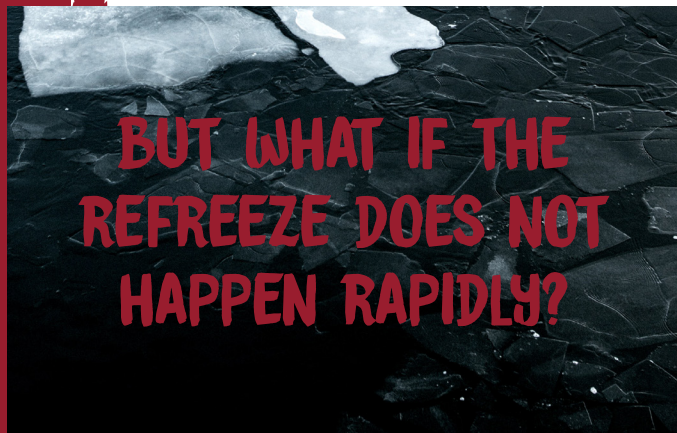
After such a distraught beginning, Psalm 77 moves on to recount the great acts of God in the wilderness, finally saying:

*“Your way went through the sea; your pathways went through the mighty waters. But your footprints left no trace!”*

God was ever-present with the Israelites, even if they did not themselves see God’s footprints while they wandered. Is there any hope of meaning, any existential relief, in our own wilderness pandemic? If there are godly footprints to be followed through this pandemic, how can religious institutions such as congregations rethink themselves, how can they reclaim appropriate space in the culture and again become a trusted neighbor who can speak a word as questions about the future are being asked? Can congregations change to meet this new day? Following the terrorist attacks, our congregations did not.

# UNFREEZING AND REFREEZING

Interrupted normalcy provides the opportunity for deep change. A long-held organizational metaphor for this opportunity centered on the idea of unfreezing and refreezing. Institutions like congregations become frozen over time as their practices become standardized (even ritualized), their norms settle into place, and their assumptions grow roots producing answers even before questions are asked. Once everyone “knows how it works here” stability hardens like cement and the threat or discomfort of change is easily held at bay. But institutions can become unfrozen. Both internal shifts in the change of leadership or the intrusion of conflict and external shifts of demographics or cultural conditions can unfreeze the hardened assumptions and practices of an institution. Leaders have long been advised to opportunistically make changes quickly when an institution becomes unfrozen, since the system will likely soon refreeze, with new norms, practices and assumptions hardening into place. Change was seen as a limited opportunity to be taken in the unfrozen moment.



But what if the refreeze does not happen rapidly? The new norms of social distancing in response to the pandemic are no longer being described as disruptive in the way that a winter blizzard interrupts daily patterns for a day or two, but rather like an ice age in which one’s setting is permanently changed requiring a deep level of personal adaptation in order to survive.<sup>1</sup>

There is a mixed metaphor going on here. As the culture and our communities are becoming frozen in the new ice age of a global pandemic, our congregations are experiencing an unfrozen moment of being freed from old established practices and assumptions that may also

last for a significant amount of time. What if this new pandemic “ice age” will forestall the return to the former congregational normalcy long enough to reopen our own spirits of discernment for a way in which the congregation (the community of believers) can reconnect to a culture that has in many ways passed it by? There is a choice waiting to be made: a return to the safety of an old, but relatively disconnected normalcy – or an opening of ourselves to a new expression of the very ancient intents of our faith. The choice is already beginning to be made by voices longing for our post-pandemic future.

I like the way that friend Bill Millar from the United Church of Canada framed it in his series of podcasts on multicultural living, which now include an introduction in each episode recognizing our pandemic situation. He said:

*It may well be that life will be significantly different when this crisis is past and we leave our homes and unlock our faith buildings. Perhaps we will instinctively want to open ourselves outward to welcome all who, like us, stumble and soar, love and disappoint, hope and pray. And, if instead in that day, our fear, our trauma, causes us to initially seek safety – the security of sameness – I hope these podcasts remind us that comfort through exclusion is not a place where people of faith can abide for long. The impulse of the gospel of hospitality is too strong. (openout.ca Podcast on “Considering” #1)*

Comfort that does not follow the impulse of the Gospel is not a place where people of faith can abide for long. Millar said that well. However, for the church to follow the impulse of the Gospel into new territory will not be a natural response for many of us because of our eagerness to return to life as we knew it pre-pandemic – that is, unless we begin our discernment now. We must begin now to ask what we are already learning, what we are already being taught. It is already time to step out on the balcony overlooking our changed daily lives to ask what we see now, to discern who we are being called to be now.

