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Phillip E. Hammond
University of Arizona

Albert Gedricks
University of Wisconsin

Edward J. Lawler
Cornell University, ejl3@cornell.edu

Louise Allen Turner
University of Wisconsin

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Clergy Authority and Friendship with Parishioners

Abstract

[Excerpt] Without challenging the general truth of the observation, one can nevertheless note considerable variation in the friendliness of clergymen. Is that variation owing simply to "personality" differences, or are there further structural features that differentially apply within the occupation? This paper argues that there *are* further structural features which can usefully be employed in understanding the friendship patterns of clergy with parishioners.

Keywords

clergy, behavior, personality, friendship, organizational structure

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CLERGY AUTHORITY AND FRIENDSHIP WITH PARISHIONERS

PHILLIP E. HAMMOND
University of Arizona

ALBERT GEDICKS
EDWARD LAWLER
LOUISE ALLEN TURNER
University of Wisconsin

Because subordinates very likely feel ambivalent toward the authority of superordinates (Merton and Barber, 1963: 111), those in control are hesitant to expose their authority more than is necessary. Since the occupational site is often the necessary locale where authority is exercised, it is in off-the-job sites—so-called informal contacts—where leaders can most easily avoid followers. Those in authority seldom seek friends among those subject to their authority.

Homans (1961: 311) states the case as follows:

From loneliness, from burden of decision, from the ambivalence of importunity of his followers, the leader will seek occasional escape in the society of men with whom he can relax and be at ease. In the nature of the case, the only such society open to him is the society of his equals: people who have nothing to ask of him.

Blau (1964: 263) notes that an “essential element of professional and bureaucratic detachment is the absence of exchange relations with clients,” just as Merton (1957: 202) before him observed that the “personality pattern of the bureaucrat is nucleated about this norm of impersonality.”

As professionals with authority in organizations, clergymen might be expected to behave in their leadership capacity as do

secular leaders—with considerable hesitation to mix informally with parishioners. Certainly this is the position of Moberg (1962: 508).

Professional responsibilities impede close friendships in the community he [the clergyman] serves. Efforts to prevent all semblance of favoritism may prohibit a sense of belonging or of feeling wanted when he has no friend in whom to confide at times of personal and professional problems.

Without challenging the general truth of the observation, one can nevertheless note considerable variation in the friendliness of clergymen. Is that variation owing simply to "personality" differences, or are there further structural features that differentially apply within the occupation? This paper argues that there *are* further structural features which can usefully be employed in understanding the friendship patterns of clergy with parishioners.

THE THEORY

It is worth noting that the general case involves those whose authority is rational-legal, to use Weber's term. And rational-legal authority, based as it is on expertise and expedience, might be expected to be precisely that kind of authority most vulnerable to the challenges arising from informal contact. After all, if the boss demonstrates his poor choice of irons on the golf course, or his inability even to read a roadmap, it might logically call into question his general competence and, thus, authority. Or, to draw from another sphere altogether, knowledge that one's superior is just as inadequate a husband-father as anyone else can only have the effect of jeopardizing his authority on the job. At the least, it cannot enhance any rationally derived basis for leadership.

Other kinds of authority are not rationally derived, however. Charismatic authority, by definition, is irrational, and traditional authority is only in the long run challenged by

demonstrated incompetence. More important in the present discussion, both of these types of authority are overwhelmed in Western church history by the kind of authority Weber termed charisma of office. Indeed, the doctrine of apostolic succession—whereby clerical authority given by Jesus to the Apostle Peter is handed down through successive generations—was, for Weber, the model for his charisma of office notion.

Church history records considerable variation in whether, when, and to what extent the idea of apostolic succession was rejected, however. Formally, of course, Roman Catholicism has never rejected the idea; the Pope is a direct ecclesiastical descendant of Peter, and lesser clergy occupy sacred offices by virtue of ordination and the “laying on of hands” by bishops through whom their authority is transmitted. The Anglican Church rebelled against Roman authority, but its organizational integrity remained, and it simply adopted a somewhat broader view of apostolic succession. Lutheranism began as a revolt against Catholicism, of course, but soon began developing into a “denomination.” Its quick success at achieving established status in a number of European societies led its theology to incorporate notions of sacred authority and hierarchical command. Farther to the left yet are the antinomian groups or those representing breakaways from already existing Protestant bodies. These denominations exhibit the greatest rejection of any notion of charisma of office.

