

**News and Current Events :: With Few Jobs, an Unmarried Pastor Points to Bias****With Few Jobs, an Unmarried Pastor Points to Bias, on: 2011/3/22 0:02**

March 21, 2011

With Few Jobs, an Unmarried Pastor Points to Bias By ERIK ECKHOLM

Like all too many Americans, Mark Almlie was laid off in the spring of 2009 when his workplace downsized. He has been searching for an appropriate position ever since, replying to more than 500 job postings without success.

But Mr. Almlie, despite a sterling education and years of experience, has faced an obstacle that does not exist in most professions: He is a single pastor, in a field where those doing the hiring overwhelmingly prefer married people and, especially, married men with children.

Mr. Almlie, 37, has been shocked, he says, at what he calls unfair discrimination, based mainly on irrational fears: that a single pastor cannot counsel a mostly married flock, that he might sow turmoil by flirting with a church member, or that he might be gay. If the job search is hard for single men, it is doubly so for single women who train for the ministry, in part because many evangelical denominations explicitly require a man to lead the congregation.

Mr. Almlie, an ordained evangelical minister who lives in Petaluma, Calif., has also had to contend with the argument, which he disputes with scriptural citations of his own, that the Bible calls for married leaders. "Prejudice against single pastors abounds," Mr. Almlie wrote in articles he posted on a popular Christian blog site in January and February, setting off a wide-ranging debate online on a topic that many said has been largely ignored.

Some evangelical churches, in particular, openly exclude single candidates; a recent posting for a pastor by a church on Long Island said it was seeking "a family man whose family will be involved in the ministry life of the church." Other churches convey the message through code words, like "seeking a Biblical man" (translation: a husband and a provider).

"I'll get an e-mail saying 'wonderful résumé,'" Mr. Almlie said in an interview. "Once I say I'm single, never married, I never hear back."

Federal anti-discrimination law specifically exempts religious groups when they hire a person for religion-related activities, and courts have been loath to interfere in ministerial employment, said David Middlebrook, a lawyer and a specialist in religion law in Dallas and Fort Worth.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said it was unfair to accuse churches of discrimination because that word implied something "wrongful."

"Both the logic of Scripture and the centrality of marriage in society," he said, justify "the strong inclination of congregations to hire a man who is not only married but faithfully married."

Mr. Mohler said he tells the students at his seminary that "if they remain single, they need to understand that there's going to be a significant limitation on their ability to serve as a pastor."

Women seeking positions in mainline Protestant denominations like Episcopal and Presbyterian have seen the doors widen: By 2009, 28 percent of senior pastors in mainline churches were female, according to a survey by U.S. Congregations, a nonprofit research group in Louisville, Ky. But a preference or firm requirement for male pastors persists among conservative churches (mainly evangelical), with fewer than 2 percent of senior positions held by women.

Single pastors remain uncommon, especially among conservative churches, where the figure is one in 20, according to the same survey. Among mainline Protestant denominations, roughly one in six senior pastors are single.

Amy Mark is, like Mr. Almlie, ordained by the Evangelical Covenant Church, and like him has searched widely in the evangelical world for a permanent position. After seven years with only some temporary pastoral stints, she finds herself working in a crafts shop to get by.

Her denomination's policy of accepting women as leaders has not been taken to heart by many local churches, she discovered to her chagrin. Being single was a major second obstacle.

In more than 50 interviews, she said, "they often acted like I'm not quite whole because I'm single," questioning whether she could counsel couples or parents. At the same time, some also asked whether, if she did get married and have a family, she would be able to continue with a demanding job as a pastor.

Ms. Mark is now helping to start a new ministry for teenage mothers in a low-income area east of San Francisco—a project that has lifted her spirits, she said, after years of feeling hurt and betrayed.

Scott Cormode, professor of leadership development at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.—where Mr. Almlie received his master's of divinity before he worked as an assistant pastor in California—said he did not believe that the bias against single pastors was as pervasive as Mr. Almlie contended. He noted that finding a position was always hard in a crowded field.

But Jackson W. Carroll, emeritus professor of religion at Duke Divinity School, suggested that the preference for marriage might have been hardened by the social upheavals of recent decades.

"Evangelicals are responding to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which they saw as a real threat to the family," he said. "A pastor with a wife is less likely to be a homosexual and more likely to mirror the traditional image of a family."

Matt Steen, 35, encountered concerns about the possibility of sexual misconduct during the year he fruitlessly sought a new position as a youth pastor. "I had some pretty candid conversations with churches," he recalled of his interviews in 2006. "They'd say, 'Tell me about your wife and kids,' and I'd say, 'I haven't met them yet.'"

Many interviewers seemed to fear that he might "do something stupid, like get involved with a student," he said. "I told them that I understand the concern, but that I've seen married pastors make the same mistakes."

Mr. Steen later married and for family reasons moved to Long Island, ultimately leaving the ministry. He now markets accounting services to churches.

Some religion experts suggested a less charitable reason for the marriage requirement: the expectation that a pastor's wife will provide unpaid labor, perhaps leading the choir or teaching Sunday school.

"Sometimes, parishioners have an unspoken preference for a happily married male with a wife who does not work outside the home," Cynthia Woolever, research director at U.S. Congregations, wrote in a 2009 article. "She also volunteers at the church while raising wholesome and polite children."

Mr. Almlie notes that during the first 1,500 years of Christianity, "singleness, not marriage, was lauded as next to godliness." Martin Luther, in his break with Rome, preached against mandatory celibacy and got married himself.

As he searches for a job, Mr. Almlie is also looking for a life partner. He has tried Christian dating services and even eHarmony, but nothing has clicked. He says that he understands the desire to have a model family, but that he faces too many myths and fears.

"Ultimately, I do begrudge not being hired," he said.