# BEGINNING OUR DISCERNMENT

The necessary discernment is not about how our churches are doing in the immediate moment. From any number of perspectives, the “technical work” of adapting to the pandemic is going well. Ronald Heifetz was the one who introduced the notion that technical work is the application of known solutions to known problems.<sup>2</sup> It is simple problem-solving. And, it is going well. In this time when congregations (which by their nature are highly relational) are prohibited from personal, physical contact, leaders are learning to do decision making, congregational administration and congregational care connected by technology when they cannot be face-to-face. Worship has continued through digital platforms like Zoom or streaming via YouTube or other providers. Larger congregations are learning to nurture connection and attendance through their webpages. Bible studies, sharing groups, discipleship programs continue with people connected home to home instead of side by side. The technical work of a pandemic is becoming more familiar and better managed as the days and weeks of the pandemic stretch on. What was once new and uncomfortable is smoothing out. However, the fundamental question driving this work is “how will we now do in this changed setting what we were doing before?” It is a technical question sending us in search of newly available solutions to continue to do what we have long known how to do.

Discernment, however, is deeper work focused on identity and purpose, pursuing questions such as “who are we now?”; “what does God ask of us now?” Questioning how to do something in a new way challenges our creativity. Questioning who we are, and what we are to be doing, is more unnerving. Questions of purpose and identity prompted by our sudden new setting invite us to risk and to learn what we don’t yet know.

The Leadership Ministry work of TMF has begun an inquiry into the post-pandemic church ([bit.ly/challenges-and-opportunities](https://bit.ly/challenges-and-opportunities)). In the work being done at TMF, five areas of focus have already begun to take shape:

- Grieving well
- Discerning purpose
- Walking alongside
- Decentralizing power
- Expanding imagination

These areas surfaced from a number of structured conversations that TMF convened with congregational leaders. The quick response of TMF to issues of discernment offers a place to start discernment. What follows is but one incursion into these areas identified by TMF; a deeper dive and a beginning conversation in the area of decentralizing power: the role of clergy, which is being reshaped by the virus. Only months into pandemic changes, it is possible to witness curiously energized adaptations to formerly centralized practices of leadership which challenge the imagination of how the future of congregations might be.

# REEXAMINING THE ROLE OF CLERGY

Aristotle once observed that nature abhors a vacuum. Empty spaces in living systems naturally get filled. I am watching it happen in real-time in my own local congregation.

In pre-pandemic times the congregation my wife and I attend has been a traditional, established congregation with a worshipping attendance somewhere around 100 people, led by a full-time pastor supported by a part-time staff of secretary, music director, and children's director. We have the requisite decision-making groups, fellowship groups, task-related volunteers and some occasional study groups. Everything happens through the pastor – with his leadership, his direction, his invitation, his permission, his support, or his awareness. If there is a “specialty” in this congregation it is our excellent Sunday morning music program in worship which is traditional, classical, and supported by the exceptional voices of four or five young adults from a nearby Philadelphia music institute who see Sunday morning as an opportunity to practice their vocation. Each Sunday includes a lay reader and a member of a small rotating group of people who offer a children's sermon as a part of the worship service. Our congregation is a typical pastor-centered congregation with lay people filling in the traditional spots and roles to supplement, accommodate, or balance the central role of clergy.

And then the pandemic brought its restrictions with all the empty spaces that suddenly surfaced when former activities, movements and personal connections were prohibited.

My congregation chose the Zoom digital platform for the continuation of worship. Zoom is a more collaborative format than live streaming. Live streaming is used by many congregations to continue their former mode of worship, except with very few persons allowed in the sanctuary - perhaps like a ballgame being played in an empty stadium with the fans at home watching on their tv. Zoom is different. It is public space that people use collaboratively for whatever purpose calls them together. It is public space, but it is not sacred space. To change Zoom from public space to worship and congregational space there are a lot of empty places needing new people, new strategies, and the letting go of old assumptions. And, so I watch the vacuum spaces of Zoom being filled:

- Katy, a busy young professional, helped us move on to the Zoom platform and now manages our worship service as she mutes and unmutes speakers as needed, guides the sharing of joys and concerns during our prayer time – and in the process displays empathy and “pastoral” care that she might have kept in check in pre-pandemic worship.
- Marilyn, a relatively new member, develops the PowerPoint format that guides our liturgy on Zoom, complete with theme templates and focusing artwork. She also now offers a weekly “mini-sermon” reinterpretation of the scripture reading for children that often connects the Gospel message to contemporary children's movie characters.
- Elizabeth, our esteemed music director who was the guiding light behind the classical excellence of our pre-pandemic traditional worship, has set aside her feelings about technology and non-classical religious music. She moved eagerly to explore microphones and recording apps that would allow the brilliance of her piano playing to be heard from her living room and is easily making room for members singing solos from their sofas, playing guitars from their basements, and children performing from their kitchens.
- Igor, a very new member, has not waited for invitations to get to know other people but has initiated his own phone calls, working his way through the church directory to see how everyone is doing in the pandemic in an act of pastoral care.
- Passing the peace and sanctuary sidebars that once kept people connected on Sundays is being replaced by a growing number of phone calls among people who are checking on one another.
- Wayne, our children's director, has changed from a room in our church building to a zoom “room” for additional Saturday connections with children in a way in which they continue to be engaged with the attention of our congregation.
- Paula and Michelle have stepped up in new ways to facilitate Wednesday evening conversations with a small group of adults that is now growing beyond the numbers of the former adult Sunday School class.