Any modern society contains a number of churches located along a continuum according to their doctrine of the sacredness of the clerical office. Not infrequently, this continuum is said to range from “high” church to “low.” In organizational terms, the variation is from “episcopal” to “congregational” arrangements. At the high, episcopal end of the continuum, the clergy role is seen largely as priestly. Occupant of a sacred office, the clergyman’s chief function is liturgical and sacramental. His duties are satisfactorily discharged with his performance of specified rites.¹ At the low, congregational end, by contrast, the role is largely pastoral. Denied a sacred office and thus sacramental duties, this kind of clergyman engages in few

rituals. His obligation is largely didactic, his role that of counselor.

Rational-legal authority can be and has been added at all points along the continuum, of course; regardless of their high or low, episcopal or congregational, status, denominations have not escaped bureaucratic rationalization. Clergymen possess rationally defined expertise, just as the dentist or barber, and parishioners can be said to view as expedient the assignment of pastoral functions to their leaders. The development of licensure, seminary preparation, and regional boards is the very stuff of which bureaucracy consists. There is no doubt but that almost all established denominations now regard specialized training as a major basis of their clerics' authority.²

But where educational expertise is almost universally regarded as a source of rational-legal clergy authority, a second source of rational-legal authority has been adopted (at least in Protestantism) according to the degree to which "high church" authority has been lost. This authority source might be called exemplary behavior, which, in the context of modern Western history, is defined by norms of inner-worldly asceticism, or puritanism. As Weber (1930) argued, the Reformation replaced the idea of an elite striving for perfection in a monastery with the idea that every man was made a monk. Clergy, understandably enough, have been called upon to exemplify this puritanism to a greater extent than have laymen. But the degree to which their *authority* rests on exemplary behavior is inversely proportional, it is argued here, to the "highness" of the office they are thought to occupy. Puritanical standards, in other words, substitute for charisma of office as an authority base.

In this respect, one can agree with Bowers (1963: 9) when she states that "clergy suffer terribly from this need to be what they feel they should be, what they know their congregations expect them to be and what they know or feel themselves to be." But one need not agree with her following statement that "all religions of Judeo-Christian origin place fearsome demands on the minister; the burden of the ideal self-image recognizes no denominational differences." For if the present analysis is

correct, the degree to which Protestant clergy feel the burden of exemplary behavior is a function of their church's position on a high church/low church continuum—that is, a function of the degree to which they are denied the authority of charisma of office. It is this proposition which forms the first link in the argument being advanced here.

The second link, given the opening paragraphs of this essay, is easily anticipated: To the degree a clergyman's authority rests on his conformity to puritanical standards rather than occupancy of sacred office, he will hesitate to form intimate, personal, "off-the-job" friendships with parishioners.

The thesis, then, contains two parts: (1) a low church perspective on clergy authority will likely be accompanied by puritanical standards, and (2) acceptance of puritanical standards will likely inhibit a clergyman's tendency for friendship with parishioners (see Smith, 1953, for a similar thesis, though with a very small data base).

THE DATA

OVERALL ORIENTATION: HIGH CHURCH VERSUS LOW CHURCH

Mail questionnaires were sent to 496 ordained, seminary-trained, Wisconsin clergy during spring 1969. Of these, 350 or 71% were returned. Only full-time, ordained ministers were contacted, drawn from four denominations selected to represent considerable range on the high church/low church dimension. From high to low, these denominations are: Episcopal, Lutheran (American Lutheran Council), American Baptist, and Assembly of God.³ All respondents thus claim authority by virtue of specialized training, but the sample includes persons who think of themselves, at one extreme, as "priests" of a church still formally committed to the "laying on of hands" as ordination into the apostolic succession and, at the other extreme, as "pastors" of a church coming very much out of Protestantism's "left wing." The Constitution and Bylaws for

Local Assemblies [of God], for example, not only caution governing boards of deacons that "all major matters affecting the church should be passed on to the congregation as recommendations [only]"; it also warns the clergy that:

The Pastor should also understand that his choice as Pastor does not permit him to assume arbitrary or dictatorial powers. . . . He should be looked up to and respected as the leader. In the event he is elected to serve for an indefinite time, he should not presume that indefinite means permanent [General Council of Assemblies of God, n.d.].

