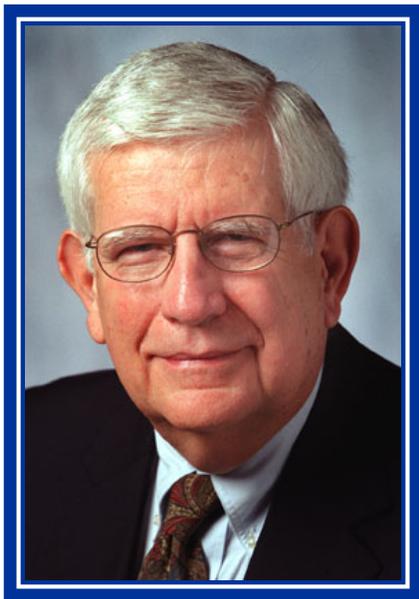


Jackson W. Carroll

on “God’s Potters” (Clergy Shaping Congregations)

By Tracy Schier

(This edited conversation is one of several pertaining to issues within Theological Education.)



Teacher, writer, minister, research director—these are the hats that Jackson Carroll has worn over the years in his service to church, and most recently, to issues of pastoral leadership. Now Duke Divinity School’s Ruth W. and A. Morris Williams Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society, Jack continues to learn and write from the massive findings of the Pulpit and Pew Project, the Lilly Endowment-funded program based at Duke that he directed between 1999 and 2004.

The Pulpit and Pew project commissioned the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to interview clergy in 80 denominations and faith groups across the United States to learn about their social origins, education, ministerial practices, personal and family lives, reading and scholarship habits, leadership styles, physical and emotional health—all indicators contributing to morale and effectiveness and significant for understanding congregational dynamics. In addition to the survey, Carroll and his colleagues conducted focus groups with clergy and laity in seven sites across the U.S. They were especially interested in exploring the meaning of good ministry and what resources are needed to nurture and sustain it. Carroll’s 2006 book, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*, documents this work. (A companion book, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Ministry*, by L. Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong, drew on the work of a group of pastoral theologians convened by Pulpit and Pew to explore good ministry from a theological perspective.)

Jack Carroll’s Bachelor of Divinity degree is from Duke Divinity School and his Ph.D. is from Princeton Theological Seminary. As minister he served

congregations in Dumfries, Scotland, and Rock Hill, SC., and was the Methodist chaplain at Duke University. He is a retired clergy member of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist church.

He joined the Duke Divinity School faculty in 1993, after having taught at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, and Hartford Seminary, where he was founding director of the Center for Social and Religious Research. He also was interim president at Hartford in 1989-90.

Carroll’s dedication to issues of church leadership is reflected in the numerous books, reports, and articles he has authored or co-authored. Among his 14 books are *As One With Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry*; *Bridging Divided Worlds: Generational Cultures in Congregations*; *Mainline to the Future: Congregations for the 21st Century*; and *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools*. The latter book received the 1998 Distinguished Book Award of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

This conversation is edited.

Q. *In God’s Potters you talk about models of ministry—ministry as office, as profession, as calling, and as producers of culture. As you look historically at the church in the United States, can you say that, over the past 200-plus years, some or one of these models have been, at particular times, more dominant or important to church health and pastoral effectiveness? Is one model more necessary to the church in the U.S. today?*

A. Clergy have always been producers of culture in the sense that I used the term in *God’s Potters*. The other three models, however, have varied historically. When we go back to Puritan New England it is obvious that ministry as office was the most important model. These early American ministers were ordained to the ministerial office, *which* specified their role as preachers, teachers and sacramental leaders—representing the church’s tradition in the congregation and the larger society, where they also had official status. By the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century the minister’s calling from God became more of an issue. Greater attention was given to a minister’s spiritual grounding and less to his intellectual qualifications and formal credentials. Leaders of the Awakening, Gilbert Tennant, for example, considered many of the Puritan divines to be spiritually cold and lacking a vital inward call from God. Thus having a demonstrated call to ministry became quite important and was given further emphasis by the Baptists and Methodists, whose evangelical fervor spread across the young, rapidly growing nation. So we see over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a real tension between

ministry as office and ministry as calling. Then we get to the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, a time when “professionalism” was gaining currency, not just in ministry but in many occupations. In part this was an effort to raise the status of these occupations by defining them as professions with specialized knowledge not available to “laity”; however, the concern for special knowledge and skills also reflected a concern that professionals be competent in their work, to be able to do well what their jobs required. In higher education there came to be a great emphasis on producing competent practitioners. Seminaries also began to think of them-selves as professional schools—an emphasis that was especially strong by the mid-twentieth century. Though the professional model emphasizes competent ministry, it has been strongly criticized, among other things, for setting clergy apart from laity and making laity seem to be “amateur” Christians in comparison to clergy.

