

The Urgency of Young Clergy Recruitment and Planned Responses

The persistent decline in the United Methodist church in the US is well known. By itself, one would not imagine that the recruitment of young clergy would be critical to the future of the denomination. One might think that there must be a declining need for young clergy in the face of increasing numbers of church closures.

Surely, the recruitment of young clergy must be challenging. The fact that our denomination is closing churches faster than ever before should be of concern to the college graduate considering a career in ministry within our denomination. What is it about the United Methodist Church that could be appealing to potential young clergy recruits? Perhaps most would contend that our denomination's needs for young clergy are decreasing along with a declining interest among college graduates to enter seminary and to become elders in our denomination.

This is in fact not the case at all--quite the contrary. The United Methodist Church is in critical need for growing numbers of young clergy. Moreover, the present may be the best time for any potential recruit to join our denomination. These two perspectives are at odds. The latter perspective is not widely endorsed. Why is it the correct one?

The Urgency of Young Clergy Recruitment

There are at least two reasons that point to the urgency of young clergy recruitment—the projections from the National Projection Model and the implementation of the Benchmark Strategy. The former argues that without improvement young clergy recruitment efforts, the denomination will experience even faster decline. The Benchmark Strategy argues that that is a significant possibility that the denomination will return to years of persistent growth. This possibility depends upon successful, young clergy recruitment.

In 2012, GCFA's Economic Advisory Committee sponsored the creation of the National Projection Model to project the future of the denomination. The findings are remarkable. The National Projection Model predicts a shortage of elders of over 4,000 by 2020. By 2030, the shortage is expected to reach over 5,000. This projection is partially based upon the impending retirements of baby-boomers in record numbers. These facts alone should elicit immediate improvements in young clergy recruitment.

Add to this challenge the implemented Benchmark Strategy which promises a turnaround for the denomination in the US. By 2021 worship attendance is projected to increase, representing a critical opportunity to sustain growth in the denomination for many years—an opportunity to become the first of hopefully several mainline denominations to return to positive growth.

Key to the projected turnaround is a sufficiently sized clergy pool from which pulpits will be successfully filled. The turnaround cannot take place with a 4,000 plus shortage of clergy. In fact, there

cannot be a shortage of clergy. This underscores the importance of young clergy recruitment over the next ten years and beyond. With the persistent decline in our denomination in the US, successful clergy recruitment is challenging at best. It remains one of our denomination's critical challenges.

The National Projection Model

The General Council on Finance and Administration helped to fund the development of the National Projection Model for our denomination in the US. This model provides a 2030 portrait of the denomination, including key indicators such as worship attendance, local church funding, new church starts, elder retirements and new clergy recruitment. Not-so-surprisingly, the model projects an avalanche of retirements. Such numbers of elder retirements have not been experienced before.

In concert with this avalanche is the persistent decline in the number of pulpits. So, what gives? The projected retirements are expected to far exceed the decline in the number of pulpits. This shortage of elders, if not avoided, will only hasten the pace of church decline. Many local churches will be appointing less-educated senior pastors because of this shortage.

The Benchmark Strategy

Based upon several years of research, growth and decline in local churches were found to be related to three drivers: effectiveness of the senior pastor, demographic changes in the neighborhoods surrounding the local church, and local church spending patterns—particularly programs and non-clergy staff expenditures. Given the present urgency for fruitful change, there is little the local church can change quickly. Pastors are already appointed. Short of relocating, the local church cannot affect the demographic changes in the neighboring populations. However, the local church can modify its spending patterns. And such modifications can take place quickly.

The Benchmark Strategy was implemented to reverse the decline in worship attendance in a district in Texas—the initial pilot project. Since its implementation in 2012, it has expanded into additional districts and annual conferences. It is expected to involve 1,000 local churches by 2021 and promote sustained growth in worship attendance within the US. It is to foster \$120 million in new, local church funding of growth oriented programs and non-clergy staff positions. This will be sufficient to turn around the denomination by 2021.