Branching out from many of the same historical roots, Baptists also stress pastoral service to an autonomous congregation rather than priestly authority, though their longevity as a denomination results in a distinction between clergy and laity which is somewhat stronger than in the Assemblies of God (Harrison, 1960). Nearer the Episcopal Church in its notion of sacred authority is the Lutheran Church with its history of "established" status in several European countries. As will be seen presently, the differences among these several denominations are most definitely reflected in their clergy's conceptions of the ministerial role authority, though variation *within* denominations is also found.

Measurement of ministerial role authority occurs along three dimensions of a presumed high church/low church continuum. The first of these dimensions expresses quite directly the charisma of office notion. Respondents were asked:

- (1) Which of the following statements best captures your view of your ordination?
 - (a) My ordination is basically a ceremony, indicating only that I have had specialized training.
 - (b) My ordination is a "commissioning" which, if I chose, I could relinquish.
 - (c) My ordination provides me with sacred orders which, even if I chose, I could not relinquish.

Any persons who chose "c" as the response was regarded as "high" on this dimension and given a score of 2. All others were then divided on the basis of their answers to another question:

- (2) Did you have a "call" to the ministry?

Those who said "Yes, I had a call that was very real" were regarded as "low" and given a score of 0. All others were regarded as in the middle and given a score of 1.

The second dimension of the presumed high-low continuum—liturgical orientation—is measured by three questions:

- (1) In your view, how important a part of the worship service is communion? (one point given for "absolutely essential")
- (2) In addition to responsive readings, does your congregation engage in unison recitations (e.g., affirmations, creeds, etc.) as an act of worship? (one point for "yes, regularly")
- (3) Considering the whole spectrum in your denomination, where do you locate yourself on a "high Church-low Church" continuum? (Answerable on an 8-point scale. One point given for checking one of the first three "high" positions. A similar question but referring to all of Protestantism had preceded this question.)

The third dimension of the high-low continuum might be called the "laicization of theology," the notion that, salvation being every man's responsibility, he must not rely on the offices of the church. Historically known as the doctrine of *fides explicita*, the idea is that one may not "subject one's own conviction to religious authority" (Weber, 1963: 194-195), but must train oneself in dogmatics. In the present day, differences with respect to this doctrine are found in various views of how much the church must therefore "teach" its people the explicit tenets of their faith. Three questions were asked:

- (1) How important a part of the worship service do you regard the sermon? (one point given for "The major element in the service." Affirmative answers to this and the next two questions reflect a "low" church view, of course, and are given negative weight therefore in the overall index)

- (2) How important an aspect of your ministry do you regard Bible and theological study by your adult laymen? (one point given for "A vital part, more important than any other")
- (3) One of the debates historically within Protestantism has been over the degree to which laymen must be knowledgeable and explicit in their faith rather than relying on the "grace" provided them by the church. Which of the following best captures your theological position in this debate:
 - (a) Only the church can supply grace; salvation is unlikely outside the church.
 - (b) While theological literacy and understanding of one's faith are important, the church nevertheless provides a necessary context for a layman's religious life.
 - (c) The church can assist a man in his search for salvation, but his own theological understanding is more important.
 - (d) The church is simply the body of people; man's salvation depends entirely on his own knowledge and faith in God. (one point given for either c or d)

These three dimensions are strongly related, as one would expect. Persons who view their office as sacred are also more likely to stress liturgy in worship and less likely to regard the explication of laymen's theological knowledge as a critical task for the clergy. That the "attitudinal" measure is reflected in behavior is shown in the following two facts: (1) 100% of those 25 respondents scoring lowest (0 or 1) on the overall index report "never" wearing a clerical collar, whereas not one of those 65 respondents scoring highest (7 or 8) gave that answer. (2) All of those 65 highest respondents "always" wear a robe or other special garb in the pulpit, whereas none of the 25 lowest selected that answer. Not surprisingly, then, the measure of high church/low church orientation is strongly associated with respondents' denominations, as Table 1 shows.

