

Teachers Who Left LCMS Schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a Thrivent grant project designed to obtain information from ordained and commissioned church workers who left parish ministry, in order to understand why individuals left, and what could be done to improve church worker retention. The initial phase of the project, which surveyed LCMS clergy as part of a multi-denominational study of Protestant clergy, is documented in a forthcoming publication from the Pulpit and Pew project at Duke University. A pre-publication paper reporting the results of the clergy survey is available through the Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support. (See *EXPERIENCES OF PROTESTANT MINISTERS WHO LEFT LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRY*, by Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger.)

Since the Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support was interested in obtaining data on commissioned teachers who had left LCMS schools, we obtained permission from Dr. Hoge to adapt the clergy questionnaire for our survey of teachers. A copy of the questionnaire is attached to this report.

The sample for this survey was defined as all commissioned teachers who left a position at one of our LCMS schools, primary through secondary, between January 1, 1998 and December 31, 2002, for reasons other than retirement or taking a district or national office position. Rosters and Statistics identified 408 commissioned teachers who left teaching positions during the five year period we defined. Of the total mailed questionnaires, 19 were returned undeliverable, and 89 respondents indicated they were not eligible (i.e., they indicated they were retired, were still in teaching positions, or were actively seeking teaching positions). Of the 300 remaining eligible recipients 149 (49.6%) returned questionnaires, of which 141 (47%) were useable. The following results are based on the responses of the 141 completed questionnaires. Since we have responses from fewer than half of the sample, we must assume the possibility of potential bias, in that those who left under the most difficult circumstances are probably under-represented. Given that qualification, this is the largest study ever available of a national sample of commissioned teachers who have left teaching in LCMS schools.

II. RESULTS

While we will not discuss all of the data detailed in the summary tables attached to this report, the key findings will be noted in the text tables woven into the narrative. Where significant associations between items were found, using the Chi square (χ^2) statistic, they are noted.

The respondents were overwhelmingly female (83%), and were married (84% in a first marriage). Most entered teaching in their early twenties, and left by their early thirties. One in five (22%) currently teaches in a public or private school. One quarter of the respondents held a second job in their last LCMS teaching position. For more demographic information on the sample, see the summary tables.

Now to the key findings.

A. The vast majority of the respondents felt good about entering the teaching profession.

Nearly nine-out-of-10 (88%) agreed “strongly” or “somewhat” with the statement “I am really glad that I entered teaching.” In written comments, many of those who had left the classroom for family-related reasons said they look forward to returning to teaching at some point in the future.

B. Primary motivations for leaving teaching.

Respondents were asked to use their own words to describe their primary motivation for leaving teaching. The vast majority of participants (80%) gave one or more written responses. We coded up to three. (See TABLE A, following page.)

1. Nearly half of those who gave a primary reason for leaving cited family issues.

Nearly one third (32%) said they left to have, or care for, children, and another 11% said they left to relocate due to a job-related transfer by the spouse. The remainder cited other family-related issues, including caring for elderly family members.

2. Another quarter (24%) cited conflict or stress related to their last teaching position.

The presence of conflict in their last school/congregation was reported by a majority of these former teachers, with one third (33%) indicating there was major conflict.

3. Thirteen percent of respondents said they found another ministry position. Nearly one in seven teachers moved from a teaching position to some other type of ministry, either in the same congregation or in another setting.

**TABLE A:
MAIN MOTIVATION FOR LEAVING
YOUR LCMS TEACHING POSITION
(IN RESPONDENT’S OWN WORDS)
(n = 113)**

<u>Reason/Motivation</u>	<u>% of Respondents</u>
Family-related issues	48
Childcare	32%
Spouse relocated	11
Family illness	<1
Conflicts/Stress	24
Found another position	13
Personal health	4
Other	17

C. Major Stressors

One major stressor for many respondents, especially women, was the lack of personal/family time, and the ongoing struggle to negotiate work and family demands. (See TABLE B, following page.) These so-called “boundary” issues were independent of any other conflict issues (i.e., they were no more or less likely to be cited by those who experienced congregational conflict). In other words, even in those situations that were relatively free of organizational conflict, many teachers encountered these struggles over work/family issues.

