

Mainline worries about dearth of young pastors: Fewer than 5 percent under 35

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

At the end of April, a new TV ad financed by the Episcopal Church will show 30-something Paige Blair of Maine talking casually about how during tough times, church provides her “some solace and perspectives that help me understand, reconcile and forgive.”

She doesn’t think the church “gets everything right,” she goes on to say. “I go because if I didn’t, people would ask me why. After all, I am the priest of this parish.”

Words on the screen then identify Blair as rector of St. George’s Episcopal Church in York Harbor, Maine—a church she’s served since 2000. Clergy in other regions will be featured in future versions of the 30-second ad—with the proviso that they are of “Gen-X age,” reported Episcopal News Service.

The TV campaign reflects the escalating concern of mainline church leaders that the paucity of pastors under 35 will have a negative effect on attracting and keeping young-adult churchgoers.

A newly released study of clergy ages in the largest mainline denomination, the United Methodist Church, shows a dramatic drop in under-35 ordained pastors in the past 20 years. The number of younger clergy dropped from 15.05 percent of the 1985 total to 4.69 percent in 2005.

The actual numbers of younger UMC pastors declined from 3,219 in 1985 to 850 last year, according to a report released March 20 by Lovett H. Weems Jr., director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Methodist-related Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

“The project originated from a concern that the age of United Methodist clergy is getting disproportionately older than the population the church seeks to reach,” said

Weems. Most of the figures came as “estimates from denominational offices or from survey responses” rather than from hard statistics, he said.

Yet the current low percentage of under-35 ordained Methodist pastors resembles the estimates that Weems obtained from other mainline churches: American Baptists and Disciples of Christ each at 5.5 percent, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at 4.86 percent and the Episcopal Church at 4.1 percent. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) total was higher, at 7.1 percent, but that was a figure from 2002.

“With this study the drumbeat of concern is growing louder,” commented Ann Svennungsen, president of the Atlanta-based Fund for Theological Education (FTE). “But the key will be whether we hear it and all of the church’s institutions hold themselves accountable for inviting qualified, diverse young people into ministry.”

A much-reported factor in recent decades is the high ratio of new seminarians who are second-career men and women entering the ministry at older ages, thus contributing to the overall graying of pastors. Also, according to the March 17 *New York Times*, more seminarians today seek a degree not to become pastors but to bring their theological and ethical perspectives into other kinds of work.

The FTE this year announced a \$6 million, four-year grant from the Lilly Endowment to encourage congregations to recruit under-35 candidates for the ministry with the aid of grants to offset tuition and living expenses.

“This work should be one of the church’s highest priorities,” Svennungsen said. “Leadership matters, for the health of congregations and for the strength of the congregation’s mission in the world.”

Weems put it similarly: “The issue of enlisting younger quality clergy must be seen side by side with the quality and vitality of the church itself.” Citing the analysis by author Gil Rendle in *The Multigenerational Congregation*, Weems said that church leaders “have to contend with the worldviews of multiple generations together.”