



Review of *Stuck: Why Clergy are Alienated from their Calling, Congregation, and Career... and What to do About it* by Todd Ferguson and Josh Packard, 2022

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In *Stuck: Why Clergy are Alienated from Their Calling, Congregation, and Career... and What to Do About It*, Todd Ferguson and Josh Packard have written a thoughtful and timely account of the difficulties pastors face in congregational ministry. They bring a new angle to the topic, while bridging sociological theory and down-to-earth reflections on pastoral ministry. They explore the ways that clergy's individual struggles are shaped by structural forces: namely, social Darwinism, capitalism, and secularization. They examine three levels in which pastors feel “stuck:” their calling, their congregation, and their career. In doing so, they paint a convincing picture of how pastors feel indebted to their profession, while at the same time feeling alienated from their sense of calling to their vocation. *Stuck* can help us understand the pre-existing structures and difficulties that pastors faced prior to the onset of COVID-19, and help us imagine the ways that COVID-19 potentially exacerbated them. And while the cases presented in this book are not necessarily representative of the discontent that all pastors feel, Ferguson and Packard offer an important contribution in their invitation to reconceptualize how we understand the theoretical role and meaning of congregational life, clerical leadership, and divine calling in our present social context.

The greatest contribution that Ferguson and Packard offer in this book is their exploration of the complications and contradictions of the ways that pastoral calling relates to congregational work. A basic research question of the book is how the occupational duties of a pastor can get “in the way” of one's calling (18). Importantly, this book is not about clergy losing their faith or their call. Rather, it is about how the call that clergy feel does not match the current social organization of congregations and congregational work. Ferguson and Packard argue that the way that congregations and congregational work are currently organized is

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problematic. They found that when pastors began their careers in ministry, they realized that their jobs were not only about spiritual leadership or pastoral care, but also about leading a “rationalized, bureaucratic organization” (68). Ferguson and Packard highlight a very interesting contradiction: that pastors feel called to an idealized understanding of congregational leadership that may not exist. The authors present the locus for change at the congregation level, because the reality of congregational work does not fit the sense of calling that pastors feel, and because congregations are being shaped by societal forces in ways that do not fit that sense of calling. However, another solution would be to think about the ways institutions—especially seminaries where future pastors are trained and congregations where future pastors are formed—shape and guide the formation of pastoral calling and pastoral imagination. Seminaries and denominations would do well to study this book to understand the ways that their preparation of pastors does and does not serve to form their call to and expectations for congregational ministry.

Despite the strengths of this work, Ferguson and Packard make some overstatements that are worth correcting. The authors take the difficulties their sample experience—who are an especially dissatisfied group and not representative of the national population of clergy—and draw conclusions as if all clergy are experiencing them. Though I believe the authors would say that all clergy experience (to some extent) the tension between their personal calling and the social structuring of congregational ministry, it is not accurate to say that all (or most) pastors find themselves in the same position of deep discontent as the respondents in this study. The authors acknowledge this themselves, when they admit that only “around 1 to 2 percent of both Protestant and Catholic clergy leave the profession each year” (114). However, this admission is far into the book, and the ramifications are not explored. Recently gathered data by the National Survey of Religious Leaders in 2019–2020 found that 97% of clergy reported being very or moderately satisfied with their work as a religious leader. Further, when asked how often they considered leaving religious work all together, 66% of clergy said never. Only 2% of clergy said they considered leaving “very often” (Chaves et al., 2022). Though *Stuck* gives a helpful overview into the 2% who are extremely dissatisfied in their jobs, the conclusions the authors draw concerning clergy dissatisfaction and struggle are overstated. Thus, the title of their book would more accurately be, *Stuck: Why Some Clergy are Alienated from Their Calling, Congregation, and Career... and What to Do About it*.

Overall, Ferguson and Packard have written a book that will help seminaries, denominational leaders, academics, and pastors themselves understand some of the deeper context of pastors who are really struggling—and, ideally, help these parties to offer these “stuck” pastors support and care in that difficult place. Further, they have raised important questions about the social construction of pastoral calling and the ways this construction does and does not fit the current organization of the religious congregations in America.

Reference

Chaves, Mark, Anna Holleman, Joseph Roso, and Mary Hawkins. 2022. *National Survey of Religious Leaders*. Data file and codebook. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, Department of Sociology.

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