Today we see a mixture of the three models. In an increasingly well-educated society, we recognize the great importance of clergy who are competent in their various leadership roles and who exhibit spiritual authenticity grounded in a call from God. In addition, it is important that clergy have a clear understanding of what is essential in their role as pastors as they represent and interpret the Christian tradition in ever changing circumstances. Seminaries more and more recognize that congregational leadership today must be formed spiritually and embody the combined abilities to teach, preach and lead.

Q. What do pastors need to offer their congregations today that they didn’t, let’s say, 20 or 30 years ago? Or to focus more closely, before 9/11, the Afghan and Iraq wars, the new consciousness of Islam in our country and world?

A. It is shocking how little we all know—and this includes pastors—about the history, beliefs and practices of other faiths that are rapidly growing in the United States. This is especially true of our lack of understanding of Islam, whose practitioners are often labeled as potential terrorists. So, what specifically can Christian pastors do? First, they teach themselves about other faiths so that they can teach their congregations to understand their new neighbors whose faith and practices may be different. Rather than dismissing other faiths as false, we need a theology for understanding and appreciating other religions in relation to our own. Moreover, teaching about other religions is not enough. Pastors should find ways in their communities for themselves and their members to have broader contacts with members of other religions, other ethnic groups that are growing in our midst. Interacting with and understanding the needs and culture of Hispanic peoples (most of whom are fellow Christians) or of Buddhists or Muslims, for example, can go a long way towards breaking down walls of suspicion and hostility and promoting peace and justice in our communities and beyond.

Q. How should pastors react to the growing numbers of people who are “spiritual” but not involved in a congregation or denomination?

A. Unfortunately, some pastors don’t react at all because they rarely encounter these people because they are absent from our congregations. The mega churches have tried through special programming to reach the “spiritual but not religious” folks by deemphasizing the institutional trappings of traditional churches. I commend them for their efforts. But, there is a danger of pandering, of toning down the proclamation of the Gospel, and making the Christian life seem as easy and undemanding as possible. There are a lot of folks who are not anti-religious but are not turned on by the institutional aspects of religion. A lot of the anti-institutional bias is a holdover from the 1960s, where institutions were seen as oppressive and their leaders were distrusted. One result is a sharp decline in denominational loyalty and the growth of a nation of religious consumers who shop around for churches that seem to meet their needs. But they often have few criteria for judging what is authentic and faithful to the Christian tradition and what is not. I have seen this in teaching Sunday school classes of young adults. They have real questions about the Christian faith and its meaning for their lives, but they have few criteria that help them sort the wheat from the chaff. Getting back to the mega church phenomenon, there are still some of these churches that teach what is called the prosperity gospel—which I find to be a perversion of the Christian faith; however, some of the mega churches are rethinking their ministries and placing greater emphasis on the fundamentals of the faith and what one’s faith implies for responsible life in society. Willow Creek and Saddleback are examples, as are also some of the so-called emerging churches that have grown up often in reaction to the mega churches.

Q. In our culture, in which branding is so ubiquitous, what do pastors and churches need to do to “brand” in order to attract/educate? Religion-as-product seems crude, but I think it is apt in many ways.

A. When you think about it, churches long have been branded. Denominations are one form of branding—though they seem less important today than in the past. Or, we often group denominations into mainline, evangelical, fundamentalist, and so on—this too is a kind of branding. Thus, even if denominational labels aren’t especially important when people move or become religious consumers and switch membership from one church to another, they most often do so within particular brands. Those who grew up in the UCC, for example, will often look to join another mainline church; evangelicals will seek out another evangelical church rather than affiliate with a mainline congregation. They switch within brands. Also, individual congregations sometimes undergo a kind of branding. Some congregations become known for social ministry or good music or an exciting youth ministry, or being especially sensitive to people going through divorce. As I said, this is a kind of branding. In this regard, clergy need to be

aware of what is distinctive about their particular congregation’s culture and its particular strengths, and of how the congregation’s strengths—its brand—can (without pandering) be made appealing to those who are members or potential members. Mega churches are able to do this well. Because of their large size, they develop small groups and other programs that appeal to differing needs of their members—offering different brands, so to speak, within the one large congregation.

Q. Please talk about the delicate dance that a new pastor must do when he/she takes on a congregation that may be dysfunctional but not recognized as such by the members. “We love who we are...”

