

Equipping the Called:
Cultivating a Culture of Call in
the Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church

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Abstract

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A call to ministry can be experienced at any age. However, to hear a call to ministry, a person must first be in a relationship with God. And to respond to a call to ministry by pursuing a ministry vocation, a person requires support and discernment. Churches, ministries, and denominations that encourage people to have a personal relationship with Christ and help them to respond to a call to ministry create a “culture of call,” where people can consistently hear and respond to a call to ministry. This paper explores how the Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church (UMC) has cultivated a culture of call by investing in ministries with young people, creating spaces where young people could serve and hear a call to ministry, and removing barriers to entry for those responding to a call to ministry. These intentional choices have resulted in the Florida Annual Conference becoming one of the top ten United Methodist Annual Conferences by percentage of clergy under age 35 today, with 7.1% of elders under age 35, and a significant number of clergy in leadership in the Conference coming from the millennial generation. By learning from the experience of the Florida Annual Conference and cultivating their own cultures of call, local churches, Annual Conferences, and denominations can increase the number of clergy serving the church, which is in decline. They will also experience vitality and growth through the gifts of young leaders which might have otherwise been lost without the support of a culture of call.

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Introduction

In 1 Samuel 3, we can read the call story of the prophet Samuel as a young child. Samuel is sleeping in the temple, and he hears God calling him three times by name. But Samuel does not realize God is calling him, so three times he runs to the room of the priest Eli. The more experienced Eli realizes that God is calling Samuel, and he tells Samuel that next time he hears the call, he should respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”¹ Samuel hears God calling again, and he responds as Eli told him, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”² Though God was calling Samuel, Samuel needed guidance to hear the call and respond. At his young age, he did not realize that God was calling him, but the older priest Eli saw what was happening and helped Samuel to respond to God’s call.

The same can be true for any young person hearing a call to ministry. God calls people at all ages, even the very young, to serve in ministry. But if that person is not in a relationship with God and does not have mentors to help them respond to their call, they will not hear the call and respond. The local church is a primary place where people come to Christ and hear Christ’s call to “follow.” For some, that call is a specific call into vocational ministry. Other places, like campus ministries, camps, and even larger denominational events can also serve as spaces where someone could come to Christ and hear the call into ordained ministry. Churches, ministries, and denominations that encourage people to have a personal relationship with Christ and help them to respond to a call to ministry create a “culture of call.” So how can local churches, ministries, and denominations become places that cultivate a culture of call, where people can come to Christ and hear and respond to God calling them into vocational ministry?

¹ 1 Sam. 3:9 New Revised Standard Version

² 1 Sam. 3:10 NRSV

Part 1: Cultivating a Culture of Call

Unlike most other jobs, becoming a pastor is not a matter of deciding on a career but of responding to a call. In *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer writes of what is required for someone to hear and respond to “the life that wants to live in me”:

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions... Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear.³

Churches and institutions that create space for people to hear their calling into ministry create a culture of call, based on first bringing people to a relationship with Christ, and second, giving them the opportunity to hear a call to ministry through service and ministry experiences.

In this paper I will explore how the Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church (UMC) has cultivated a culture of call by investing in ministries with young people, creating spaces where young people could serve and hear a call to ministry, and removing barriers to entry for those responding to a call to ministry. Though there is still room for growth, these intentional choices have resulted in the Florida Annual Conference becoming one of the top ten United Methodist Annual Conferences by percentage of clergy under age 35 today, with 7.1% of their elders under age 35, and a significant number of clergy in leadership in the Conference coming from the millennial generation.⁴ Beyond those who have become ordained elders by the age of 35, there is also a significant number of young clergy in the Florida Annual Conference who have started the ordination process and are serving as local church pastors, but who have not yet reached the ordination milestone.

³ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=700256.4.>, 4.

⁴ “A Lewis Center Report on Clergy Age Trends in the United Methodist Church: 2024 Report,” <https://www.churchleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Clergy-Age-Trends-Report-2024.pdf>

An audience for this paper is other United Methodist Annual Conferences who could take learnings from the Florida Annual Conference to build up the number of young clergy serving in their conferences. However, the research and conclusions could also be used by local churches, campus ministries, and other denominations to evaluate how they cultivate a culture of call to increase the young clergy serving in their contexts.

