

Leadership for Reaching Emerging Generations



Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Early American Methodists could have focused only on the needs of existing adult members. They chose instead to give attention to the future and to the young. Their passion for establishing colleges is a prime example. Historian Nathan Hatch reminds us that Methodists were virtually alone among the American denominations in the extent of their educational emphasis. For most of the nineteenth century, Methodists founded one or more colleges or universities each year. Indeed, over a thousand educational institutions were founded, although many did not survive.

Various youth and young adult organizations and movements played key roles in the development of vigorous leadership for the church. The Sunday school movement, for example, was a major



Lovett H. Weems Jr. is guest editor of this issue of *Circuit Rider* and distinguished professor of church leadership and director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

effort toward the evangelism and education of a new generation of Christians. The Sunday school movement was not a strictly Methodist endeavor, but Methodists contributed significantly to its leadership and benefited greatly from its success.

A RAPIDLY AGING CHURCH

Once when my family and I were in Cambridge, England, for a study leave, Walter and Mary Brueggemann paid us a visit. They commented on their walk to church earlier in the day. Outside a meeting hall there was a line of youth perhaps three blocks long waiting to buy tickets for an upcoming rock concert. The contrast between those hundreds of youth and the congregation attending worship was profound. Not only was the congregation small in numbers, but also virtually everyone attending was elderly. As they reported this dichotomy, we looked at each other in recognition. We had also seen the same line of youth and the same elderly congregation that day, only at a different church.

Later, I remembered that conversation while reading *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* in which Walter writes, "I

genuinely care and fear as I visit churches and see them frequented largely by older people; it is like visiting Wilder's *Our Town* in a season of despair a generation later." The United Methodist Church within the United States, like the other mainline churches, is an aging church.

The percentage of church members aged fifty and above has continued to grow for a number of decades now. Persons of this age constitute a higher percentage of church members than of the population as a whole. This is true even when people in the overall population too young to be church members are excluded from the comparison. The aging of the church works against diversity in the church since people of color in the population are disproportionately young. An aging church is unlikely to become more diverse, while a younger church is likely to be more diverse.

One unfortunate reason the aging of the denomination has not received more attention is that in declining churches, especially aging congregations, the availability of financial resources tends to continue, and perhaps even increase. In growing churches, needs run ahead of money by two or three years as newer, often younger, members join. At first, the newer members may not bring the same resources and commitment as more established members. The opposite is the case in aging congregations. On the whole, people have more assets from age fifty and above than at any other time in their lives. In the mid-1960s, as membership in The United Methodist Church began to decline, a financial decline was not immediately felt—both because the aging members who remained had more resources and because of inflation. One can only imagine what would have happened if membership and money trends over the last forty years had traded places.

The next two decades will bring the death of a large group of United Methodists nurtured in another era and with an exemplary dedication and commitment. And their millions of dollars in financial assets that have kept the church afloat during the past forty years of decline will also be gone for the most part. Just as importantly, this generation's energy, passion, and sacrifice will be lost. Their blessed memory and fine example will continue to inspire the church. Some will continue their giving to the church through estate plans. But in the final analysis, churches cannot thrive on either inherited faithfulness or inherited money. There must be a vision and enthusiasm to capture the hearts and souls of a new generation of disciples.

Don Haynes makes an uncomfortable point humorously. He says every United Methodist leader should thank God

every night for medical science. Without the advances in medicine and longer life expectancy, The United Methodist Church would have already died. Humor usually requires some degree of overstatement. So it is in this case, but not by much. Because the average age of United Methodists is higher than the national average, the death rate each year for United Methodists is higher than in the general population. (Sorry, joining another church will not increase your life expectancy!) This trend will continue to get worse every year so long as the average age is increasing.

There is another factor contributing to the aging of our church. The birthrates among the traditional constituencies of mainline churches are the lowest of any denominational family in the United States. Birth rates are so low that even if every child of the current members of mainline denominations joined his or her family's church, there still would not be growth.

YOUNGER CLERGY LEADERSHIP NEEDED TO REACH EMERGING GENERATIONS

The leadership base of declining organizations gets smaller and smaller, and they fail to attract quality young leaders. So just at the time when the organization needs its best leaders in greatest numbers, the base of new and quality leadership tends to be smallest. Another article in this issue of *Circuit Rider* documents the declining number of United Methodist elders under age thirty-five over the past twenty years.

The issue of enlisting younger quality clergy must be seen side by side with the quality and vitality of the church itself. The church's overall health is the most

The issue of enlisting younger quality clergy must be seen side by side with the quality and vitality of the church itself. The church's overall health is the most important factor determining who comes into ordained ministry.

important factor determining who comes into ordained ministry. Organizations tend to get the leadership they deserve, not the leadership they need. Any questions or concerns about the quality of leadership must be directed at the church itself—why the church in this particular era allows so many to ignore the call of God.

Leander Keck links the enlistment dilemma directly to the condition of the church itself. "The impression is abroad," he contends, "that the church does not welcome strength since it is more a place to find a support group than a channel for energy and talent, more a place where the bruised find solace than where the strong find companions and challenge." He goes on to say that he is not looking for "Jesus-jocks and wheeler-dealers," but rather acknowledging "the churches have the opportunity to nurture the kind of persons that society needs to lead its institutions including the churches themselves."

