

Ways Established Church Leaders Can Work with Young Clergy

It is incumbent upon those who are older to reach out to their younger colleagues. Those who are younger are not nearly as likely to feel they are in a position to initiate dialogue. Conversations occurring only within generations will normally center on whether “we” are going to have to change to accommodate “them” or whether “they” are going to shape up and see things “our” way. The hand of invitation must first be extended by incumbent leaders to the leaders of tomorrow. And if the established leaders reach out with authenticity and a willingness to learn, then emerging leaders will respond enthusiastically.

Research shows that people from different generations are far more alike than different in their views, values, hopes, and dreams. So why is there generational conflict? While basic values may be the same, how various generations express those values tends to differ greatly. For example, when young people dress casually, some older people may view that as a sign of disrespect. But the young people mean no disrespect; they just want to dress casually. What is often seen as a conflict of values is more likely to be not about values at all but rather how people express their values.

Listening is Key

Listening could be the most effective thing that denominational leaders and other established clergy could do to improve the world of young clergy and to make their judicatories more attractive and hospitable for younger clergy. Listening is simple and easy to do, but it will not happen unless there is planning. One encouraging sign is that many bishops, superintendents, and other ministry leaders are initiating regular conversations with younger clergy. It is crucial to remember that, for younger people, respect comes from being heard and taken seriously. No effort will yield greater rewards for the time expended.

Trust is Essential

Credibility is the foundation upon which all effective work builds. An established leader wins trust slowly. The young will give established leaders a degree of deference because of position. However, the credibility needed for partnership in ministry must be worked out among people.

There are three building blocks for establishing trust across generations. Relationships are primary. Every encounter with another person serves to enhance or decrease trust. There is no better way to build credibility than spending time with other persons, getting to know them, and giving them a chance to get to know you. Another element is character. Every time another person sees consistency between words and actions, respect grows. Knowing that another person has the highest integrity adds to trust. The third element is competence. In addition to good personal relationships and demonstrated character, established leaders must also be seen as competent in helping address the important challenges being faced. When young leaders see these three factors present in established leaders, there develops a sense of trust that makes common mission possible.

Common Mission Links Generations

If there is a leadership vacuum, the natural tendency will be for all generations to view whatever happens in the church through the lens of their generational perspectives. The challenge for established leaders is to reframe the discussion around a compelling common purpose. Then everyone is challenged to view their distinct generational strengths through the lens of the common mission. Differences among generations that once seemed a liability now appear as an abundance of diversity that we can bring to the task of implementing the common goal. This provides a means for persons across generations to gather around the task and thus live their way into a new way of understanding each other as they work together. It permits people to form relationships that leverage the differences each generation brings. Extraordinary things can be done when people work side by side to pursue what all consider to be God's vision for them.

Adapted from The Crisis of Younger Clergy by Ann A. Michel and Lovett H. Weems, Jr. (Abingdon Press, 2008). Used by permission.

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