

Summit focuses on need to recruit young clergy

May 9, 2006

A UMNS Report
By Linda Green*

United Methodist leaders are forming an advisory team to help develop a plan for recruiting young clergy - a group that one expert calls an endangered species in the church.

Forming the team was proposed at a May 1-3 summit that brought experts in the recruitment and development of young clergy leadership to Atlanta. Once it's formed, the team will devise a national plan that will go into effect during the next year.

All 75 summit participants were invited to become part of the advisory team, which will help the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry in determining the next steps for young adult clergy development, according to the Rev. Meg Lassiat, director of student ministries, vocation, and enlistment at the board in Nashville, Tenn.

The summit was sponsored by the board and the Pastoral Leadership Search Effort through a grant from the Fund for Theological Education and the Lilly Endowment. The board is accepting applications for membership on the team.

Lassiat said attention is being given to the lack of young clergy in the United Methodist Church because studies indicate only 4.69 percent of elders are under age 35, while 50 percent of elders are over age 50, a statistic similar in most mainline denomination.

"While a number of factors have been identified as causes that may contribute to the low numbers of young adult clergy, at this time no one issue has been identified as central to that problem," she said.

'Endangered species'

Young clergy are "United Methodism's endangered species," said the Rev. Lovett Weems, director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at United Methodist-related Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington. He identified several issues the church must address to remove them from the endangered list.

"The church itself must change," Weems said during his summit presentation. The issue of enlisting younger quality clergy must be seen side by side with the quality and vitality of the church itself, he said. The church's overall health is the most important factor determining who comes into ordained ministry, he added.

"Organizations tend to get the leadership they deserve, not the leadership they need," he said. "Until the United Methodist Church demonstrates that it can reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people in life-transforming ways, current clergy age trends will probably not change."

He told the summit that the church's ordained ministry process needs to be both "renamed and reframed," and the language of placing new clergy on probation needs to be rethought.

"New terminology less associated with the criminal justice system would help," he said. "The entry process also needs to be reframed from a hurdle to overcome to a blessed entry into the high calling of ordained ministry."

Competing vocations

Susan Hay, director of youth ministries at the United Methodist Board of Discipleship, calls the lack of young clergy in the denomination "a mixed bag."

"With today's young people, there are more vocations they see where their Christian commitment can be lived out, so they feel called to live out this sense of Christian vocation in the profession they feel they have something to contribute," she said.

The church is "not doing a good job mentoring our young people who may sense a call to the clergy in helping them discern and respond to this call," she said. "We discourage when we don't help them find adequate financial support in both their undergraduate and graduate pursuits."

The members of the proposed advisory team will be diverse in terms of experience and perspectives in the area of young adult leadership development. The team will:

- develop a plan for the denomination's future efforts;
- help carry out a denominational plan for vocational discernment and young leadership development;
- research issues surrounding leadership development and young adult clergy; and
- act as a liaison with vocationally related ministries, such as regional and denominational events, Web site development and so on.

Meet the millennials

Hay also provided insight about the characteristics of the millennial generation - the 76 million Americans born between 1982 and 1999 - a population larger than baby boomers and generation X-ers.

Millennials, she said, are a diverse population, with about 8 percent identifying themselves as multiethnic and more than 55 percent saying they have a friend of another ethnicity. Another characteristic of this age group is that more than 75 percent of their time is spent in "structured activities due to working parents."

Hay also said millennials are "passionately tolerant and spiritual, but without focus, which makes them vulnerable to the countless counterfeits in their world." They also are not quick to trust adults, a trait that shapes how they relate to authority, and perceive truth and directions with which they live their lives, she said.

According to Hay, a paramount need is relationships. Millennials rely strongly on close personal networks of friends and family and have a deep desire to be connected with others, she said.

Millennials are already impacting the United Methodist Church through their "enthusiasm, hopefulness, willingness to take leadership roles, strong mission/outreach sense and their desire for deep spiritual experiences."

Also providing leadership was Bishop Woodie White, bishop-in-residence at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, who preached about call during the opening worship service of the meeting. Socorro de Anda, president of the Lydia Patterson Institute in El Paso, Texas, highlighted how the Lydia Patterson School has been effective in developing young leaders for colleges and churches.

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