

Perspectives on the young clergy crisis

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December 10, 2011



Since I've been chairing a national Presbyterian Church (USA) committee on the Nature of the Church for the 21st century, I've been gaining a different perspective on many of the larger trends of our denomination. One thing that has been difficult to realize (and equally difficult to communicate to the larger church) is the young clergy crisis.

Why would I call it a crisis? We've known for a long time about the startling [decline of young clergy](#). The drop-out rates don't help (I can't find hard and fast stats on this... but some claim that about 70% of young clergy drop out within the first five years of ministry, usually because of lack of support or financial reasons). The average age of a pastor in the PCUSA is 53. And I've realized that the age of our leadership might be much higher.

Over

half of our congregations cannot afford a full-time pastor and many associate pastor positions were cut during the recent economic downturn. These are churches where seminary graduates would normally be heading, so what are the congregations doing instead? **Many of them are hiring retired ministers or retired laypeople to serve these churches while our younger pastors remain unemployed.**

Do I have something against people over 65? Of course not. I also have sympathy for people who have seen their retirement savings dwindle over the last four years. I know that many people have great energy well past the age of 65. So why would this situation be a problem?

Like all denominations, [the age of our worshipers is increasing](#). The median age of a Presbyterian in the pew is 61. Half of our membership is over the age of 61, and four out of five worshipers are over the age of 45. [Jackson Carroll](#) points out that the age of a congregation will often reflect the age of its pastoral leadership.

So, if we're trying to imagine a compelling vision for the church in the years to come, we'll need to reach the next generation. But that's hard to do when

- **Half of our congregations may be served by pastors and laypeople who are 65 or older**
- **The other half of our congregations are being served by people who are about 53**
- **Younger pastors can't find calls and are forced to take up other employment**
- **Many younger pastors who *do* get called to pastorates drop out within the first 5 years of ministry.**