For example, two-thirds (67%) of respondents indicated they were “somewhat” or “very dissatisfied” with the ease with which they could maintain separation between their teaching duties and personal/family time. And 62% said they had a “great” or “somewhat of a problem” having a private life apart from their teaching role. An even larger share of respondents (73%) had a problem “finding time for recreation, relaxation, or personal reflection.” Finally, over half (56%) “very” or “fairly often” felt their work in the school did not permit them to devote adequate time to their family.

While it is not clear that work/family conflicts, in and of themselves, were major motivators for many teachers to leave teaching, what is clear is that many teachers, especially women, deal with such issues as a major stressor in their day-to-day lives.

**TABLE B:
ITEMS RELATED TO PERSONAL/FAMILY TIME
AND LAST POSITION**

Percent dissatisfied with ease in maintaining separation between teaching duties and personal/family time	67%
Percent who had a problem with having a private life apart from teaching role	62%
Percent who had a problem finding time for recreation, relaxation or personal reflection	73%
Percent who often felt their work in the school did not permit them to devote adequate time to their family	56%

Another major source of stress for a significant minority of teachers involves conflict. One third of these respondents indicated the presence of major conflict in the congregation they served in the last two years of teaching, and nearly one quarter (24%) cited conflict as a primary motivation for leaving LCMS schools. The most frequently cited sources of conflict are listed below, in TABLE C. “Pastoral leadership style,” “Finances,” and “Issues involving the school or faculty” were each selected as sources by half or more of those who experienced conflict.

**TABLE C:
SOURCES OF CONFLICT IN LAST CONGREGATION SERVED**
(Respondents could check more than one reason)

Sources marked by at least 20% of respondents:	%
Pastoral leadership style	53
Finances	52
Issues involving the school or faculty	51
Conflicts between staff and/or clergy	33
Renovation of an existing building	32
Changes in worship style	27
Changes in music styles	21

Those respondents who indicated their last teaching position involved a congregation in conflict were significantly more likely to report lower levels of satisfaction or more problems than those who did not report the presence of conflict. Many of those same measures of satisfaction or problems were also related to the perceived presence or absence of “vision” displayed by the school leadership. In other words, levels of satisfaction seemed to be higher among those former teachers who had served in a school where there was “a clear vision and a strong commitment to

achieving it.” Conversely, the extent of problems seemed to be lower among teachers who served in such schools in their last teaching position. For example, TABLE D, below, presents those items related to satisfaction with various aspects of the last teaching position, the proportion of respondents marking “very” or “somewhat satisfied” and whether each item was positively (+) or negatively (-) associated with congregational conflict or school vision. In other words, those most likely to indicate they were satisfied with their overall effectiveness as a teacher in their last school were significantly more likely to also report that school had a clear vision. Levels of satisfaction with “relations with other teachers,” “spiritual life,” “relations with lay leaders,” and “relations with the pastor” were all negatively associated with conflict and positively associated with a perceived sense of vision for the school.

**TABLE D:
LEVELS OF SATISFACTION AND ASSOCIATION
WITH CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT OR SCHOOL VISION**

<u>Satisfaction with . . . (in descending order)</u>	<u>% Very/ Somewhat</u>	<u>Extent of Conflict</u>	<u>Presence of Vision</u>
Your overall effectiveness as a teacher in this particular school	88		+++
Relations with other teachers	80	--	++
Spiritual life	79	--	++
Relations with lay leaders in congregation	74	--	++
Your non-teaching responsibilities	73		+
Relations with the pastor	66	--	++
Support from your district officials	66	-	
+/-	x ² significant at <i>p</i> < .05		
++/- -	x ² significant at <i>p</i> < .01		
+++/- - -	x ² significant at <i>p</i> < .001		

Relative satisfaction with “non-teaching responsibilities” was positively related to the presence of vision, while satisfaction with “support from district officials” was negatively related to the extent of conflict.

