

Where are the younger clergy?

Affirming vocations: Affirming vocations

by [David J. Wood](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

The number of ordained clergy age 35 or under in mainline denominations is remarkably low. The United Church of Christ lists only 207 clergy in that category—only 4 percent of its total number of ministers. The figure is even lower for the Disciples of Christ (3.7 percent) and the Episcopal Church (3.9 percent), and it is only slightly higher for American Baptists (5.8 percent), for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (6.1 percent), for United Methodists (6.7 percent) and for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (7 percent).

By contrast, 25 years ago nearly one-quarter of all PCUSA pastors were 35 or under, and almost one-fifth of Episcopal ministers were that young.

So the questions arise: Where are the younger clergy? Why aren't young people choosing pastoral ministry?

When confronted with the dearth of younger clergy, seminaries and denominational offices are tempted to point the finger at congregations ("If only they would send us younger candidates!"). The congregations, meanwhile, point toward the institutions ("If only they would send us competent pastors!"). And everyone blames the culture.

Clearly, something is going on in church and society to make pastoral ministry an unappealing profession to many young people. Recently a young man who had graduated from a well-regarded liberal arts college mentioned to his classmates that he was planning to be a minister. "That's social suicide!" they told him.

I'm convinced that the young are more than capable of making choices that are determined by rationalities other than those of the dominant culture. But young people will not discern such a calling out of the morally thin air of our culture. It takes the thick context of vital ecclesial reality to shape a vocational imagination

sufficient to the pastoral life.

All of us have our explanations as to why the young are not joining the ranks of ordained ministers. The real question—and the one that remains largely unanswered at the institutional, congregational and pastoral levels—is this: “Do we have clear and sufficient reasons as to why they should?” I once heard it said of those in their early 20s that they are not searching for meaning per se, but for participation in a struggle that is meaningful. Pastoral ministry is a struggle. Is it also a meaningful struggle?

I recently received the following note from a good friend who is also a pastor:

The reason that young people do not want to be pastors is that they see all too clearly the limitations of the pastoral life, not its opportunities. Its opportunities may in fact exist for some people who have the personality and desire for it . . . those who are truly called. But why in the world would a talented young person commit to a life of low salary, low prestige, long hours, no weekends and little room for advancement?

The call to this vocation does not sound forth in a vacuum—it requires the vocal chords of congregational life and culture. Such a calling is mediated through ecclesial relationships and experiences—it requires the apprenticeship of faithful lives in the context of faithful communities. This is a calling discerned face to face, life to life.

The increase in second- and third-career men and women into ordained ministry has occurred at a time when the number of people making the ministry a first-career choice is declining. Perhaps this indicates that the church is not providing the context within which such a first call can be discerned.

Without for a moment slighting the benefit the church has received from the influx of older men and women into pastoral ministry, it's clear that a profession that fails to capture the imagination of a younger generation is in great danger. We live in a time when all institutions must be able to adapt to rapidly changing cultural forms, meanings and symbols. The kind of cultural change we are undergoing is by and large mediated by the youngest generations. While this reality does not in and of itself authorize young voices, it ought to cause us to recognize how ill equipped we will be to reach a new generation if we are unable to inspire the young to identify

the pastoral ministry as their first and lifelong calling.

Denominational officials realize that the low number of young clergy is a critical concern. But they have not developed a way to respond. A good place to start would be to attend to those young adults who, against the prevailing winds of the culture, have responded to the call to ordained ministry.

Many of the young pastors I talk with observe their peers in other professional contexts receiving recognition and validation for their new ideas and innovative contributions, while they themselves feel a strong sense of marginalization—not only in relation to the culture at large but in relation to their own congregational and institutional cultures as well. Providing the funds for young pastors to gather together on a regular basis for disciplined conversation and collaboration with one another about the practice of pastoral leadership might be a good place to start. Networking is a highly prized activity of this generation. At the least, denominations need to recognize that younger pastors are not the future of the church—they are the present by which its future will be shaped.

This article was adapted from the March/April 2001 issue of Congregations, which is devoted to the topic of young clergy. Used with permission of the Alban Institute, Inc.