I will begin by sharing research from the Lewis Center for Church Leadership from the mid-2000's which lifted up the problem of a lack of young clergy in The United Methodist Church. I will analyze the Florida Annual Conference's response, including roadblocks that had to be addressed in order to move forward towards creating a culture of call. I will offer insights from a series of conversations with those in Conference leadership during the mid-2000's and 2010's to discover their perspective, intentions, and changes they implemented to establish a culture of call. Finally, I will share how these changes resulted in increased numbers of younger clergy and the results of surveys and interviews with millennial clergy currently serving in the Florida Annual Conference. In these surveys and interviews, a clear pattern emerged in the call stories of millennial clergy: the clergy person engaged in a relationship with Christ as a child or youth, served in some ministry capacity in their early twenties, and experienced a mentor relationship with a pastor who helped them to begin the candidacy process toward ordained ministry. This pattern came up in story after story of calling, and it is one of the keys to creating a culture of call for young adults. I will also consider how other churches and denominations can implement learnings from the Florida Annual Conference to create cultures of call in their contexts.

Some definitions before we go much further: The UMC categorizes those who serve as clergy in several ways. An ordained elder is a fully approved pastor serving primarily as a local

church pastor. Ordained elders are guaranteed an appointment, or an assignment to pastor a church. In The United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, the book of polity for the denomination, an elder is called to “bear authority and responsibility to preach and teach the Word, to administer the sacraments, and to order the life of the church so it can be faithful in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”⁵ An ordained deacon is a fully approved pastor serving in a specialized ministry role. This could be within or outside the formal church setting. In The United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, a deacon is called to “witness to the Word in their words and actions, and to embody and lead the community’s service in the world for the sake of enacting God’s compassion and justice.”⁶

Before elders and deacons are ordained, they are provisionally approved by their Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. This means they serve as a provisional elder or deacon for a minimum of two years before they can apply to be approved for ordination. This final approval process can take up to eight years. A licensed local pastor is someone serving as a pastor but with fewer schooling requirements and/or fewer interviews to become approved to serve in a local church setting. In the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, a licensed local pastor is defined as “all persons not ordained as elders or deacons who are appointed to preach and conduct divine worship and perform the duties of a pastor.”⁷ All of the above are considered clergy.

In addition, United Methodist polity divides up local churches by geography into Annual Conferences. These groups of churches and the pastors serving in them meet annually at a conference - hence the name. For example, the Florida Annual Conference covers the geographic

⁵ United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), ¶305.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., ¶315.

region just west of Tallahassee to the Florida Keys. And while the *Book of Discipline* stipulates specific standards for how Annual Conferences and local churches are organized and run, Annual Conferences and local churches are also given some discretion to create their own appropriate policies in certain areas of polity. So while UMC Annual Conferences have polity and rules in common with regards to the process for approving and ordaining clergy, they also have some discretion with regards to how they implement their process and their standards for approving clergy, beyond the basic requirements of the *Book of Discipline*.

Part 2: Where are the young clergy?

The United Methodist Church experienced a wake-up call in 2006, when the Lewis Center for Church Leadership released a report called “Clergy Age Trends in The United Methodist Church, 1985-2005.” In this report, Rev. Dr. Lovett Weems and his research team revealed that the percentage of United Methodist elders under the age of 35 had dropped from 15.05% in 1985 to 4.69% in 2005.⁸ Though some had known a trend like this was in the works, the hard data had never been compiled in this stark way before.

The decrease of young clergy in the church is an existential crisis in all churches, not just in The United Methodist Church. According to Barna Group research, “as of 2022, only 16 percent of Protestant senior pastors are 40 years old or younger, and the average age among pastors is 52.”⁹ I would propose that this is due to young adults not hearing a call to ministry as

⁸ “A Lewis Center Report on Clergy Age Trends in The United Methodist Church, 1985-2005,” Lewis Center for Church Leadership, Wesley Theological Seminary, 2006, <https://www.churchleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ClergyAgeTrends06.pdf>.

