

Pulpits, pews, and CEOs

ANYBODY WHO KNOWS anything about religion knows that people in pulpits have a different view of the world than people in pews.

Years of data and front-line reports have yielded two clichés. The first is that most ministers in the old mainline Protestant churches are more liberal on matters of doctrine and morality than their people. And the second is that most evangelical ministers are more conservative than their people.

Differing Views

"There's actually a lot of truth in both of those, especially if you fine-tune the second one," said Ron Sellers, president of Ellison Research (www.ellisonresearch.com) in Phoenix. "It's probably more accurate to say that most evangelical pastors are more conservative than the lives their people are living. . . .

"But any way you look at it, there is a gap between the pulpits and the pews. What fewer people seem to realize is that there is an even bigger gap between pastors and the people who are leading their national churches."

Thus, Sellers and his team recently raised eyebrows with data reporting that 40 percent of Protestant ministers say some of their beliefs clash with official positions taken by their national denominations or conventions. Theologically, 19 percent say they are more liberal and 23 percent say they are more conservative, while 59 percent mesh with their leaders. Politically, 16 percent of the ministers say they are more liberal and 27 percent more conservative than their national churches.

This 50-state survey was not large

enough, said Sellers, to provide individual results for all of America's Protestant flocks.

But there were glimpses of life in some of the trenches. For example, United Methodist ministers were the most likely to clash with their leaders. Only 33 percent felt their theological positions matched the hierarchy, with 25 percent saying they are more liberal than the denomination and 42 percent saying they are more conservative. A mere 29 percent felt their political beliefs matched stances taken by the national church.

Complexity and Diversity

The survey raised more questions than it answered. One reason is that most of the labels that have defined Protestantism in America are becoming increasingly blurry. Clergy simply do not know what "conservative," "liber-

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al," "evangelical," "charismatic," "traditional," and the newer term "seeker-friendly" mean anymore.

"Things are too complex out there," said Sellers. "Even when you try to define the basic words like 'evangelical' or 'mainline'—everything breaks down. Just to give one example, there are many conservative, evangelical pastors out there in the Episcopal Church, even though that seems to make no sense whatsoever when you look at the national church."

The bottom line: A sign in a church's front yard is no longer a dependable indicator of what is happening inside

the doors.

Listening to a few sermons may not even do the trick, since many ministers seem to be using highly personal dictionaries. The survey found "seeker-friendly" Lutherans, "charismatic" mainline Presbyterians, a few Southern Baptists who do gay union rites, and many other examples of clergy and their churches that refuse to fit into familiar boxes.

Nevertheless, many clichés did ring true. Conservatives preach longer than liberals. Older, smaller congregations are more devoted to traditional hymnody than younger, larger congregations. Bible Belt ministers like religious television more than their Frost Belt counterparts. Church leaders in the National Association of Evangelicals are twice as likely to vote Republican as those in the National Council of Churches.

But the overall impression left by the data, said Sellers, is one of diversity. This is especially true among mainline Protestants, where hot issues—most linked to marriage and sex—are dividing clergy into warring camps of painfully similar sizes. This is making life brutal for national-church leaders.

"It's like in a large corporation, where the CEO is surrounded by people who share that vision," said Sellers. "The further you go down the food scale, the more diversity you're going to find. By the time you reach the mailroom, people are going to have all kinds of opinions about what the CEO is saying.

"Precisely the same thing is happening today in all of these national denominations. No one is sure what the vision is and what all the words mean." ■

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Terry Mattingly teaches at Palm Beach Atlantic University and is senior fellow for journalism at the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities. He writes this weekly column for the Scripps Howard News Service.

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