



Congregations Nurturing Future Leaders

By Elizabeth Mitchell Clement

In a previous issue of *Leading Ideas*, Robert K. Martin connects pastoral leadership with gardening. One look at a neighbor's garden reminds him that the bulbs he took care to put away the previous summer would not be their glorious selves that spring because they were still in the basement. Many other things were done but there would be no blooms for Easter. What is not planted will not grow – nature is clear on this. And we should take it as a lesson for the church and all its leadership.

Congregations and their leaders are to the next generation of pastors what gardens and gardeners are to tulips. They are living systems in which labor in one season brings new life in another. For more than 50 years, the Fund for Theological Education has worked to assure that the next generation of leadership for the church and the academy is “planted” by identifying and encouraging young people to explore the vocation of ministry, and by providing fellowships to support their seminary and doctoral studies. More recently, the Fund's Calling Congregations initiative has turned its attention to the “garden,” that is, to the congregations that grow leaders.

Gardening as a metaphor has drawn us beyond *if* or *what* is planted to *how* the planting is done and under what conditions. This new image brings with it new questions about the church, its leadership, and its proper work: What is the connection between our efforts and what finally comes to fruition? What are churches planting? What do we hope will sprout? If the church does not seed a new generation of leaders, where will they come from? If the church really is like a garden, who is called to labor in it?

Calling Congregations wants to know more about the churches that send young people to pastoral ministry, and to encourage their “gardening” work. The call to ordained ministry is often understood as a private communication with God, and it is. But the call is almost never heard without others who teach us to listen and wait, and who help us know how to respond. While God surely calls, God does not work alone.

This metaphor offers us another way to see congregations—less as a machine with well-oiled, very active pieces and programs doing this and that, and more as a working farm, with people depending on each other for nourishing relationships, growing in God's purpose together. In a church that hopes to serve God and neighbors, cultivation never stops.

Calling Congregations are places where people—especially young people—can grow into Christian vocation, including the vocation of pastoral ministry. Across traditions, ethnic/racial groups, and geography, Calling Congregations are noticeable for the ways they are:

- Rich in relationships to support grace, growth and development of people over time and all life circumstances. They apprentice people as they grow toward the fullness of life.
- Known as places where something important is at stake for creation and each other. They invest time, money and opportunity in discernment and response to life choices.
- Actively resisting what thwarts the fulfillment of God's vision of shalom and abundance. They invite and prepare people for discipleship, especially ministry.
- Making “God-sense” of life and what people do. They name people's gifts and work as God sees them, and set them free to flourish.
- Healthy places for pastors and those who lead the church. They care for clergy and share leadership.



A pastor friend in Washington, DC, recently shared with me his fear that there may be no one to baptize his great-granddaughter. His concern is real. Research by the Lewis Center and others confirms that fewer and fewer young persons are responding to God's call to ordained ministry. This stark reality calls us to be careful stewards of the church by cultivating future generations of leaders. Congregations that send people into ordained ministry tend to do three things – *notice*, *name*, and *nurture*. They pay attention to young leaders in the congregation; invite them to hear God's call by naming their gifts; and nurture them in the congregation and beyond, supporting and empowering young people for ministry.

Perhaps churches should mimic the rhythms of the harvest in our life together – like a community garden – preparing the ground, planting seeds and tending to plants. With her tangible resources and the amazing array of gifts bestowed upon her people, the church should be an area of extraordinary fertility. Perhaps if we saw ourselves called to gardening . . .

When Jesus prepared the leaders of the next generation, he took the rhythms of a long, slow walk, a purposeful conversation for learning and teaching amidst the human and social realities they met on the journey. That congregation – powered by the promise of new life and life eternal – had a natural rhythm to it.

That model for congregational life remains a fertile, generative image for the future church and its leaders. If more young people are to answer the call to ordained pastoral ministry, our congregations and leaders must take up the careful tending that promises blooms in seasons to come.

As Paul assured the early church, some will plant and others will water, and God will give the increase. (1 Cor 3:6) Thanks be to God.

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