A. I encourage students to get to know the congregation to which there are called or appointed before they try to make changes. A good pastor must lead from within the culture and, at the same time, help the congregation see beyond its past and present state to what God may be calling the congregation to be and do. But a pastor can’t do that effectively until the congregation believes that she or he understands and loves them and trusts them to lead them wisely.

The pastor needs to recognize the delicate balance between what is and what might be. If a pastor pushes too hard he or she can close off opportunities for real and needed change. Pastors need to have the tools for understanding and leading. They need to be ethnographers as well as theologians. Fortunately today there are considerable available resources and models for understanding congregations that have come from the congregational studies movement. M.Div. programs’ field education and internships, for example, are increasingly designed to give students more training and experience in understanding the diversity of congregations. While much more needs to be done, I think that there are good things happening in the seminaries that train students in congregational analysis and encourage them to reflect theologically on what they see in their field education and internship experiences. These programs give students opportunities just to know what types of questions to ask when they assume leadership of a congregation.

Q. Why do you think the U.S. cultural climate is much more hospitable to religion compared to, say, western Europe where indifference and even hostility to religion seems to be growing? Have our congregations and pastors had something to do with this?

A. Well, certainly the framers of our Constitution had a little to do with this! From the start we have been a country that is hospitable to religion, and the Constitution’s non-establishment clause allows for healthy competitiveness and diversity rather than privileging one particular faith as the established religion. Because there is no

established church in the U.S., clergy and congregations have had to be entrepreneurial to survive and attract members. People have choices—this goes back to what we were saying about branding. Congregations have distinct identities, and those who understand who they are and do things well can usually attract people and maintain their loyalty. A lot of pastors outside of the U.S. don’t even think this way. They don’t think or act as entrepreneurial leaders in the same way as many American pastors. I encourage the seminaries to realize the importance of helping students develop leadership skills, learn to recognize the possibilities present in their congregations and communities and how to develop and incorporate these possibilities in their congregation’s ministry. It amounts to always seeing and developing what lies beyond the status quo.

Q. You note in God’s Potters (page 43) that “Broader, more inclusive ecumenical networks are replacing old-style clergy associations.” Do you have indications that these are growing in number and expanding in reach, and what things are they doing that is different?

A. I have only anecdotal evidence. In Hartford I served on the board of directors of the Greater Hartford Conference of Churches, which was made up of Protestants and Catholics. It had previously been an all-Protestant Council of Churches. As we joined with Catholics, we all had to learn to get beyond the old hostility and suspicion that existed between and among Christian denominations. We had to acknowledge that on some matters we had real differences that we could not paper over, but also that there were many important ways that we could work together. In Durham we have a group called Durham Congregations in Action, which is multi-racial and multi-faith. It includes Christians, Jews and Muslims. Being ecumenical and interfaith sometimes makes it difficult to speak with a common voice as was the case in the past when everyone was Christian. Now with broadened membership, the clergy associations and groups such as the one in Durham find common cause through working together in common projects such as homelessness or hunger more than by making public statements on issues on which there is genuine disagreement among the participating groups—for example, homosexuality or abortion. I do find, however, that increasingly there are ways for cooperation and mutual action on issues of economic justice or peace and reconciliation, where, in spite of theological differences, we can find common ground among the different faith groups.

Q. Your data suggest that the church is an exception when it comes to accommodating women who want both a profession and motherhood, and in welcoming older women more than other professions. This is a positive thing. But other aspects for women in ministry/pastoring are not as positive. What can you say here?

A. Many of the churches have been willing to make accommodations such as providing maternity leave. The big change that I see is the number of women serving in mid-size and large congregations. While still quite small in the overall picture, the numbers are growing. Unfortunately we still see that, after the first ten years in ministry, men typically outpace women in salaries, but they are gradually achieving greater equality. Mobility—moving from one pastorate to another—is a serious problem for both men and women. Many couples, where one is a pastor (or, for that matter, where both are pastors), are often not flexible enough to be mobile. Usually the non-clergy person is the main breadwinner, and so when the clergy partner in the family is called to another congregation and this call requires a physical move to the new congregation, this places a real strain on family life.

