

Single and Pulpit-less

Ken Briggs | Mar. 22, 2011 NCR Today

As article in today's *New York Times* says that single Protestant ministers face bleak job prospects because congregations prefer that their pastors be married.

It reminded me of an earlier era when the assumption was that hiring a minister with wife was getting "two for the price of one."

Much has changed since then among the old Protestant stock. The big one is that these traditions, once called "mainline," have lagged behind the energetic and well financed evangelical boomers for the past 30 years. Among the old established types -- Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, etc. -- a generally liberal theological outlook has gone through the rigors of opening the clergy to those once shut out -- among them women, gays and the unmarried.

The article unfortunately confuses this openness with the restricted-to-male policy of evangelicals. It is hardly surprising that conservative, family preoccupied evangelicals would keep their clergy married and single. That is not nearly the case in the old-line churches, but the Times story mixes them all together.

The article cites the low percentages of single clergy and supposes that it is due to bias against singleness across the board. The real question is how many singles are applying to old-line and evangelical churches, respectively, how they compare to other candidates and what proof of alleged bias consists of.

In any case, this kind of article shouldn't be used to convince Catholic priests that prime pulpits await them in Protestantism if they get married or that single Catholic women should rush into marriage with any better hopes. Nope.

Speaking of preparation, high school seniors are hunkering down awaiting the letters of acceptance or rejection from colleges. Mitch Albom in a column this week tries to calm the waters by assuring them that it doesn't make all that much difference -- it's the what the student makes of college rather than the "name" of the college making the student. But his wise counsel isn't likely to go far in a climate where such elusive and unreliable qualities attached to certain colleges -- "elite" and "prestigious" and "top rank" -- are markers of self-worth and accomplishment or brands of inferiority. Nonsense, of course, but it's a measure that obsesses both parents and students.

Not only is this out of line with the reality of higher education, it raises a more troubling question. If this country has such superior colleges and universities, admission to which is tantamount to entry into heaven, why are we as a nation, both domestically and internationally, so hamstrung in our efforts to solve even one major problem?