The relationship is obvious, but the two phenomena are clearly not synonymous. Lutheran clergy, selected so as to yield a larger sample, are fortunately most widely distributed along the continuum. That being the case, the analysis to follow can be checked on an intra- as well as interdenominational basis.

TABLE 1
The Distribution of High-Low Church Perspectives in
Four Denominations

Church Perspective		Denomination			
		Assembly of God	American Baptists	Lutheran	Episcopal
High	8	0%	0%	1%	64%
	7	0	0	6	21
	6	0	4	18	5
	5	2	16	31	8
	4	16	14	22	2
	3	25	28	16	2
	2	30	21	6	0
	1	21	16	0	0
Low	0	3	1	0	0
	n=	(56) ^a	(57) ^a	(165) ^a	(83) ^a

a. In 9 cases, respondents failed to identify their denominations.

CHURCH ORIENTATION AND PURITAN STANDARDS OF CONDUCT

The argument being made has as its first proposition the assertion that as the sacred authority implied in a high church perspective declines, authority based on conformity to inner-worldly ascetic standards of conduct will increase. "Puritanism" today is different, needless to say, from earlier puritanisms, and the range of behaviors which might (but might not) fall under a clergyman's personal code is enormous. Respondents were asked about several areas of conduct, however, and the index of Puritanism is based on answers to these four questions:

- (1) Some clergy have independent sources of income and thus are able to acquire luxuries such as expensive cars, gourmet food, or would travel. In general, how do you feel about this?
 - (a) It's their choice. If that is what they want, they should be able to do it.
 - (b) I have ambivalent feelings about such matters but probably feel it is rather unwise behavior for clergy.
 - (c) Such behavior is inappropriate for a clergyman.
(one point given for either b or c)

- (2) Many a "preacher's kid" has complained that he has to behave better than other children his age. What do you think best describes this situation?
- (a) The minister's family should be an example to the whole community.
 - (b) Since his family's behavior does reflect on the church, like it or not, his children should be on their toes.
 - (c) There is no reason why a preacher's kid should behave any better than others' kids.
- (one point given for either a or b)
- (3) Suppose you heard of a clergyman who, along with his wife, was avant-garde, e.g., was a jazz buff, wore "mod" clothes when the occasion permitted, etc. How would regard such a clergyman?
- (a) That kind of behavior really isn't appropriate.
 - (b) On balance I would disapprove.
 - (c) If that is what he prefers, let him do it.
 - (d) I would applaud him.
- (one point given for either a or b)
- (4) "A clergyman should maintain higher standards of personal conduct than other people." Do you:
- (a) Agree strongly?
 - (b) Agree somewhat?
 - (c) Disagree somewhat?
 - (d) Disagree strongly?
- (one point given for either a or b)

Scores thus range from 0 (low) to 4 (high) on the measure of Puritanism.

The shift from high church to low church is a long-term change, with various "positions" on the continuum themselves becoming institutionalized through time. For this reason, no relationship is expected in this group of clergy between one's age and his high-low church perspective. What can be described as rebellion against puritanism, however, *is* related to age, and this rebellion goes on within clergy ranks. Holding age constant, then, Table 2 indicates that the proposition—puritan standards will more likely be found as a high church perspective declines—is strongly supported.

TABLE 2
 Within Three Age Groups, the Percentage High (score 3-4) in
 Puritanism According to High-Low Church Perspective^a

% High in Puritanism Among:	Church Perspective								
	Low								High
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age 35 and under	— (0)	80 (5)	78 (9)	64 (11)	37 (8)	28 (25)	26 (19)	11 (9)	8 (12)
36-50	100 (1)	80 (5)	65 (20)	56 (32)	40 (30)	30 (23)	25 (8)	14 (7)	38 (16)
51 and over	100 (3)	82 (11)	64 (11)	69 (16)	83 (18)	50 (18)	78 (9)	38 (8)	54 (13)

a. This table is replicated using Lutherans alone.