Q. Bi-vocational pastors are growing in numbers. What is the good news about this and what is the downside?

A. The good news is that using bi-vocational pastors is one way—and an important way—to meet needs of really small Protestant churches. Approximately sixty percent (60%) of these churches have 100 or fewer members, and these small congregations cannot afford to pay a full time pastor. Many of these bi-vocational pastors are very able people and they often bring gifts from their experience in other occupations that serve them well as pastors. One downside is that this is a model that is not yet well accepted. A congregation that has never had a bi-vocational pastor or even a lay pastor can see this as a status issue, and perhaps even a signal of decline. There is also the difficulty of providing adequate theological training for bi-vocational pastors. It is not helpful to a congregation to have a well-intentioned, but poorly educated bi-vocational pastor. He or she will sometimes do more harm than good. So, the growing use of bi-vocational pastors can be a godsend to small congregations, but denominations need to see that these pastors are both spiritually mature and adequately trained for their pastoral duties.

Q. Trust is so important in the pastoral role. Has the Catholic clergy sex scandal caused erosion of trust levels in denominations other than Catholic? Has it precipitated action?

A. There has been some ripple effect, though how much is difficult to say. Certainly the Catholic problem has made other denominations much more aware of the potential for such abuses and of actual instances of it. Seminaries have increasingly made clergy ethics a matter of serious concern—and this goes beyond just having good pastoral etiquette, which was essentially the focus of what I was taught in seminary. You ask about erosion of trust; the pedophilia scandal—and similar sexual abuse

scandals in other denominations—is bound to have eroded trust in pastors of all denominations. Even without the scandal, respect for clergy on the part of succeeding generations of young people has declined over the past few decades. The National Opinion Resource Center (NORC) has been studying successive cohorts of young people, and, though clergy are still highly respected, each new cohort appears to have less respect for religious institutions and their leaders than its predecessors. Of course, this declining respect has some roots in the anti-institutionalism that we talked about earlier and is not just the fruit of the recent sexual abuse scandals. Overall this emphasizes the need for clergy mentoring and colleague groups in which clergy study together, share together, break down the isolation that the clergy role sometimes fosters, and hold each other mutually accountable. It also highlights the importance in seminaries of emphasis on clergy ethics and on learning to set appropriate boundaries in one’s relationships with parishioners.

Q. Do you think that seminary faculties have enough experience of/understanding of congregational life to impact their students?

A. My overall answer is no. Increasingly, because of the nature of Ph.D. programs, a growing number of seminary faculty come into teaching without pastoral or other significant experience of congregational life. Also, the norms and rewards of the academy do not give any particular advantage to folks who have parish experience or who are ordained; rather promotions and tenure are based on how well they do their academic discipline. To be sure, doing well in one’s discipline is essential, but it is important for seminary faculties also to have a healthy appreciation of congregational life.

Q. As you look back at the Pulpit and Pew project, are there any things that you wish you had been able to look at more closely? Actually, a better way to put this is—what needs to be studied next, using Pulpit and Pew as catalyst for furthering knowledge about the American church?

A. Our study was aimed to provide a baseline for future studies, to give the big picture of clergy today rather than fine-grained analyses of particular issues. So there is much about specific pastoral problems and concerns that need to be studied in greater depth. One area that we missed in our study, regrettably was looking at church staffs—associate pastors and other types of staff members: how staffing needs are met in our congregations. Fortunately, Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce are currently doing a study that will include a look at church staffs as they do another round of surveys of U. S. congregations. Also, Mark Chaves is looking at staffing patterns and issues with data from his second National Congregational Study. These two studies will fill an

important gap that was not covered in our Pulpit and Pew survey. If I were to do it again I would also try to oversample sample clergywomen and African American clergy, as well as Hispanic and Asian American clergy. We need further insight into the unique issues and ministry experiences of these groups. We saw and said a lot about clergy roles and the paths that clergy follow in becoming pastors. I would like to see more in depth look at clergy beliefs and attitudes. We simply did not have the time or resources in our telephone survey to pursue these matters to the extent that I would have liked. And I’m particularly interested to explore further issues of clergy authority: How do clergy and lay members understand the clergy’s authority? How has this changed over time? How do clergy exercise their authority to lead? Clergy family life is also an issue about which much more research is needed. Many clergy have a happy and healthy family life; however, the growth of dual career families, time demands on clergy, financial stress because of typically low pastoral salaries, issues of home ownership versus church-owned parsonages, and other such issues are placing considerable strain on clergy families. Such issues have profound effects on clergy’s physical, spiritual and emotional health. I would also like to see someone undertake an ethnographic study of clergy work, shadowing a small sample of clergy in their day-to-day functioning, and probing with them why they do things the way that they do. Finally, I would like to see someone do a careful study of what lay people know about the clergy role, how they view their clergy and what they expect of them. These are a few of the issues that I would like to see studied in depth.