



Why Young Clergy Matter

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr., and Ann A. Michel

In recent decades, many North American churches have suffered a serious and sustained decline in the number and percentages of clergy under the age of 35. In many denominations, the percentage of younger clergy has slipped close to 5 percent or even less. While middle-aged and older pastors bring vital gifts to the practice of ministry, it is troubling that the church allows so many younger persons to ignore God's call.

There are a number of important reasons why the pool of clergy must include a proportionate number of younger persons. The declining number of young clergy deprives the profession at both ends of the age spectrum. The new ideas, creativity, energy, and cultural awareness often exhibited by the young are lost. And with more persons entering ministry with fewer years to serve, the wisdom and experience that can come with long tenures in ministry are also in jeopardy.

Church leaders who gathered recently to discuss clergy age trends were asked the question "Why are young clergy important?" They responded with comments such as, "Younger clergy have an ability to see the world and the church through new eyes," "They bring enthusiasm, idealism, and fresh perspectives to the practice of ministry," and "Young clergy are more open to innovation and more nimble in working with new ideas."

In many instances, young clergy bring tremendous energy to the demands of ministry because of the mental and physical stamina associated with youth. The schedules and routines of the young may be more flexible, and they are available for and interested in innovative challenges holding significant risk. To put it in common vernacular, older people tend to be more set in their ways.

Young clergy also have certain advantages in reaching out to their own generation. They are more likely to speak the language of an emerging generation whose world view and communication modes differ from those of their parents' generation. They show high sensitivity to diversity and other cultural realities in today's world. Just as important, the mere presence of young clergy in a church symbolizes that younger persons are valued as leaders and participants.

These factors help explain why young clergy seem particularly well-suited to the task of church planting. Research conducted in the Episcopal Church has found that pastors between the ages of 24 and 35 were the most successful in founding churches that reach 250 or more in worship attendance within seven years. An informal poll of congregational development officials in the United Methodist Church also showed a preference for church planters aged 25 to 35.



Research on the differences between younger and older seminary students sheds light on some other attributes of younger clergy. While older students tend to bring important experience in congregational life, younger students tend to enter seminary with better academic records in college or previous graduate studies, and they are more likely to have educational training in disciplines such as theology, religion, philosophy, and other humanities traditionally regarded as appropriate preparation for theological study. And preliminary data from Lewis Center research on pastoral effectiveness indicate that laity tend to rate young clergy as highly effective, even though they may not be as self confident as their older peers.

But just as youthfulness has advantages in ministry, so does experience. Leadership is a form of expertise that has a long gestation period. In most fields, attaining the status of expert requires at least ten years of extensive experience and training. Without sufficient numbers of younger persons entering the profession, there will be fewer clergy in the pipeline who have achieved the longevity of service required for the most challenging pastoral assignments and denominational leadership roles. While the growing number of middle-aged and older persons who enter ministry bring many important gifts, it is also true that many will not achieve the longevity of service needed for some of the most demanding ministry roles such as serving as lead pastor of a very large congregation.

The dearth of young clergy is contributing to an impending leadership crisis in yet another way. The growing percentage of elders who are 55 and older raises the specter of a tidal wave of retirements hitting the system in the not-too-distant future. The aging of the church's clergy pool poses other practical and institutional challenges, as well. There is widespread concern among pension and health care administrators in many denominations about the costs associated with having so many middle-aged and older persons in the system. They see less money flowing into pension trusts at the same time that more is being paid out.

Having a proportionate number of young persons entering ordained ministry is vital to the vibrancy of the church, as well as its ability to attract younger congregants and form new congregations. And it is essential for developing the long-term experience in ministry necessary for the most challenging assignments. Young clergy do, indeed, matter.

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VIGNETTE

Everyone Welcome?

By Gary A. Shockley

Many congregations truly do believe they are open to everyone until someone different comes along making them feel uncomfortable.

I recently visited a church where, and I kid you not, they had two posters on the wall near the entrance to the sanctuary with pictures of certain clothing styles that were on one poster unacceptable and on the other acceptable to wear. As I walked inside, I was met by another sign that said, "No food or drink beyond this point. This means YOU!" Just beyond that sign was another one that read, "Those who truly honor Christ kneel when they receive Communion." The real kicker was the words printed in their bulletin: "Everyone welcome!" Nobody can make this stuff up.

I meet people all the time – faithful people, smart people, good and decent people – who have walked away from the church because of petty things like this and, unfortunately, not so petty things. They have come up against our barricades – our rules, regulations, dress codes, and expectations of behavior – and have returned home muttering beneath their breath, "I don't belong there. I will never do this again." Their experience of us is anything but real. They see us as stuffy, pretentious, often out of touch with reality, and just plain inauthentic. Unchurched people (as we call them) are smarter than we think. They see through our phoniness. They can smell hypocrisy a mile away.

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The Right Question

Leaders do not need answers.

Leaders must have the right questions.

Job interview questions often give little useful information because the questions and answers are so predictable. These questions sometimes give a glimpse of the candidate that can be revealing.

What did you learn in your first job (or last job)?

Tell us about a work success you have had, what happened, and what you learned from it.

Tell us about a problem you faced and how you solved it.

Tell us about a work failure you have had, what happened, and what you learned from it.

The paradox of aging is that every generation perceives itself as justifiably different from its predecessor, but plans as if its successor generation will be the same. *Charles Handy*