

Call waiting: Inviting youth to ministry

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Mainline denominations have only begun to recognize the alarmingly low numbers of clergy under the age of 35. In my denomination, the United Church of Christ, I am one of only 207 clergy in that age bracket—about 4 percent of total clergy.

While there are many factors contributing to this crisis, few solutions are being offered. Many officials hope that the number of second-career pastors will compensate for the lack of younger ministers. However, it appears that the number of second-career people will not be able to replace the number of pastors who will be retiring over the next ten to 15 years. There will also be many intangible losses when the average pastoral career spans ten years instead of 20 or 30.

I have heard it suggested on more than one occasion that few young people are entering the ministry because the Lord isn't calling as many as he used to. This is not the case. In the three years I was a youth minister at a church in Massachusetts, eight young people openly expressed a desire to enter the pastoral ministry. What made the difference was the encouraging role of the congregation. Whatever denominations do to address this crisis, there is much that congregations and pastors can do. I have another revealing story to tell: When a colleague of mine had her first conversation with her bishop, she began to explain to him her sense of call to ordained ministry. The bishop stopped her short. He told her that he no longer recommended ministry as a vocation for young people, because it is too difficult and doesn't come with the prestige that it had in the past.

Unlike this bishop, church leaders, pastors and congregations need to create the opportunities for youth to discern their call to ministry. Making that kind of space for young people does not require a Herculean effort. It simply takes patience and a commitment to a few principles.

First, and most obviously, youth programs must be a priority. Youth groups, confirmation programs, youth Bible studies and retreats are essential to young people's spiritual formation. While many churches do not have the resources to support extensive programs, every church can provide something.

And these programs need be designed to be transformative: they should prompt kids to grapple with and confront issues of faith.

Too often churches, even those that think of themselves as having strong youth programs, aim only to provide safe and nurturing environments. They think they have succeeded if the youth feel free to be themselves in the church building. It is important for youth to be in supportive and safe environments, but that kind of program is only scratching the surface. It is in churches where kids are invited into a personal relationship with their Lord and God that ministers are born.

Second, pastors must take a personal interest in youth, regardless of whether they think they have a gift for youth ministry.

True, some people are better at connecting with youth than others. But pastors who take time out to call on or sit down with teenagers make a significant impact on those persons' lives of faith regardless of what their gifts are. That act tells those teenagers that God cares for them. And it makes pastors more human and accessible figures, making it easier for youth to envision themselves in the pastoral role with a teenager someday.

Third, we need to teach youth how to pray. Most kids, like most adults, have no context for the activity of prayer. Yet it is the single most effective avenue for relationship and connection with God.

At the beginning of every school year I try to teach our youth groups how to pray. I understand that much of our prayer experience is groping about in the dark, relying on the Spirit to intercede for us. I give these kids a structure for prayer, so that they have some way to navigate that time of searching and waiting.

Whenever the youth group gathers, kids offer prayers at the beginning and at the end of our time together. A different teenager prays each time. At first it is an uncomfortable experience for many, but in time it becomes natural. I have found that the kids who most freely give themselves to prayer are often the ones who express an interest in ministry.

Fourth, we must find a way to involve youth in regular worship. Congregations may be engaged in a variety of different missions and ministries, but worship remains at the core of what we do. Recently, when I spoke with some of the young people I had worked with years ago, they told me that one of the most significant factors shaping

their interest in ministry was their enjoyment of leading worship. Often youth involvement in worship is confined to a “Youth Sunday” or to reading scripture on Christmas Eve. The church I served had made extensive efforts to have youth regularly lead worship. Youth were routinely invited to lead the entire liturgy, craft prayers, offer faith witnesses and even preach sermons. This activity was valuable not only because the young people got to assume different leadership roles, but because it involved hours of preparation time and time spent with the pastor.

Finally, we must not hesitate to issue invitations. When pastors or congregations recognize ministerial gifts in a young person, they should name those gifts. It’s a powerful experience to recognize gifts in a young person and then gently suggest to that person that he or she might make a fine and faithful pastor some day.

We ourselves do not call people into ministry. Jesus Christ does the calling. But pastors and congregations can provide the space for that call to be heard. That task has never been more urgent.