None of this was happening before. What was happening pre-pandemic was fundamentally being done, directed, or managed by the “professional” staff and the volunteers under their direction. Further, I would suggest, if a number of these changes had been proposed pre-pandemic (like Katy leading the prayers of joys and concerns with her empathetic responses, or Marilyn re-formatting the liturgy and including her own weekly mini-sermon, or a change in the format of music and those who provide it) it would have prompted many months of conversation and deliberation through levels of committees and congregational opinions, perhaps even stirring conflict.

A good bit of what has been happening so naturally in our congregation is technical in nature as people are learning to adapt to connecting without being physically present. Importantly, watching Sunday morning Zoom worship or Wednesday evening “Sunday School,” it is clear that the number of people who are connecting is larger than our pre-pandemic participation. Like the post-9/11 response, people are turning to, or returning to, the congregation with questions of meaning on their mind. On the surface, the ability of our congregations to swivel quickly to technological solutions is problem-solving. But behind that technical work is the more curious, deep, and unquestioned incursions into formerly observed professional boundaries, both pastoral and musical.

## PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

In all modern professions, boundaries are intentionally developed and used to protect the turf and the importance of the professional. In his stunning study of the system of professions, Andrew Abbott describes professions as “exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases.”<sup>3</sup> Every profession claims and protects its own area of expertise by defining the questions and the set of problems that it addresses. Abbott calls the area of professional practice (the “expertise”) of any profession its “jurisdiction.” This jurisdiction is defined by the questions or problems over which the profession claims authority. The boundaries of the jurisdiction of a profession are managed by the use of professional language (jargon), the certification and assignment of professional roles, and by sanctions for unwanted crossings into professional territory by non-professionals or by persons from other professions. The jurisdiction of medicine is sickness and health. The jurisdiction of law is ownership, egalitarianism and justice. The jurisdiction of theology, once the mother of all professions, has considerably shrunk. At its best, the profession of theology has the capacity to address questions of meaning in life. At its humblest, theology has reduced itself to the questions of management of rituals and congregational/institutional practices. Whatever its jurisdiction, a profession develops protective boundaries to preserve and protect its practitioners.

The boundaries of any profession are not, however, static. Boundaries are constantly challenged as related professions and individuals compete to offer their own answers to the questions once reserved to the purview of a single profession. A helpful example offered by Abbott is the problem of alcoholism.<sup>4</sup> In a much earlier day, this problem was solely within the province of professional clergy at a time when they were the leading authority on human behavior in most towns and villages. The primary tool of the clergy in that early time was to denounce the alcoholic as a sinner and seek to lead him or her to repentance. As the profession of medicine developed, it encroached on the jurisdiction of the clergy, eventually taking over the problem of alcoholism with its claim to provide more effective treatment. While the medical profession had something to offer, it too failed to solve the problem of alcoholism completely leaving jurisdictional room for other professions to try new approaches: neurology, psychiatry, and psychology, all of which attempted remediation through self-discovery and pharmacology; law which found space to exercise its tools of legislation and enforcement; and social work, which stepped in with its expertise in personal and social issues. Professions, and professionals, naturally work to preserve and protect their jurisdictional boundaries as they compete with one another for the right to address specific and discrete questions and problems of life.

...PEOPLE ARE  
TURNING TO,  
OR RETURNING  
TO, THE  
CONGREGATION  
WITH QUESTIONS  
OF MEANING ON  
THEIR MIND.

But even professional boundaries can be breached by the insight and effectiveness of laity who use their practical wisdom to step into the jurisdictional vacuums left by professionals. In the example of alcoholism above, do not miss the contribution of the lay movement of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) that provides help to so many.

In an earlier journal article that focused on the issues of professionalism, I described how the role of clergy has over time become limited to the jurisdiction of the interior lives of individuals and the management of faith communities.<sup>5</sup> The professional questions under the jurisdiction of clergy include how one interprets life's transitions and experiences using text and ritual, and how congregations go about their work such as worship, the formation of a person's faith, care of suffering, and the outreach of mission. Clergy manage their professional boundaries with their own abstract knowledge and jargon, with distinctions in clothing and the use of symbols, and in the institutional certification of their role through ordination. There have repeatedly been times throughout history in which clergy have protected, in last-gasp fashion, their dominance of pastoral jurisdiction in areas of worship, pastoral care, and moral judgment. The path to professionalism for clergy is highly structured and protects the right for certified professionals to exercise their earned space. Quite naturally, because of this professionalization of the clergy and their maintenance of jurisdictional boundaries, there is a high level of clergy dominance in established denominations and congregations. Laity are expected to honor the professional jurisdictional boundaries of the clergy, and also simply prefer to leave a lot of the work of the church "to the professionals."

