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# Catherine A. Caimano: Free Range Priests solve traditional church problems



Composite illustration by Catherine A. Caimano / SmartMockups

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An Episcopal “clergypreneur” innovates a new model of pastoral care in which congregations run their own churches and contract with her for services such as worship, Christian education and leadership formation.

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TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2019

A few weeks ago after Sunday worship, I was drinking coffee with parishioners at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Salisbury, North Carolina.

We were talking about how happy they are with how things are going in the congregation.

They mentioned how easily they laugh and socialize together. They talked about their deepening theology, how they are being challenged to think about their relationship with God in new ways.

They mentioned how many of them are designated lay ministers of some kind -- they read and assist during Eucharist; they officiate at morning prayer; they bring communion and visit with those who cannot make it to church.

We spoke at length about a beloved parishioner who had recently died after a grueling illness. Nearly everyone from the congregation had helped provide care for him and his wife, with visits, meals, prayers and gifts. At the funeral and after, they were present and prayerful with his grieving family, giving extraordinary care both to them and to each other.

By almost any measure, St. Paul's is an exceptional and flourishing congregation.

Except one: size.

The total membership of St. Paul's is about 30, though they have seen a solid 10 percent growth over the past two years. Three new members have become very active during that time. One is now in the choir, and another is on the vestry. St. Paul's is a congregation of modest size and modest means, yet they are thriving spiritually.

I know this because I am their "Free Range Priest."

My relationship with St. Paul's is part of my overall ministry as a "clergypreneur," a term coined by my friend [the Rev. Jay McNeal](#). I work in a variety of ways and places, online and in person, with congregations and individuals, to make one vocation from a variety of jobs.

Basically, I am like an Uber driver for your spiritual experience.

At St. Paul's, I serve two Sundays per month for a flat fee, plus they pay me hourly for pastoral care, Christian education and leadership formation, and other services as needed. I am not a "Sunday supply" priest -- basically, a substitute clergy person -- because I have an ongoing relationship with this community. Yet I am also not their official pastor.

I am not in charge of the congregation, I do not attend their leadership meetings, and I do not represent them. The congregation runs the church, and their ministry keeps it going. They contract with me for my own ministry, where and when it works best for them, and for me.

My ministry at St. Paul's, and my wider [Free Range Priest](#) ministry -- which includes Sunday supply, mentoring, coaching and more -- is born out of necessity. St. Paul's, and many churches like it (close to 20 percent of Episcopal churches the last time I checked), can no longer afford even a very part-time clergy salary. Only about half of mainline Christian clergy are currently being paid for full-time work. Many clergy work full time -- or more -- but are not getting paid for that work.

Both congregations and clergy are facing the reality of dwindling numbers, which creates a lot of tension for both. Clearly, we need to find creative solutions for congregations to continue to thrive and for clergy to continue to serve. The new vocation of Free Range Priest gives the congregations and the clergy the creative space to flourish.

Sometimes, people are put off by the title "Free Range."

"Like the chicken?" they ask.

Well, sort of.

"Free Range" might imply that I have no accountability or responsibility for what I do, but that could not be further from the truth. Like the chicken (and the lamb), I am still part of the flock. Nothing I do is outside the realm of how an ordained clergyperson serves -- bearing the sacraments, traditions and Scripture of the faith into the world. I am still fully responsible and accountable -- to both St. Paul's and the Episcopal Church -- for all that I do. The only thing that is different for me is where, how and with whom I do this.

As a Free Range Priest, I support congregations as they currently are, not as they wish they could be or once were. This is why my work with St. Paul's is so important. I am free to serve them in a way that supports the other parts of my ministry. And they are free to have ordained ministry that they can afford, without having to worry about how to pay a clergy salary.

“You have freed us from having ‘NPAS,’” one parishioner told me. “That means ‘no-priest anxiety syndrome.’”

Many congregations have this syndrome, because they fear they can't pay a salary and thus might lose their priest.

Priests (and other ordained ministers) have this fear, too. Lots of ordained clergy have no idea how they would support themselves and their families if they lost their full- or part-time clergy salaries. Many are looking for secular work, because ministry no longer pays the bills -- or the seminary student debt.

Lots of clergy -- more than 1 in 10, according to one study -- work without any compensation, because they love the church and want to serve God and God's people even if congregations can't pay them. But this is not sustainable for clergy or congregations. If we keep moving toward clergy not being paid, we will soon have no ordained ministry at all.

As a Free Range Priest, I now know that there is another way.

Congregations can afford to pay for ministry on contract, by the hour. I know, because I do it.

Clergy can find ways to share our ministry -- online and in person -- with those who need to know about the love of God but may not be attending church. I know, because I do it.

For so long, the mainline Christian congregational model has been the only way we could imagine clergy serving our vocation. But today, we have many other ways to consider being the church, and serving the church.

This is my whole ministry. It is healthier to have the freedom to consider how to bring the love of God to the most people -- and get paid for it -- than to have to keep upholding institutional and organizational models of church administration that are no longer working.

My ministry is to model and support what it might look like to serve fully as an ordained clergyperson in unexpected ways and places. In addition to serving St. Paul's, I serve as Sunday supply for other congregations. I teach and mentor preachers online with [Backstory Preaching](#); I coach and mentor clergy; I work with clergy, congregations and dioceses on challenges facing

today's church, particularly around digital and social media ministry. I also offer "2 Minutes of Good News" every Monday morning on my [Facebook page](#) and connect in other ways with those who are not necessarily believers or churchgoers.

Such fresh, adaptive approaches to where, how and whom clergy serve are crucial for the mainline Christian church to thrive in the 21st-century world.

Free Range Priests aim to find ways to make ministry sustainable, and to help share good news in new places and ways. Creative ministry is the future of the living church.