Conversely, a number of problems related to relationships in their last school were also related to the extent of conflict or perceived lack of vision (see TABLE E, below). Relationships with other faculty, relationships with the Board of Education, with the principal, other school staff, and the pastor, were all impacted by the presence of conflict and/or the absence of vision.

**TABLE E:
RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEMS IN LAST TEACHING
ASSIGNMENT AND RELATIONSHIP TO CONFLICT OR VISION**

<u>Problem in last teaching assignment</u>	<u>Very little/ No Problem(%)</u>	<u>Extent of Conflict</u>	<u>Presence of Vision</u>
Relationships with other faculty	70	–	++
Relationships with Board of Education	79	--	+
Relationship with the principal	69		+++
Relationships with other school staff	83	–	+++
Relationship with the pastor	69	--	

+/- x^2 significant at $p < .05$
 ++/-- x^2 significant at $p < .01$
 +++/-- x^2 significant at $p < .001$

In addition, former teachers who indicated they experienced conflict, or perceived a lack of vision, in their last school were more likely to say they “very” or “fairly often” experienced stress as a result of “dealing with individuals who (were) critical of their work.” They were also more likely to say they experienced stress because of the challenges they faced in their last school. Those who perceived a lack of vision were also more likely to agree that “the demands of the administration were unrealistic.”

Finally, several issues that a significant minority of teachers indicated were important in their decision to leave an LCMS school were related to the presence of conflict and/or lack of vision. For example, over half (57%) of the respondents said feeling “drained by the demands on me” was of “great importance” or “somewhat important” in their decision to leave.

Teachers who had experienced major conflict or perceived a lack of vision were more likely to cite this feeling. Those who perceived a lack of vision in their last school were also more likely to say feeling “lonely or isolated” was an important issue in their decision to leave teaching, or that they felt doubts about “my abilities as a teacher.”

There is some evidence that the extent of conflict and the perception of the presence or absence of vision for the school are related. See TABLE F, below.

<u>PERCEIVED VISION OF SCHOOL</u>	% RESPONDENTS REPORTING ...		
	<u>NO CONFLICT</u>	<u>MINOR CONFLICT</u>	<u>MAJOR CONFLICT</u>
No clear vision, goals, direction	7.7	7.7	84.6
Had ideas, but no clear vision	20.6	35.3	44.1
Had a clear vision, but not enough commitment to carry it out	22.0	46.0	32.0
Had a clear vision and a strong commitment to achieve it	45.2	45.2	9.7
x ² significant at <i>p</i> < .001			

Among those teachers who indicated their last school had “no clear vision, goals, direction,” over 80% reported major conflict in the congregation. Conversely, those who indicated their last school “Had a clear vision and a strong commitment to achieve it,” less than 10% reported the presence of major conflict. Note the perception of a clear vision does not preclude the possibility of conflict, since over half of the respondents who claimed their school had a clear vision still reported some conflict, but they were nine times LESS likely to report major conflict.

We cannot tell, given the data here, the direction of causation. That is, it is unclear whether the presence of major conflict prevents the development of a clear vision, or the lack of vision paves the way for the development of major conflict. Intuitively, one would suspect that the former is more likely than the latter.

III. DISCUSSION

Clearly these respondents left teaching in LCMS schools for situational reasons. Nearly ninety percent agreed they were glad they entered teaching.

While major career changes, such as leaving teaching, are most likely the result of several factors, it is clear that the largest set of motivations for these respondents revolved around family issues, primarily child rearing.

However, for a significant minority of teachers who left LCMS schools, conflict and stress were major motivations “pushing” them out of the classroom. For some, primarily women, the need to juggle family and professional demands were a major stressor. For others, conflict, which may or may not have directly involved them personally, created stress in key relationships and reduced their overall job satisfaction. Consistent with key findings in the TEACHING 2000 STUDY, helping teachers deal with conflict and the stress of family/professional demands on their physical and emotional presence may significantly aid teacher retention in the years to come.