

Engineers switch to ministry

By John Zingaro

One is Baptist, one is Catholic.

As seminarians, they were known as "second-career students." That is, they didn't study to be clerics until they had already pursued other livelihoods.

The Rev. Nate Williams of Wilkins, pastor of First Baptist Church of Oakland, had been a metallurgical engineer; the Rev. Joseph Mueller of St. Bernard Church in Mt. Lebanon had been an industrial engineer.

The increasing number of their types becoming clerics is such that Mueller's ordination class last summer had the highest average age of any in the history of the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese — 34.

At Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, the average age for an entry student has risen from the mid-20s in the early and mid-1960s to 31, says the director of admissions, the Rev. John White. Most of the students are Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists and "as high as 50 percent of the students are second-career individuals."

Why do they make the switch? What type of ministry do they pursue?

Williams and Mueller had pursued technical careers at the encouragement of their fathers. Their fathers had known difficult economic times and, as Mueller says, "We really trusted our parents' wisdom in those days." An engineering degree would mean a secure job. "They knew the reality of the Depression," Williams says.

Both graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1960s. Both, however, had developed serious doubts about vocations as engineers. Mueller, in fact, left school to join the Navy Reserves for a year and a half before finishing his last semester in chemical engineering.

Williams, the son of a Welsh stone cutter, had come to Pitt from a tiny town in upstate New York and became one of a handful of students chosen for full scholarships from General Motors Corp. During his second year, however, he had an English professor, Richard Tobias (who is still teaching at Pitt) whose reading list included Whitney Griswold's "Liberal Education and the Democratic Ideal."

"That began to open me up to a variety of issues," Williams says. "I learned that education could not only lead to a better job but could open you to values and ideas. I had never known that."

Back then, Williams observes, his Baptist church was "excessively fundamentalist, which means it was also anti-intellectual." Back then, as well, the pursuit of science and math was an "American reaction to Sputnik; competing with the Russians was consciously stated as a goal."

Newly attracted to liberal arts, Williams considered changing his major, but "my father was so distressed by that" he finished his studies in metallurgical engineering. "My father wasn't domineering over my life," Williams says, "it's just that I had so much respect for him."

As his father had hoped, Williams landed a secure job. He was given the pick of three positions with the Timken Roller Bearing Co. in Chicago: research, production or sales. He was made the sales and service engineer for the Chicago region. "I spent a lot of hours on the road, and I began to read. One night, I looked across the bookshelf at what I had been reading, and it was top-heavy with biblical and theological studies. I talked with my wife, who wasn't pleased with the traveling, and she concurred in my interest in going to seminary school."

At 25, the father of two toddlers, he entered Northern Baptist Theological Seminary near Chicago. At that time, Chicago was a hotbed of anti-war activity, the site of the Democratic National Convention. "I hadn't thought about the Vietnam War," he says. "One day, one of my classmates [who had been active in peace demonstrations] looked at me and said, 'Do you even consider what you are called to be as a Christian?' I began to read the Scriptures in a new way."

Today, at 42, he readily recalls re-reading the 58th chapter of Isaiah and cites the verse in which the prophet instructs believers, "Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor."

When Williams returned to Pittsburgh five

years ago as pastor of First Baptist Church in Oakland, he literally opened the church's doors. A concert to raise funds for an anti-nuclear group was permitted in the sanctuary; a British journalist who had visited Nicaragua was allowed to lecture on Central American politics at a community meeting in the first-floor auditorium; training sessions have been held in the church for the Pittsburgh Head Start program; wives of international students from the universities hold fellowships there, as do Chinese students from Carnegie-Mellon University, worshipping in Mandarin; the church serves as the meeting place for chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous and the American Association of Retired Persons.

Parishioners concerned about the architecturally remarkable church being vulnerable to "outsiders" were asked by Williams, "Is our church a museum or a mission?"

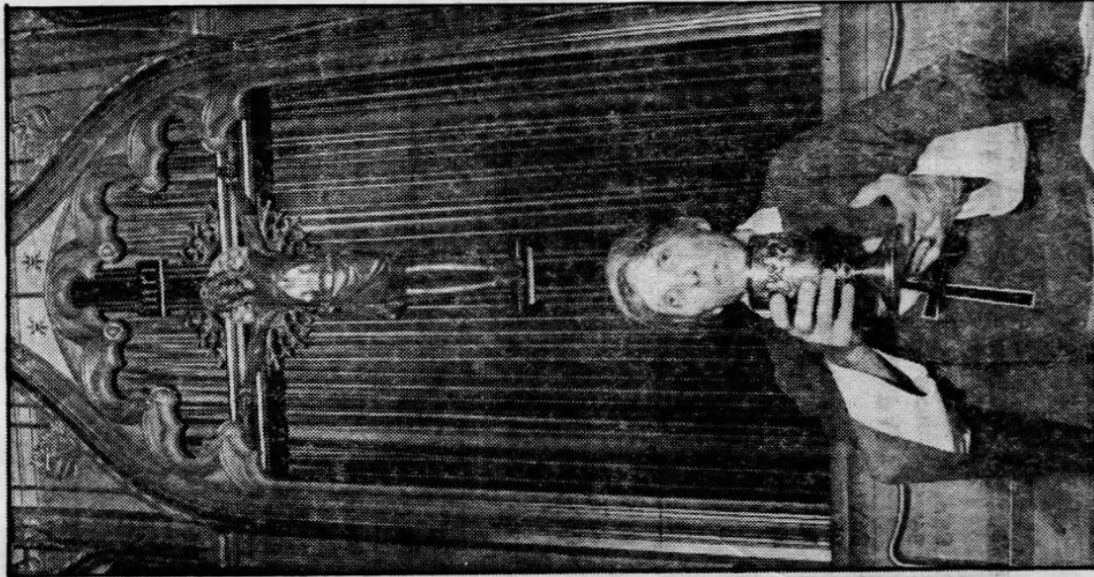
Williams had worked seven years as a metallurgical engineer before being ordained at 29.

Mueller, however, had worked nearly a full 20 years for three firms, mostly as an engineer who advised industries on fire-protection designs. Coming from a religious family — his twin brother is a priest — Mueller had often thought of becoming a priest himself but, when his brother entered the seminary, the task of paying for the family house fell upon him. Both parents had died, and he became "so wrapped up trying to keep responsible jobs that I just didn't have time to think about it."

It wasn't until, years later, as a wave of layoffs occurred at his workplace, Mueller began privately wishing that he, too, would be laid off. It would be the surest way to free him to make the decision. But his job wasn't cut. Still, he began to "understand that I was called into the priesthood." He quit his job at 43, entered St. Mary of the Mount Seminary at Emmitsburg, Md., and, at 47, was ordained last summer.

Having been a homeowner and a bread-winner, Mueller is able to "relate to problems more closely."

"It does help," he says. "I think people see in me that I am fairly quick to understand their problems."



James Klingensmith/Post-Gazette

The Rev. Joseph Mueller holds a chalice in St. Bernard Roman Catholic Church in Mt. Lebanon.