So, into the long-established boundaries of the professional clergy comes the disorienting pandemic COVID19 "ice age" requiring immediate and deep adaptation. Suddenly Katy is offering pastoral responses, Marilyn is offering sermon interpretations, liturgy is being reshaped, music is becoming more diverse and inclusive, and Igor is doing pastoral care. None of this diminishes the importance of clergy, which will be further addressed below. But all of this is new and different, and seemingly – just happened. I want to argue that these very earliest adaptations by individuals give us the opportunity to begin a critical discernment prompted by the deep changes of a pandemic in which old ways and old assumptions no longer hold sway. What are we already seeing? What lessons are already being taught? Is this a time to question (once again, in an on-going historically repeated pattern) the professional nature of the church and the way in which the church has used and protected the role of clergy?

In the very earliest 1st century development of the church, the gifts of the Spirit and the roles of the people were not so constrained by certification and the setting aside of particular individuals. There were no professional boundaries – only the recognized gifts of the people. Consider the record of the Epistles as St. Paul and others worked to bring shape to the messianic community that was intended in the first church:

Romans 12: 6-8 We have different gifts that are consistent with God's grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouragement.

I Corinthians 12: 8-10 A word of wisdom is given by the Spirit to one person, a gift of knowledge to another according to the same Spirit, faith to still another by the same Spirit, gifts of healing to another in the one Spirit, performance of miracles to another, different kinds of tongues to another, and the interpretation of the tongues to another.

I Corinthians 12: 28 In the church, God has appointed first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, the ability to help others, leadership skills, different kinds of tongues.


Ephesians 4:11-13 He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of service and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son.

I Peter 4:11 Whoever speaks should do so as those who speak God's word. Whoever serves should do so from the strength that God furnishes.

Clearly, at the beginning of the formation of congregations, Paul did not assume omnicompetence - that all gifts were to be placed in reserve only for selected individuals who would be given the role of pastor. Of course, there is a whole history of how these scriptural passages and the development of the role of pastor has emerged over the centuries. Nonetheless, does not the recent, and immediate, accommodation to the present pandemic test assumptions about the centrality of the role of pastoral professionalism? Does it not test assumptions about pastoral omnicompetence under which clergy are burdened as parishioners think that their pastor should be able to do all things, at all times, and do them all well. As the pandemic has created a vacuum, people with gifts have easily and helpfully stepped in, putting more gifts of the Spirit into action. There is new ferment afoot. There is new movement by the Spirit to be discerned lest it simply pass by, as it did after 9/11.

The limitation felt by congregations dominated by clergy, or laboring under the assumptions about the necessity and centrality of clergy, is not a new quandary. As recently as twenty years ago, as part of a national study led by the Alban Institute, Jim Wind and I wrote a position paper about the leadership situation within American congregations.<sup>6</sup> Included in that report was mounting evidence that most denominations now strain under the burden of an insufficient number of clergy to serve their congregations. Combined with the attitude of people that their congregation is incomplete when not staffed by a full-time clergy person, congregations increasingly suffer self-imposed insecurity or incompleteness when the jurisdictional role of a professional clergyperson is not provided. Over recent decades serious questions have repeatedly and increasingly been raised about the viability of those congregations which cannot support professional clergy, assuming that a congregation cannot be vital without clergy leadership. Because of assumptions of pastoral omnicompetence, questions grow about the expense and effectiveness of seminary training to prepare professionals to lead congregations in the changing landscape. Generational questions are raised about the need for, or the appropriateness of, professional clergy as a set-aside and protected class of congregational leaders.

In the midst of these questions about leadership, there have been experiments and serious reflection about the professional role of clergy and the use of the gifts of the people of congregations. An important example is a brief, but in my mind exciting, little book written by Stewart Zabriskie in 1995 with the title *Total Ministry: Reclaiming the Ministry of All God's People*. Zabriskie's purpose was to ask what leadership would be needed in the church of tomorrow, and how denominations could make it happen?<sup>7</sup> Zabriskie was the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Nevada – a denominational judicatory with very small congregations spaced too far apart to effectively afford full-time clergy either individually or in shared agreements. These congregations suffered under their lack of full-time residential clergy. The Episcopal Diocese of Nevada was a natural arena to raise questions about the role and importance of clergy, and a natural place to experiment. As Zabriskie said, “For too long ‘ministry’ had meant ‘clergy’; minister had referred to an ordained person. Most congregations newly led by lay ministers felt a corresponding sense of loss with a vestigial hope for ‘when we have a minister again.’”<sup>8</sup> Zabriskie was willing to reexamine long-held assumptions and try something new in his setting.



