

# Young Clergy Speak

ANN A. MICHEL

What are the challenges and opportunities younger clergy face in ministering to members of their own generation? In November 2005, a group of “Lewis Fellows” shared their perspectives on this question. All in their twenties and thirties, the Lewis Fellows are involved in an ongoing leadership development program sponsored by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary. These women and men, who face the task of ministering to the new millennium, provide key insights on the realities of emerging generation leadership.

“I find the common assumption that our generation is uninterested in faith and spirituality to be completely false,” says **Matthew Smith**, 29, a probationary member of the Virginia Conference. “Younger adults are truly inquisitive. But often, they are more interested in experiencing spirituality than in just hearing about it.” **Natalya Cherry**, also 29 and a pastor in the Central Pennsylvania Conference, believes the emerging generation’s freedom to talk openly about their issues is a wide-open door to those in ministry. “We need to learn how to ‘listen’ someone into God’s presence,” she says. Young clergy have taken note of the emergent church movement’s use of ancient traditions and see opportunities for connecting younger adults with United Methodist traditions.

But making the church responsive to young people’s spiritual needs can be a challenge. **Christina McLain**, 29, pastor of Burnt Factory United Methodist Church in

*There is a real  
spiritual hunger  
and a desire to find  
significance and  
meaning in life  
among younger  
people.*

—Judy Chung, 36, Pastor, La  
Mirada United Methodist  
Church, California



Winchester, Virginia, finds “younger people want to bat things around and test ideas out—things the older people in my congregation aren’t comfortable doing. Older members see church as a matter of obedience, duty, and loyalty. It’s hard to get them to a place where they are actually willing to dialogue in a way that would attract younger people.”

The emerging generation feels no obligation to be in church on Sunday mornings. According to **Cynthia Weems**, 33, a pastor in Rose Hill, Kansas, “They are not going to come simply because they are supposed to come. It’s up to us to provide something meaningful and spiritually nurturing.” **Mark Holland**, 36, pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Kansas, believes a fundamental transformation is called for in how the church thinks and operates. “The church should be a place where people can openly explore their spiritual journeys, not a place where spiritual formation involves correction of new ideas.” Authenticity and genuine spirituality are watchwords for this new generation.

Young pastors often find themselves in the role of cross-cultural interpreter, bridging the gap between congregations steeped in their own institutional cultures and a new generation that increasingly has no prior experience of church. Older people tend to be suspicious of younger adults and reluctant to give them authority. “I find myself having to be an apologist for an institutional system that can seem overwhelming to newcomers,” says **Amy Aitken**, a pastor in Long Beach, California. Young members often must go through a real struggle to have their new ministry ideas validated. And Aitken feels this contradicts the church’s desire to welcome younger persons and invite them into discipleship.

Yet newcomers bring fresh perspectives and new questions to the church. “Ministering to an unchurched generation gives us

an opportunity to look at things in new ways,” says **Mike Bennett**, 30, pastor of Union Chapel UMC in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. It is also an opportunity to be more conscientious about explaining what the church believes and why. “Every time I teach ‘Methodism 101,’ half the people who show up have been in the church for decades,” says Weems. “I find that even among lifelong members of the church, there is a hunger for introductory Bible studies, basic classes on prayer, spirituality, and Wesleyan theology. People seem really eager to engage their faith and glad to know that we are a church that encourages thoughtful engagement,” says Aitken.

Connecting with the desire to serve others is another real opportunity for reaching the emerging generation. “Our generation is very interested in hands-on work,” says **Daniel Mejia**, 32, associate pastor of Arlington United Methodist church in Virginia. “They want to help the homeless and feed the poor. This is an opportunity for us to present a ministry.” Younger clergy also believe the church has a role to play in helping GenXers make sense of their privileged upbringings.

It is critical that the church open up leadership roles to create space for younger adults. **Amy Yarnell**, 34, believes many young families have chosen her church in Chesapeake City, Maryland because they see her and other young adults in leadership roles. Although creative and vibrant older pastors can connect with the younger generation, “young people can feel intimidated by a church where the same leaders have served for decades,” says Yarnell. She is concerned about

her church’s continued ability to reach younger people as she and other leaders get older.

Young clergy are keenly aware of the burden of the church’s institutional structures. “People are searching for something authentic,” says Mejia. “Too often, we show young people ‘religion,’ when we need to be offering them Christ.” Mejia sees the need for renewal and institutional reform in today’s church as comparable to the need in John Wesley’s day.

*The Wesleyan tradition’s covenantal model with its emphasis on small groups, intimacy, and vulnerability, is very well-suited for this generation. We need to get back to the sense of genuine, authentic Christian community.*

—Amy Aitken, 34, Pastor, California Heights United Methodist Church, Long Beach, California



Young pastors feel torn between the desire to be out in the community connecting with the young and their obligation to serve aging congregants and the institutional needs of their own churches. "It is hard to find time to minister to people my own age," reports **Gordon Pruitt**, 33, of Rockville, Virginia.

Young clergy also feel the pressure of a life preserver mentality. "We are expected to save the church with our energy

*The Methodist focus on social witness as an expression of faith really does appeal to our generation. They want to be in service.*

—Matthew Smith, 29,  
Pastor, Andrew Chapel  
United Methodist Church,  
Stafford, Virginia



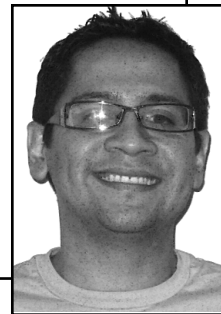
and ideas, but they give us very little rope," says **Amanda Stein**, 34, of Trinity United Methodist Church in Madison, Wisconsin.

Serving on five different committees in a conference where more than half of the members are retired, Stein fears burnout. Jesus' admonition, "the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few," is an apt description of the dilemma faced by young clergy reaching out to their own generation, according to Pruitt.

Yet these young pastors are very hopeful about the future of the church. Some congregations and some structures may pass away. But overall, they see declining memberships and aging congregations giving way to new possibilities. "I think the church will shrink as the older generation passes, but then it will explode," says Bennett. Looking ahead to ministry in the year 2030, they see a more diverse church, less bound by institutional

*The church has very high expectations of young clergy. They expect us to save a declining church, but we are given a very short leash if what we are proposing has never been done before.*

—Daniel Mejia, 32,  
Associate Pastor, Arlington  
United Methodist Church,  
Virginia



structure and more connected to the surrounding community. "I envision the church moving out of its culture of death and moving into the world in meaningful, new ways," says Mark Holland. "The church of the future is going to make a real impact on the lives of people in the world."



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