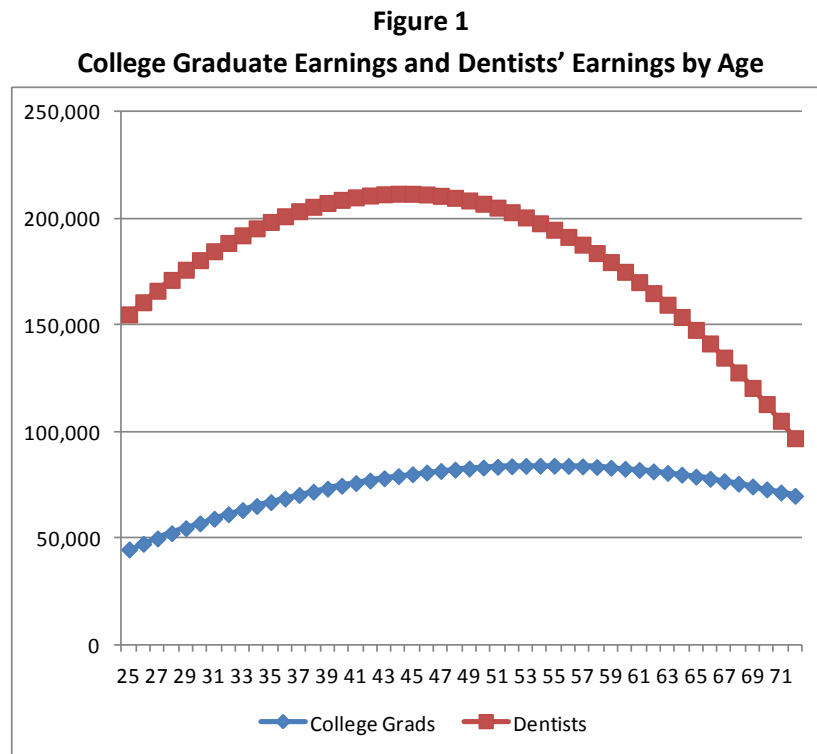
Yet the projected turnaround is dependent upon adequate numbers of effective elders. Research proves that the young, talented clergy are the most effective elders in promoting church growth. The young, talented clergy are the most effective in establishing growing new churches. There must be no shortage since a shortage will inhibit positive growth. The shortage must be corrected with growing numbers of young, talented clergy. The prospects for a turnaround hinges upon successful clergy recruitment. Thus, the need for such recruitment is critical and urgent.

Economics 101

There are numerous economic studies of career selection among college graduates, seeking to explain why the number of graduates entering a profession rises and falls across time. Although there will always be those individuals who select a career profession for a host of reasons, economic studies consistently demonstrate that career earning potential is one of those reasons. As the prospects for career earnings improve, more college graduates seek to begin those selected professional career paths.

Perhaps some actual history makes the point. Out of a year's pool of new college graduates, there will be some who will seek entry into dental school, hoping to begin careers as practicing dentists. History proves that the percentage of college graduates applying for a seat in a dental school rises and falls over the years, and that changes in this percentage from year to year is closely related to the earnings of practicing dentists, the costs of a dental school education, and the earnings of the college graduates who choose immediate employment upon completing the undergraduate degree.

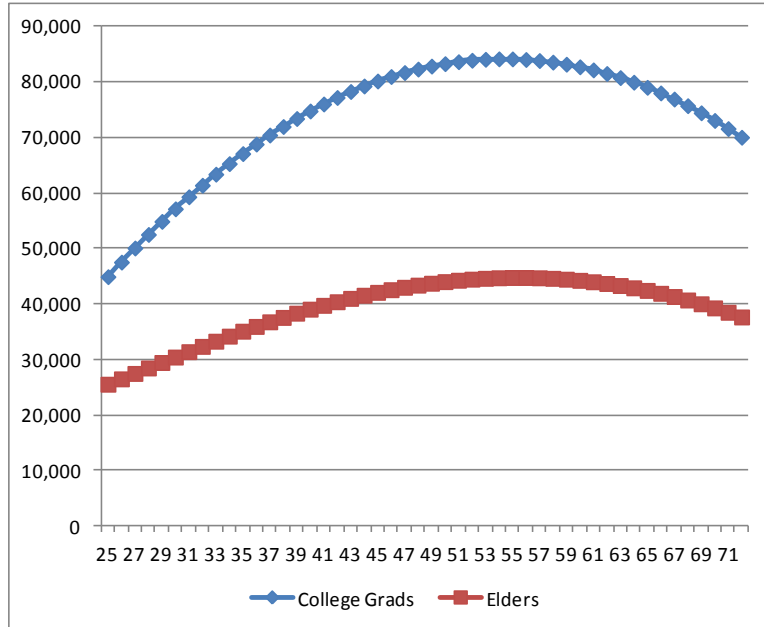
To illustrate, Figure 1 presents the age-earnings cycle of college graduates and practicing dentists.