**MOST DENOMINATIONS NOW  
STRAIN UNDER THE BURDEN OF AN  
INSUFFICIENT NUMBER OF CLERGY TO  
SERVE THEIR CONGREGATIONS.**



Instead of making this a financial issue by having the diocese subsidize salaries of clergy to make them available to these congregations; instead of making this an institutional issue by seeking new ways to yoke or team congregations over large distances to share full-time clergy; and instead of making this a denominational polity issue by rewriting requirements for alternative forms of ordination to develop some form of clergy more accessible to these churches, Zabriskie asked about the gifts of the people already in the congregations. Who has the gift of speaking? Who has the gift of teaching, of caring, of visitation, of leadership...? He then took the step of not asking how the church might ordain these people or try to teach them more than the rest of the people knew, or how to make them more like clergy. Instead, he explored how to help these people claim and use the gifts they already had – and then asked how to teach the whole congregation to theologically and practically use the gifts that are already present in their community? Could the recognition and use of the gifts of all of the people in the community of believers be a more total form of ministry, one not delimited by assumptions of the professional jurisdiction and boundaries of clergy? Could congregations learn to use the gifts they already possessed without deferring to their assumptions about the unique role of ordained clergy?

Importantly Zabriskie's work was not just driven by the pragmatic problems of small congregations scattered over large distances. It was work also driven by discernment of the nature of the church. He drew from the earlier work of Roland Allen, an Anglican missionary to North China from 1895 to 1903. Zabriskie wrote, "Allen's writings about his sense of mission among indigenous peoples reminded the church of its New Testament roots in ministry, with special insight into the value of local, indigenous ministries."<sup>9</sup> Local, indigenous ministry – the ministry of the people already there. Like Katy, and Marilyn and Igor. What is the pandemic already teaching us?

"Vocation is the response to inspiration, not to a system."<sup>10</sup> What if the changes brought suddenly by the pandemic are an opportunity to unburden congregations from some restrictions of old professionalism? The empty spaces created by the sudden need to do things in a far different way have been quickly filled by gifted people with a natural "call," a vocation, to be engaged in ministry. The old system leaned heavily toward preferencing only those calls leading to full-time, seminary-trained, ordained ministers. That left many gifted people in the pew, facing the altar area where it was assumed ministry was being done. An early lesson of the pandemic is that gifted people are eager to get their fingers in the pie. An opportunity of this early lesson is for the institutional church to discern how best to use the gifts of all people in a post-pandemic church – a church already challenged by cultural distrust and generational entrepreneurialism.

# WHAT THEN OF THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL CLERGY? -- THE "TEMPLE PERSON" AND THE "POET"

As we begin to learn from the newly changed circumstances, the most obvious observation is that congregations are filled with more gifts than they might have assumed – or that they have learned how to harness. There is that part of congregational leadership, typically preserved for clergy through professional boundaries, that is able to be done, and done well, by others who have natural gifts and inclination for ministry.

This earliest of pandemic responses gives both reason and opportunity to rethink the roles of professional clergy and of laity in local congregations. Resetting the professional role of clergy and the role of the laity in the institutional church is not a new conversation, rather one that has recurred throughout the history of the church. In the last century, this recurring conversation in the United States has most often sought a way in which to avoid undervaluing laity and underutilizing clergy. I can argue that the current pandemic has brought both of these issues to light – both the undervaluing of laity through the very institutional professional boundaries of clergy that unnecessarily excludes laity, and the underutilization of clergy by including within their professional jurisdiction roles and functions easily shared with others. By usurping work easily done by others, clergy may be actively avoiding the more difficult and more important work that is appropriately theirs by both call and preparation. Clergy certainly need not be anxious about their place in the institutional church. The necessary conversation is not about whether there is an important place for clergy in congregations, but rather what is the most important work for clergy to do. It is about finding the right place for the clergy, the right work for them to do.

This section of the present monograph offers a beginning conversation about the role of clergy as the temple person and the poet. The temple person is that part of the role that is most deeply connected to the internal, institutional part of the congregation. It focuses on discerning what the work of the congregation is called to be in the present moment and present place, and how that work can be done through the gifts of the people (clergy and laity together). The role of the poet is different. It is the work of meaning-making – of interpreting life experience through the lens of faith in ways that make sense of that which is most hopeful and that which is most disturbing. It is making sense of life that is touched both by love and by suffering.