RETOOLED CLERGY LEADERSHIP ALSO NEEDED

Enlisting younger clergy is only part of what is needed to reach younger generations. All clergy, including older clergy, need enhanced training to meet the needs of emerging generations. As a pastor out of seminary twenty years put it, "In seminary we said we were going to change the world. Now, the world has changed without our help and we are struggling to come to grips with those changes." The pastor went on to say that many of the needs and issues he is called upon to address regularly were not even on the horizon when he was in seminary.

Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us of the difficulty of the task. "It is no easy task to build up the faith of one generation," he wrote as a young Detroit pastor in 1921, "and not destroy the supports of the religion of the other." Today's clergy live in such a tension.

In *The Multigenerational Congregation* (Alban, 2002), Gil Rendle captures the dilemma faced by countless clergy seeking to reach a younger generation who sees the world in fundamentally different ways than the older generation already in the church. Effective church leaders have to contend with the worldviews of multiple generations together. How many pastors have worked diligently to reach more young people, only to receive criticism from congregational leaders? Church leadership in the multigenerational congregation requires finding new ways to address the real generational differences that are present.

THREE KEY QUESTIONS

There are three questions that United Methodist churches would do well to keep before them if the United Methodist witness is to strengthen in the twenty-first century:

Are we reaching more people for Christ?

Are we reaching younger people for Christ?

Are we reaching more diverse people for Christ?

Are Young Elders Disappearing?

There has been a dramatic drop in the number and percentage of United Methodist elders under the age of 35 in the last twenty years. The number of elders under 35 declined from 3,219 in 1985 to 850 in 2005. Young elders as a percentage of all elders dropped from 15.05 percent in 1985 to only 4.69 percent in 2005. For example, the annual conference with the highest percentage of young elders today has 10 percent, still 5 percent below where the whole denomination was just twenty years ago.

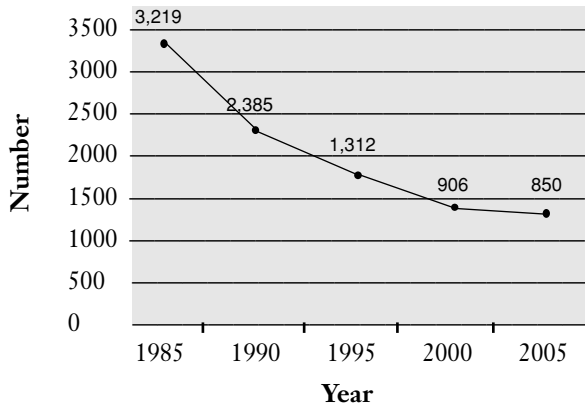
Clergy ages are not easy to track because few units of the church have up-to-date age information on clergy. The one exception is the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits. The Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary has worked with the General Board to determine age trends for United Methodist clergy.

This report deals with elders, but comparable information on deacons and local pastors is available at the Lewis Center website, www.churchleadership.com. We focus here on elders because they constitute the largest category of United Methodist clergy. Also ordained deacons as we have now in the United Methodist Church are relatively new, making trend comparisons difficult. Local pastors have traditionally had an older average age than elders.

To have comparable figures across the years, the figures include not only those who have been ordained elder but also those who have been commissioned on the elder track but not yet ordained. While not all elders are in the denominational pension system, most are, and the percentage not in the system tends to stay the same across the years, thus making trend comparisons possible.

— LHW

Number of UMC Elders Under 35

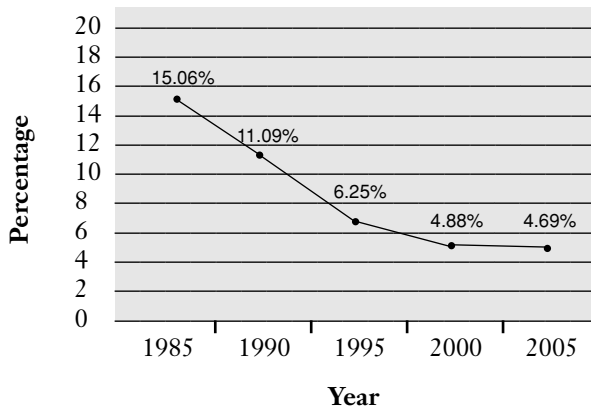


**Similar Percentages
for Deacons and Local Pastors
2005**

Deacons under 35 – 5.41%

Local Pastors under 35 – 5.67%

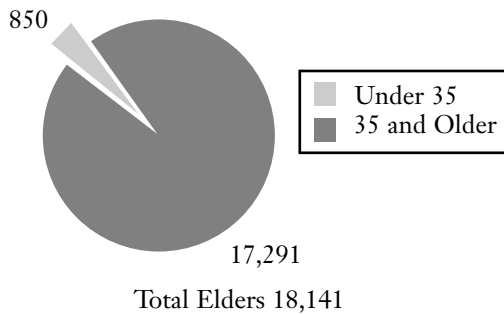
Percentage of UMC Elders Under 35



To see the figures for your annual conference and additional age breakdowns, go to

www.churchleadership.com

**Number of Elders Under 35
2005**



1985		2005
47	Average Age	51
48	Median Age*	52
54	Mode Age*	58

* Median = half older, half younger
Mode = single age most represented