The figure indicates the typical inverted U-shaped age-earnings cycle of dentists and of college graduates that is common among almost all the professions. The financial prospects for the average dentist are considerably greater than that of the typical college graduate. Economists explain that this “premium” is necessary for many to delay earnings another three years for post-graduate education. This premium is the financial return to post-graduate education.

Now consider a comparison between the age-earnings cycle of college graduates and the age-earnings cycle of elders in the United Methodist church in the US.

Figure 2
2005 Average Earnings of College Graduates and Elders



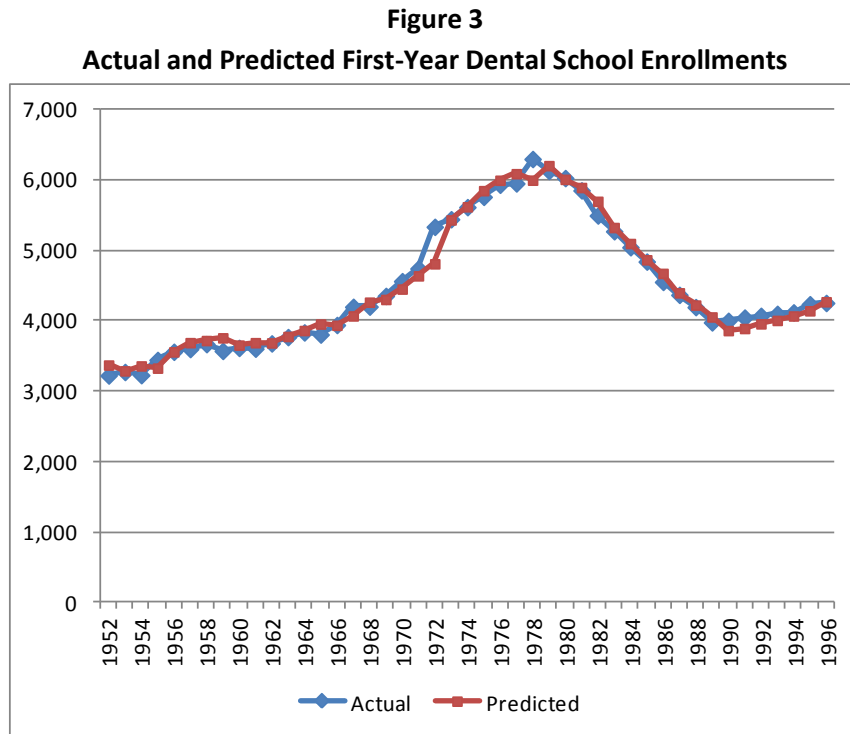
The elder in the United Methodist church, just as the dentist, invests years of time in post graduate education (i.e., seminary). For elders, instead of receiving a premium for the additional education, the elder pays a financial penalty for entering the ministry.

To be sure, there are many college graduates with the call to enter ministry in the United Methodist Church regardless of the financial prospects. However, there are many college graduates who consider the financial prospects of entering the ministry in a broad spectrum of possible career paths. The financial penalty paid by our own elders is and will be a barrier to the recruitment of increasing numbers of young, talented clergy.

In addition to earnings, career choices are also affected by the costs of education and the length of time required for the post-graduate degree. Obviously, rising costs of tuition and related costs discourage college graduates who might apply for enrollment in seminary. Scholarships are an effective way to reduce these costs. Relatively long educational programs and probationary time periods require the graduate to sacrifice more years of earnings before qualifying for higher salaried appointments. Such extended time periods discourage college graduates from considering seminary.

Career Earnings and New Students

Studies of dentists have confirmed the relation between career earnings, including the costs of education, and the number of students entering dental school. There is a strong relation between the two: career earnings and enrollments. Figure 3 presents the actual number of first-year students in US dental schools and the predicted number of first-year students based upon an economic model that takes into account career earnings.



The economic model almost perfectly predicts the number of first-year dental student enrollments in dental schools. The financial prospects of a professional career dramatically affect the number of college graduates seeking to be a member of a profession.

Although the work of dentists is far afield from ministry, the economics of the two careers may be more similar than most are willing to admit. It is highly likely that potential applicants to seminary and those seeking elder positions in our pulpits may be significantly affected by elders' career earnings, and costs of seminary education (net of scholarships). If so, one must carefully examine the financial prospects for elders in considering recruitment of young, talented clergy in the numbers necessary to eliminate the projected shortage.