Using Zabriskie’s work on “total ministry” we have a starting place for this conversation by identifying the role of clergy as the “temple person”:

In this understanding of the maintained and mission-focused community – the ministering community – the role of the ordained becomes clear. The priest becomes the maintenance person, the temple person. The priest gathers the community for its sacramental life, for the feeding and energizing that is central to the ministering community. The priest is the gatherer around a center who is not the priest, but the Lord whom we all worship. The priest points the people toward the center. The priest is not the center, a truth which we continue to discover in our total-ministry explorations and adventures. We use Wes Frensdorff’s distinction that the church is a ministering community rather than a community gathered around a minister.<sup>11</sup>

## THE TEMPLE PERSON



This notion of a “temple person” offers a path of inquiry if the idea is used metaphorically, not needing a study of ancient temple practices to determine future definitions of the role and practice of temple keepers. Zabriskie’s helpful idea was to shape a conversation in which the clergy are not central to the congregation. Indeed, it is Jesus, and the purpose-driven following after Jesus and the Gospel teachings, that must remain at the center of each congregation. In support of that faithful center, there are critical roles and functions belonging to clergy, i.e., the temple person. Necessary adjustments to the current pandemic are already reframing what these critical roles and functions are for this time in a new way .

The importance of the temple person is that she or he is the one who is not in the center but gathers others around the center. The temple person is less the doer, and more the facilitator of doing. The initial meaning of the word “liturgy” was “the work of the people.” The temple person is the one who points people to the center and then facilitates the work of the people. The list of roles and functions by which the temple person does this work may differ from place to place, from congregation to congregation. However, I offer the following list from my own work and observations as a place from which a deeper conversation might come.

- 1.** Holder of the narrative (the story) of the people of a particular congregation who gather in a particular place with a particular purpose.
- 2.** Shaper and facilitator of an on-going discernment of identity and purpose – so that the congregation’s narrative speaks of the present and the future, and not of its past.
- 3.** Caller of people to the vocation of their gifts in the immediate setting; helping people both claim and use their gifts.
- 4.** Teacher and mentor of people using their gifts; helping people see and use their gifts in the larger perspective of the biblical and theological teachings of the church.
- 5.** Overseer; offering feedback and direction appropriate to assure that people use their gifts in service to ministry, not in service to self-importance or self-need.

Note that congregational administration is not on this list. Also, not on the list are worship and program leadership, visitation or governance. Any of this additional work might include clergy but is not exclusive to the domain that is the most important work of the clergy. Divorcing the work of the clergy from assumptions of being the prime “doer” of congregational ministry does two essential things. It returns the work of the people to the people where both vocation and gifts have previously been undervalued. It also delimits the work of the clergy to that which is most important for ordained clergy to do in ways that can be done both as resident and as non-resident. Congregations that have residential clergy benefit richly from a temple person in place who can lead this work on a daily, on-going pace as he or she interacts with the people around the center of the congregation. However, with an understanding that clergy are no longer the center of the life and purpose of a community of believers, congregations can live on the gifts of the people while being resourced as needed by non-resident clergy available at limited times and from distance. The earlier history of Methodism in which circuit riding clergy periodically visited communities of believers gives reason to consider the value of this change of assumptions. The pandemic is certainly teaching the limits of a physical building as a necessary part of the definition of a congregation. Similarly, the pandemic is teaching more about the limits of an over-dependence on the daily “doing” of clergy. To allow a conversation about what is the necessary role and function of clergy in a post-pandemic world also provides new opportunities for the viability of congregations that cannot afford resident clergy leaders. The same is true of new non-traditional, generational and entrepreneurial expressions of congregations that are not clergy-centric.





## THE POET

If the work of the temple person is connected to the institutional life of the congregation, the work of the poet is connected to meaning-making. Meaning-making here refers to the capacity to bring understanding and purpose to a person's experience. This is a primary purpose of faith which offers believers a way – commonly a way different from the dominant culture – to understand their lives. Meaning-making is not the work of practitioners, but of poets.

This notion of the value of the poet comes from Walter Brueggemann who prefaced his own writing on the bold nature of Christian proclamation with a poem from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*<sup>12</sup>:

*After the seas are all cross'd (as they seem already  
cross'd)  
After the great captains and engineers have  
accomplished their work,  
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the  
chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,  
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,  
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.*

After the work of the other professions with their own discrete professional jurisdictions comes the work of the clergy/poet. This is the work of ministry, and particularly of ordained ministry, that has the least definition, but perhaps the most value. The work of meaning-making is exceedingly difficult, demanding a high level of self-understanding and maturity drawn from life experience reflected through the text and teachings of the faith. It can also be dangerous work since life seen through faith directly challenges life seen through more common perspectives such as nationalism, individualism, consumerism, or the multiple isms of race, gender or age. Because of the difficulty and danger of this work, it is rare to find clear meaning-making in the sermons of many clergy, especially the young, since it is truth won through years of labor and life experience. Brueggemann has convincingly described how a biblical faith offers believers an alternative narrative – a different and renewing story to explain the setting of people's lives and their personal situations.<sup>13</sup> It is central to the role of clergy to help people find that different story.

