

# Cultivating Young Clergy Leaders

By Nathan E. Kirkpatrick

**A** study released by the Lewis Center at Wesley Seminary revealed that less than 5% of the Elders serving in the United Methodist Church are under the age of 35. In the years since, those of us in that number seem to have become the fascination of many in the denomination's hierarchy; we are referenced in speeches, lauded in sermons, and applauded at annual conference.

For all the recent discussion, it has been a challenge to know how best to encourage us while equipping us for ministry in a changed and changing world, not to mention how to recruit more of us. Programs and initiatives to help young clergy leaders are appearing in annual conferences, through large congregations, and at seminaries. Some of these

programs are skill-based (the kind of “how to grow your church, add a second worship service, read your budget, and keep the DS happy” program); some are formational (the “who are you and how are you going to be in ministry” type of program).

In some places around the connection, young clergy have taken the initiative and created informal peer networks ourselves. At annual conference next year, look for the meeting of your conference's Spotted Owl Society, so named because clergy under 35 are as rare in the United Methodist Church as the spotted owl is in our forests. We are also creating our own continuing education opportunities to meet our needs as we perceive them.



institution that is limping into its last days or as those who must change everything about the church if there is hope for its survival.

But neither is so. We need to be reminded that we are the inheritors of a great tradition, and there is much in that tradition that is worth preserving. We need to hear that vibrant ministry is not just possible but is happening all around the connection, that there are communities of faith that are engaging their neighborhoods and bringing hope and healing to a hurting world. We as young clergy are joining this great work, not starting it from scratch. There is much that is good and right with the church; help us appreciate that if we are to be its faithful and fruitful leaders.

**That said, it is equally important that we are challenged to make change where we are right now.** It is tempting for young clergy to believe that we will make our “real” contributions to the church’s life when we are serving as the senior pastor of the big steeple church, as a district superintendent, as a staff member of a general board of agency, or as dean of a seminary. After all, these are the people we have been taught to see as “having power in the institution,” and in many ways, these are the people who do have power. Often, they feel more like bosses

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to us right now than partners with us. Yet, if we as young leaders believe the myth that the only meaningful change happens at these levels in the life of the church, we delude ourselves and abdicate our responsibility.

So, we need help in seeing and appreciating the power we already have to make change. Some of us serve on denominational or conference or district committees. Many of us are involved in community ministries that put us in ecumenical and interfaith contexts. Most of us are in pulpits frequently, if not weekly, shaping the lives and beliefs of followers of Christ. We design worship and provide pastoral care; we lead meetings and ministries. There is real power to change the life of the faithful and the community known as church in each of these acts of ministry.

Nurturing young clergy leaders means not letting us abdicate power by talking about some distant day when we are in charge. Remind us of the communities we serve now and challenge us to make the changes needed in them for the life of the church as a whole.

**Finally—It is essential that we have communities of accountability and support as we learn to lead in our own ways.**

When I was in seminary, I was sent to a church to do an internship; when I arrived, I was told that I would need to wear

So, given everything that is happening around the connection for young leaders, what are the things that are proving to be most helpful? How are we being nurtured to become what we are—the next generation of clergy leaders in and for The United Methodist Church?

**First, the most helpful programs and initiatives will offer us ways of appreciating what is *right* with the church.** Too often, when young leaders are discussed in meetings, it is with a certain institutional desperation, as if clergy under 35 will fix all that presently ails the institution. Given the tone and tenor of many of these conversations, it would be understandable if young clergy came to see themselves either as the emerging leaders of an

a clergy robe at the 11 o'clock service. Not having one of my own, I was sent to the sacristy to find one that fit. Of all the robes given to that church by retired clergy (and there were plenty—the church was at Lake Junaluska!), none of them fit me. Finally, I set aside the least ill-fitting for Sunday morning.

That Sunday morning, I put the robe on, and even the least ill-fitting of the robes was obviously not right. Its extra length meant that I had to carefully negotiate the chancel steps so as to not trip on the hem, and I had to watch its substantial sleeves to make sure I didn't knock anything off of the communion table while setting down the offering plates. In its billowy polyester glory, I was self-conscious and awkward. I was sure I looked like a child playing dress-up in church.

At the end of the service, one of the retired pastors, no doubt both seeing and sensing my dis-ease in the robe, came up to me, put his arm on my shoulder, and said, "Don't worry, Nathan; you'll grow into it."

In that moment, that felt like hope. It felt like what I was supposed to be doing in ministry—growing into borrowed robes. Finally, though, I have realized that isn't ministry. I can't borrow someone else's robe for the duration of my career; I can only wear my own. I cannot copy someone else's ministry or someone else's leadership style. I can only find my own. But to do that, I need mentors in my life holding me accountable and offering me support.


The young clergy that are in your annual conference are as talented, creative, and capable as any of the generations of

clergy that have come before. We have a great deal of promise. But we will need sound mentors, trusted friends, and good colleagues if we are to have the courage to wear our own robes—if we are to have the courage and faith to lead as God is calling us to lead. We will need clergy colleagues and congregations who give us the room to dare great things for the sake of the Kingdom, and we will need people who will extend grace to us when we fail and who humble us when we succeed. We will need friends who enliven our imagination for what is possible in ministry and who will pray with us as we find our way.

Those of us in that 5 percent want to give our best to the Church. We want to lead it in holy and healthy ways for the sake of its life and our own. So, show us what is right, challenge us to lead, and hold us accountable and support us as we do. And we will keep the faith and make you proud. □

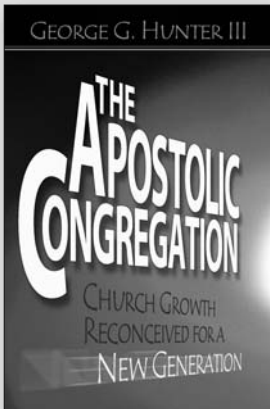


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