While it is true, therefore, that younger clergy are less puritanical than their older colleagues, especially among high churchmen, low churchmen are noticeably more puritanical than their high church colleagues. This unbalanced pattern, moreover, helps support the argument being advanced, even though data through time would be necessary to be sure the following explanation is correct: The sharp decline in puritanism from old to young reflects generational influences on clergy to shed their severe standards of conduct. This shedding can be done more readily by high churchmen because their puritanism is vestigial. For low churchmen, however, puritanism is not a vestige, but a critical replacement for authority lost through the shift from high to low church perspective. High churchmen, then, are freer to allow generational influences to operate on them, whereas low churchmen must contend also with ecclesiastical influences.

PURITANISM AND FRIENDSHIP WITH PARISHIONERS

The final term in the theory is properly a *predisposition* to act, not the act itself. The argument deals not with *whether* clergy are friendly with parishioners but the *ease* with which such intimate relations are formed. Obviously actuality is

reflective of propensity, but the friendships actually found in any parish might also result from such factors as the clergyman's age, his length of tenure and marital status, parochial ecology, socioeconomic status of clergy and laity, and so forth. Thus, the notion being measured is a clergyman's readiness, his willingness, to become affectively involved with his parishioners. Three questions were used in the measure:

- (1) If you were teaching in a seminary, preparing persons for the parish ministry, how would you counsel students who ask you regarding their forming intimate friendships with parishioners?
 - (a) I would advise them to avoid such friendships as far as they can.
 - (b) I would only caution them that such friendships could interfere with their ministry.
 - (c) I would suggest that such friendships can, under many circumstances, enhance their ministry.
 - (d) I would advise them that their best ministry is likely to be carried out in such friendships.
(one point given for either c or d)
- (2) How do you feel about parishioners' calling you by your first name?
 - (a) I strongly prefer that they do not.
 - (b) I rather prefer that they do not.
 - (c) I don't care one way or the other.
 - (d) While I don't care, I'm glad they feel free to do so.
 - (e) I rather prefer that they do.
(one point for c, d, or e)
- (3) If you were facing crucial personal decisions of, say, a family or philosophic nature, are there one or more parishioners to whom you would go for counsel? (one point given for yes, definitely or yes, probably; other responses included possibly, but not probably; very unlikely; no)

The resulting index scores range from 0 to 3 and are well related to the kinds of items one would expect. Clergy scoring high, for example, are more likely to entertain and be entertained by parishioners, more likely to call and be called by

first name, more likely indeed to report friendships with parishioners.

The second part of the argument can now be addressed: whether puritanism has the effect of inhibiting clergy readiness toward friendliness. The answer is quite clearly affirmative. For young and old, high churchmen and low, the higher the puritanism, the less likely are these clergy to report a readiness to become friendly with parishioners. Table 3 supplies the evidence.

The data are reasonably compelling, but the relationship is not particularly strong, especially when compared with the relationships reported in Tables 1 and 2. A reason might be inferred from Table 3, however. It can be seen that the readiness to form friendships is greatest precisely among those who, though expected to hold puritanical standards, in fact do not—low churchmen countering the trend by scoring low in puritanism. Such persons are rare, as the base figures show, but their enthusiasm for a friendly ministry is apparent. Why might these persons be especially predisposed toward friendship?

TABLE 3
Within Age and Church Perspective Categories, the
Relationship of Puritanism and Readiness to
Form Friendships with Parishioners^a

% Scoring High (2-3) on Readiness to Form Friendships Among:		Puritanism		
Church Perspective	Age	Low (0-1)	Medium (2)	High (3-4)
High (5-8)	41 and older	58 (26)	43 (14)	42 (38)
	40 and younger	62 (55)	38 (16)	50 (18)
Low (0-4)	41 and older	70 (17)	45 (20)	43 (86)
	40 and under	73 (15)	64 (14)	36 (28)

a. This table is replicated using Lutherans alone.

The answer would seem to require a specification of the argument with which this investigation began: Change from a high to a low church perspective was accompanied by a puritanism inhibiting friendship all right, *but it also was accompanied by an increased propensity to make friendship a vehicle of the ministry*. Puritanism generally serves to suppress that propensity (probably to the anguish of those clergy), but when puritanism is not present, then low church clergy are readier even than their high church colleagues to form friendships with parishioners.