That meaning-making is both difficult and dangerous may also be the reason that so many clergy fill their days with the unending tasks and activities of the church which they know how to do (even when the doing is not particularly valued) so that they might avoid the task of the poet which is immeasurably more difficult. This work avoidance has led many clergy to that point of being overworked but underemployed – tired from the tasks of ministry but disconnected from the purpose of ministry.

The argument in this monograph began with a discussion of professional jurisdiction to help think about the appropriate work of the clergy and the laity. Here, in the notion of the poet, the idea of professionalism allows the reconsideration of what is to be the most important jurisdiction of the church and the profession of theology. The questions to be addressed within this definition of the professional jurisdiction of theology include understanding the self, the world one lives in, and the nature of good and evil.

Huston Smith, the recently deceased scholar of religion, brought a crispness to understanding the professional jurisdiction of the clergy/poet in his discussion of the progression of professions, particularly as pursued through the training programs of universities. He wrote:

...this new spirit showed itself especially in the new professionalism, which reorganized old professions (theology, medicine and law) and spawned new ones (business administration, journalism, veterinary medicine, forestry and the like). The old professionalism took liberal studies seriously because they

made human beings their central concern. The new professionalism studies things, and it raises questions not about humanity's ultimate role and the responsibilities that go with that role but about whether X or Y is the better way to go about achieving some immediate, restricted end.<sup>14</sup>

It is this oldest of the professions, theology, that once held – and still holds in the role of the poet – human beings as the central concern. While so many professions break people's lives and experiences into their component parts to try to bring solutions to discrete problems of health, ownership or justice, it is the grander work of the church to help people find both their place and their meaning in the whole of God's creation with all other people as well as in daily experience.

This is the interpretive work which is far more daunting and dangerous than the organizational or programmatic work of the congregation, or of the relational work of pastoral care. It is not surprising that clergy might be tempted to usurp the work that belongs to the people in their congregations in order to avoid this exceedingly more difficult and less defined work that is theirs.

I began this monograph with the national tragedy of 9/11. Let me turn to the tragedy of Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 to try to frame this work of meaning-making that is central to the church and the task of the clergy/poet. In December of 2012, Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 children between 6 and 7 years old and 6 adult staff in an attack on Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Connecticut. It was a national tragedy heightened for my wife and me because our youngest son and his family had recently considered moving to this same Sandy Hook school district and they knew some of the families whose children were killed in the slaughter. In particular, one of the young boys killed was the child of our son's co-worker and he was of the exact age of our grandson Calvin, who under other circumstances could have been his classmate at the Sandy Hook School.

On the Sunday following the attack we attended historic Old St. George's United Methodist Church in Philadelphia where we sat in the pew with grandson Calvin by our side and our son and his family around us. It was the Christmas season and the third Sunday of Advent – Joy Sunday. The pastor and our friend, Fred Day, was the poet/preacher. In the shock and the grief of the moment, he gave us the alternative story of faith. Acknowledging that he had dismissed the sermon he had prepared earlier in the week because of the shooting, he turned us to the lectionary reading for Joy Sunday found in Zephaniah.

*Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem.  
The Lord has removed your judgement;  
The Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst;  
You will no longer fear evil. (Zephaniah 3:14-15)*

Now, Zephaniah, a seldom heard text from the pulpit, was written by a minor prophet in which the only voice heard in the book is the voice of an angry God whose wrath is to fall on all creation, good and evil. But on this day the poet/preacher reframed life, telling us that joy, announced in Zephaniah in the face of an angry God, was not about festivities. On this 3rd Sunday of before Christmas, he told us, the joy of Advent in the shadow of the shootings was not about holidays, decorations, parties and traditions. Instead, joy in such a moment is an act of Christian defiance when evil makes itself known in the world. And then the poet/preacher called all of the teachers and school workers who were in the congregation to the altar where he blessed them and surrounded them with our prayers so that, returning to their classrooms on Monday, they could continue in defiance of the evil that had just happened. Shaken out of shock, we left to go back to our work, our families, our communities with additional courage. The power of the poet is to re-describe the world so that whether we are overwhelmed by love or diminished by evil, we can move on with hope.

