



# The Crisis of Younger Clergy Deployment Dilemmas

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

**A**t a recent pastors' school with several hundred clergy present, a bishop asked all the clergy under the age of 35 to stand. Four or five stood. The bishop said, "All the rest of you look very carefully at these young clergy persons. In our conference, they are an endangered species. Be very good to them."

In recent decades, many North American churches have suffered a serious and sustained decline in the number and percentage of clergy under the age of thirty-five. In many denominations, the percentage of younger clergy has slipped close to five percent or even less.

Recent research by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary revealed that the percentage of United Methodist elders age thirty-five and under has decreased from 15.05 percent in 1985 to 4.92 percent in 2007. And because the pool of elders is smaller today than it was in 1985, the drop off in actual numbers has been far greater than in percentage. Looking back further, the trend is even more pronounced. According to Division of Ordained Ministry estimates, in 1973, 21.2 percent of United Methodist clergy were under the age of thirty-five.

One of the major problems contributing to the decline in

numbers and satisfaction of younger clergy is the issue of deployment. While many young clergy feel their appointments are a good fit with their gifts for ministry, a significant group would agree with Lyle Schaller that too often "talented ministers are 'set up to fail' by being invited to serve churches where their gifts, skills, experience, personality, and other characteristics do not match the needs and culture of that congregation at this point in its history." The result too often is disillusioned pastors and unhappy members. More strategic deployment of young clergy is arguably the best way the denomination can use the "scarce resource" of young leadership to enhance its outreach among younger generations, while at the same time helping young clergy survive and thrive in ministry.

## *Pay Attention to Young Clergy Appointments*

Recently, a group of United Methodist bishops met with David McAllister-Wilson, president of Wesley Theological Seminary, to discuss the declining number of young elders. When they asked McAllister-Wilson, "What can be done?" he turned the question back to them. "When you made your

appointments this year,” he asked, “at what point in the process were the appointments for the young coming out of seminary considered?” The bishops replied that these appointments are usually made last; that is how the system tends to work.

When bishops and cabinets do not consider the appointment of young clergy until the very end of the process, the options are severely limited. “It may be that we can no longer afford to operate this way in the future,” said McAllister-Wilson. “If young clergy are indeed our ‘endangered species,’ then it follows that attention needs to be given to them earlier in the process when a broader range of options is available.” There may be other clergy needing special attention in the appointment process, but young clergy certainly do.

First and second appointments are critical junctures for clergy who are just beginning ministry. Such times of transition are very vulnerable times for anyone, but young clergy are particularly vulnerable because they are experiencing multiple transitions simultaneously. Not only are they facing the normal transition all pastors face going into a new congregation; they are also transitioning from seminary, moving into their first full-time ministry context, and beginning a calling for which they have been prepared by education but, often, not yet by experience. At best, their experience in ministry has been part-time.

When conference leaders consider how young clergy should be deployed, phrases that often come up are “paying your dues,” “marking time,” and “waiting your turn.” “Didn’t we have to do these things?” older clergy may ask. It is true that the historical pattern has been for younger clergy to spend a number of years in some of the same churches to which they are appointed today. Thirty years ago, however, many of these churches were thriving. Now, after suffering decades of decline, they are less adaptable and resilient and less open to young leadership.

Another difference is that when the first of the Baby Boomers were young clergy, virtually all the clergy were men. If they were married, their spouses either did not work outside the home or worked in professions such as teaching and nursing that could be practiced in most locales. This is not the case for most young clergy today, who may have more difficulty accepting certain appointments because of their spouse’s employment.

Moreover, in previous generations many, if not most, clergy came from small membership, rural, and small town congregations. That was where a large portion of the denomination’s membership was. So when young clergy were assigned to these types of churches, they were likely to be familiar with the setting. Today, most clergy come from larger and suburban churches. Congregational life in many of the churches to which they are assigned bears no resemblance to what they have previously experienced.

## *Appoint Young Clergy Where They Can Make a Difference*

Young clergy may be the denomination’s “last best hope” for connecting with the emerging generation that is so often underrepresented in out churches today. Young clergy understand the imperative of reaching out to their own generation and are eager to do so; but they feel hemmed in by the obliga-

tions of ministering to their aging flocks and maintaining aging institutions. This is especially true in the smaller, less vital congregations to which first appointments are often made.

As one clergywoman put it, “I left seminary with a heart for reaching the young. But after three appointments that gave me no opportunity to do so, I am now in a church with potential. However, I am no longer young and now have family responsibilities that make it harder than before to be available at the hours needed to reach the young.” There is little logic in assigning the youngest clergy to communities where the fewest young adults are present—although this is very often what happens. “Churches get the pastors they can afford, not the pastors they really need,” reflects one young pastor. “And so we send young clergy into mostly dead churches hoping they can pull a Jesus raising Lazarus kind of miracle.”

Conferences should also try to avoid making assumptions about the types of ministry that interest young clergy. While some young clergy want to do youth ministry, others resent the assumption that because they are young they should be working with youth. For every young clergyperson who feels called to youth ministry, there are others who feel quite ungifted for such work. As one person put it, “Not all young medical doctors become pediatricians!”

Extra care should be taken to appoint young clergy to supportive and healthy churches. And churches receiving young pastors need some coaching and training in how to work with and support a young pastor, since fewer and fewer congregations today are practiced in working with younger leadership. Appointing young clergy with care, in ways that support their development, reward their effort, and make good use of both their ministry gifts and youthfulness, are perhaps the most important things that can be done to improve the situation that young clergy confront today. □

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**Lovett H. Weems Jr. is Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership and Director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.**



**Ann A. Michel is Associate Director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership.**