The Present Situation

The possibility of positive growth in our denomination should significantly affect the financial prospects of an elder's career in our denomination. This is crucial.

- There is a growing need for elders based upon the projected retirements through 2030. Without a deliberate intervention, there will be a considerable shortage of elders in the near future.
- There will be an increasing reliance upon the young clergy to fill the pulpits with the greater promise of growth. Studies prove that the young clergy is more effective in growing existing and new churches. An emphasis upon the young clergy, in part, reduced the size of the shortage.
- The Benchmark Strategy promises to reverse the decline in our denomination in the US. There is an expected \$120 million to be invested in local churches for the purpose of growth. The young, talented elder will receive the benefit of this infusion of new funds into the local church. The financial prospects for the young elder are highly affected by local church growth.
- The expectation of growth will significantly affect the possible reach of a new elder in transforming lives and communities. With growth, the young elder will be ministering to growing congregations rather than shrinking congregations. The prospects for making a difference in this world will be improving with time. Such cannot be said of other mainline denominations or other independent churches without the planned infusions of new funds.

In short, this is the time in which the young elder faces improving financial prospects and greater prospects for effective ministry. In reviewing history since the 1960s, this may be the most opportune time for a college graduate to enter seminary and join our ranks of elders. There may be no better time to become an elder in our denomination.

Possible Plans for the Future

To ensure the best possible outcome, there must be established strategies and implementation. The pipeline for young, talented clergy consists of several parts, including explorations for the call among youth, enriching conversations and contact with college students, recruitment of young, talented college graduates into seminary, and recruitment of seminary graduates into the path for elder membership among our annual conferences. Each part of the pipeline should be monitored to ensure that the expected "outflow" is increasing over the next fifteen years to prevent the shortage and establish a growing pool of young, effective clergy.

Local Church

In years past, many churches established a specific Sunday to encourage the call among the youth in the church. It is said that today few churches still follow this tradition. Many local churches no longer have young families as members and thus have no or too few youth in the congregation to set

aside a Sunday. Among local churches with strong youth programs, it is important to survey the leaders of these churches annually to determine what efforts are in place, if any, and to encourage the call to ministry. To support these local church efforts, information can be crafted to demonstrate the improvements in the prospects for a career in ministry in our denomination.

Annual Conferences and Districts

Few annual conferences have developed effective strategic plans for recruitment of young elders. This failure is partly due to the recent challenges of having too many elders under appointment. Information should be provided that demonstrates the impending shortage of elders in each annual conference and the urgent need for recruitment.

Each annual conference should monitor the annual number of youth in conversation about the call. This should be monitored through local church or district reporting. A useful statistic for comparisons over time is the standing of these youth in their respective high school graduating classes. Over time, we should seek higher high school standings among those to be considered. It is imperative that we recruit from the best and brightest.

Appointment making of young clergy is key to improving their age-earning cycles. With improved appointment making for the effective young elders, the earnings growth over the first five years of appointment can improve. It is important to monitor the progress made in this endeavor. To the extent that improvements are made, information disseminated to colleges, universities, and seminaries. The upward shift of the age-earnings cycle for today's young clergy is critically important.

Seminaries

If not already, the United Methodist seminaries and others, such as Asbury, should register the number of applicants for enrollments, net of duplications, so that one can monitor changes over time. Studies prove that applicant rates will improve as the age-earnings cycle shifts to the benefit of young clergy. Applicant rates will improve if there are more scholarships awarded. Applicant rates will improve with more deliberate efforts within the local churches, districts, and annual conferences to encourage the call. Monitoring these annual applicant rates is necessary to measure the effectiveness of these collective efforts and to project the increasing output from the pipeline.

Summary

Significant efforts are in place to reverse the decline in our denomination. There is promise for improving conditions for the young, talented elder. Perhaps these are the best of times for successful recruitment of the best and brightest into our denomination.

There is a critical need for increasing numbers of young, talented elders. The wave of pending retirements among aging elders is expected to create a shortage numbering over 5,000 by 2030. The planned growth in worship attendance by 2021 depends upon successful recruitment.

Successful recruitment will require change. Local churches, districts, and annual conferences must foster the call among the best and brightest youth. This will require implementation of new strategies and monitoring for strategic adjustments along the way. Annual conferences must, through revised appointment making, improve the earnings possibilities of young, effective elders. Such changes signal those who will be encouraged by improving financial conditions for young elders.

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