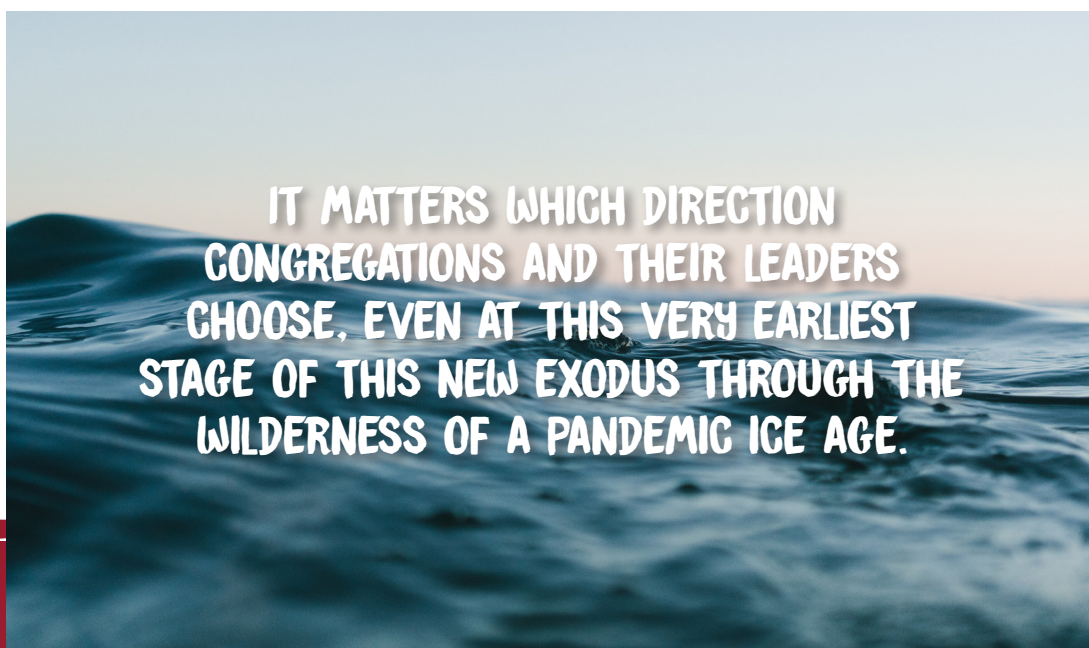
Such meaning-making is life-shifting when offered in response to tragedy and great suffering. But it is also much needed at moments of life transition such as births, birthdays, confirmations, weddings, retirements and deaths. It is needed in times of disappointments, loneliness and difficult diagnoses. It is needed in the common days of living that so often lack the energy and focus of the high holy days.

The Poet is needed in a pandemic as well when all things – things as simple as getting up in the morning to go to work or stopping by to have a cup of coffee with a friend – slip away from our control. This is a time to wonder why Jesus called twelve followers to change the world and all of history and then instructed them to be humble and avoid all titles and temptations of greatness. Do not let people call you Rabbi or Father (Matthew 23:8-10). If you want to be first, then seek to be last. (Mark 9:35). If you want to lead, become like a servant (Luke 22: 26). These were not lessons of how humility enables the great leader to become more palatable or more attractive, thereby increasing his or her power and authority. It wasn't a strategy for how simple tradesmen and tax collectors could best Jewish Pharisees and Sadducees and Roman authorities. It was the reminder to the disciples that in God's world they were never in control anyway. *"All who lift themselves up will be brought low. But all who make themselves low will be lifted up."* (Matthew 23: 12). A world that we cannot control and bend to our wishes is not a bad world. We were not really in control prior to the pandemic anyway. If we pay attention, after following the science (not the politics) that will get us through this sickness, we will also find the invisible footprints of the God who "provided a pathway through the mighty waters." Our role is not to be in control of creation, but to steward it as best we can so that all can live with what God has provided.


The work of the poet is work that belongs to clergy and is not easily done. It requires earnest study, deep reflection, and a willingness to risk proclamation. It is worth giving the work of the people back to the people to make room for the poet/clergy to prepare for this most difficult work that belongs to them. It is a central part of their professional jurisdiction.

## **AN UNFROZEN MOMENT IN THE NEW PANDEMIC ICE AGE**

What are the new lessons already produced by this changed world? Will congregations just wait for permission to go back to an old established "normal" that is already discounted by a culture that does not easily trust institutions or the practices of earlier generations? Or, will congregations work harder at discernment, looking at the newly surfaced gifts of the people as well as the obvious interest in, and need for, making meaning in this oddly changed time? Will congregations trust God's unseen footsteps and follow into a world that can be understood differently through the lens of faith?





- 
- <sup>1</sup> Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard, *Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now a Startup* ([bit.ly/leading-beyond-the-blizzard](http://bit.ly/leading-beyond-the-blizzard))
- <sup>2</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1994) 8, 71-72.
- <sup>3</sup> Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 280-300.
- <sup>5</sup> Gil Rendle, "Reclaiming Professional Jurisdiction: The Re-emergence of the Theological Task of Ministry," *Theology Today*, October 2002, 408-420.
- <sup>6</sup> James Wind and Gil Rendle, "The Leadership Situation facing American Congregations" A white paper. (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2001).
- <sup>7</sup> Stewart Zabriskie, *Total Ministry: Reclaiming the Ministry of All God's People* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1995).
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, x.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, x.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.
- <sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).
- <sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).
- <sup>14</sup> Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 101.