Though the questionnaire anticipated the difference between a readiness for friendships and actual friendships, it did not anticipate this *ex post facto* distinction—between the *desire* for parishioner friendships and the psychological *freedom* to form them. This latter distinction cannot therefore be tested with the data at hand. It does help explain a puzzling pretest experience, however, arising from two conversations about ministerial golf. A low church clergyman reported that he prefers to play golf with other clergy; he feels better able to vent his feelings over muffed shots that way, though he regards games with parishioners as “opportunities” to minister and seldom turns down such invitations. A high churchman, by contrast, asserted that he never plays with parishioners “because none of them is good enough.” The former has the desire but not the freedom to engage in friendly parishioner encounters; the latter has the freedom but not the desire.

Initially, these casual comments had been interpreted as instances of differing readiness or propensity for intimate contact with parishioners—the former minister feeling a barrier, the latter feeling so unfettered that he could even choose golf partners freely. Now, in retrospect, it seems more accurate to see the first man as torn between the desire to use friendship as a means of ministry and his inhibitions about exposing his nonministerial self. The second man, on the other hand, has no ambivalence about parishioner golf, but neither does he evidence much desire to be in intimate contact with his laymen. For the first man, “all” of his world is appropriately a

ministerial stage, some of it therefore having to be curtailed off so he can relax (Whitley, 1964: ch. 7). For the second man, the ministerial stage is but one of several stages; relaxation is no particular problem since the ministerial "urge" need not spill over onto those other stages.⁴

This anecdote has been exaggerated in order to highlight the distinction; one cannot infer ministerial style from golfing comments alone, of course. The distinction, however, would seem to be very real, explaining why, without independent measures of *desire* versus *freedom* to form parishioner friendships—using instead a single "readiness" measure—the present research found only modest support for its theory.

CONCLUSION

Modest though it was, it was support nevertheless. At the least, one can reject as a sole explanation of variation in clergy friendship patterns the random "friendliness" of clergymen, for clearly that friendliness is systematically related to clergymen's perspectives on their authority and thus their denominations. The gossip among Assembly of God seminarians during their training, we were told, frequently turns on the advisability of wearing clerical garb—almost a heresy in reverse. Yet, in an occupation where loneliness can be endemic, defined by an ideology promoting that loneliness through puritanical inhibitions, perhaps any gesture—even a turned collar—becomes a possible source of relief. In general, of course, the friendship behavior of clergy resembles that of other leaders; intimacy between superiors and followers can be difficult and therefore may be rare. But, as this report shows, such difficulty within the clergy is felt in varying degrees. For some—with a strong puritanical sense—minister-parishioner friendship will be quite stressful. For others—whose authority still inheres in the sacredness of their office—no stress will be experienced at all.

NOTES

1. The novels of Graham Greene involving Roman Catholic priests reflect this role conception (though, as has been wryly noted, the corresponding conception of God is a remarkably Lutheran one). In *The Power and the Glory* (1962: 263), for example, the alcoholic priest comes to realize that, despite his own personal failings, his priestliness has been maintained. He says, "But it doesn't matter so much my being a coward—and all the rest. I can put God into a man's mouth just the same—and I can give him God's pardon. It wouldn't make any difference . . . if every priest in the Church was like me."

2. Even the Friends (Quakers), who traditionally recognized no class of "clergy," now have a seminary in the United States for the training of specialists in Meeting (parish) management.

3. In order, the response rates were: 68%, 65%, 85%, and 72%.

4. Even the notion of "desire" for parishioner friendship can be further specified. It may involve a personal "need" for intimacy or a feeling that one "ought" to use friendship as a ministerial vehicle. The assumption in this research had been that friendship *need* is more or less constant, and clergy differ in their readiness to have that need met by parishioners rather than others. Historical development of puritanism, in that case, has led to an increase in the *obligation*, not the need, to use friendship as a ministerial vehicle. In either event, desire—whether from need or obligation—is inhibited by other features of puritanism.

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