⁹ “The Pastoral Succession Crisis Is Only Getting More Complicated,” Barna Group, August 23, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastoral-succession/>.

opposed to God no longer calling young adults into ministry. Creating a culture of call is essential to mitigate and solve this lack of young clergy.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that an external factor in the decline of young clergy from 1985-2005 is the smaller size of the Generation X population when compared to Baby Boomers. According to US Census data, there were 76 million children born into the Baby Boomer generation between 1946-1964, and only 55 million children born in the Gen X group that followed from about 1965-1979.¹⁰ In 1985, “young” clergy - those under age 35 - would have been squarely in the middle of the Baby Boomer demographic. In 2005, “young” clergy would have been part of the smaller Gen X group. There were simply fewer young adults in the United States in 2005 than there had been in 1985. That said, according to the U.S. Census, in 2000, Gen X made up approximately 20.5% of the U.S. population, while Baby Boomers made up approximately 28.9% of the population.¹¹ The decline in young clergy from 1985-2005 was still disproportionately larger than the decline in the overall number of young adults in the United States at the time. There were other factors involved besides demographic changes.

One of these factors was a shift in values between different generations. Baby Boomers grew up in a time when entering a lifelong career was a common goal and value.¹² Pastors of this generation tended to follow a traditional path of graduating college, attending seminary, serving a church, and then becoming ordained. By age 35, some of these clergy had been serving for 5-7 years in ministry as ordained elders. As young adults, Generation X and millennials valued “finding themselves,” and this could mean that they took longer to hear and respond to a call to

¹⁰ Richard Fry, “Millennials Overtake Baby Boomers as America’s Largest Generation,” Pew Research Center, April 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/04/28/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers-as-americas-largest-generation/>.

¹¹ “Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000,” United States Census Bureau, 2000, <https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDPSLDH2000.DP1?q=Gen%20X%20population%20in%202000>.

¹² *Workday*, “Engaging the Workforce Across Generations,” <https://forms.workday.com/content/dam/web/en-us/documents/whitepapers/engaging-the-workforce-across-generations.pdf>, 4-5.

ministry than previous generations. My interviews and surveys of millennial clergy in the Florida Annual Conference also indicated that they could take longer to move through the ordination process due to life circumstances, like getting married and having children later in life.

I would also argue that measuring the number of ordained elders under the age of 35 only captures part of the picture of the young clergy serving in an Annual Conference. Though it is helpful to measure how quickly a Conference helps someone come to Christ, hear a call to ministry, respond to that call, and move through the ordination process, only measuring the number of those who have completed the many-years-long ordination process before turning 35 ignores the many young clergy who are serving in church and community settings as provisional clergy or as licensed local pastors and are ordained later. These young adults, while not yet ordained, have still responded to a call to ministry and are still contributing to the ministry of the Annual Conference, many of them as pastors of local churches. And while their clergy status is not guaranteed for life, and they are not guaranteed an appointment, in the Florida Annual Conference, those who are not yet ordained are still lifted into Conference leadership roles on committees and boards as they are allowed, per United Methodist polity.

Another factor contributing to the decline of young clergy was that churches had simply stopped paying attention. The Florida Annual Conference has long held a reputation as one of the largest Annual Conferences in The United Methodist Church. According to denominational data, in 2018 the Florida Annual Conference was the fourth largest Annual Conference in the United States by lay and clergy membership, with 1,224 clergy members and 263,274 lay members.¹³ This number has been reduced by disaffiliations of United Methodist Churches and clergy in

¹³ “2020 Delegate Calculation By Annual Conference,” The United Methodist Church, January 26, 2018, https://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/press-center/documents/2020_Delegate_Calc_by_AC_with_2016_comp.pdf

2023-24, but Florida still retains its standing as one of the largest Annual Conferences in the United States. This history has created a culture of abundance and self-reliance within the Conference, an attitude that persisted with regards to the seemingly never-ending stream of young clergy entering the Conference. For example, in the 1985 Florida Annual Conference Journal which serves as the minutes of the Annual Conference meeting, the Report of the Board of Ordained Ministry stated: “The Board is pleased to report that the number of students in seminaries reached a high of 138. Time and effort has been given to make sure that each of these men and women understands thoroughly the process for becoming a United Methodist minister in the Florida Annual Conference.”¹⁴ There was no sense at that time that this was the beginning of a decline in the number of young clergy in the Conference, but by 2005, only 5.25% of the elders in Florida were under the age of 35, ranking 20th out of the 62 Annual Conferences at the time.¹⁵ The Florida Annual Conference had taken it for granted that young people were experiencing a relationship with Christ in their local churches, heard a call to ministry, went to seminary right out of college, and started their pastoral vocation by age 25. And while some clergy followed that model firmly established in the Baby Boomer generation and the generations that went before, that straightforward path was no longer the norm for many clergy. Hearing and responding to a call to ministry is an individual action, but support from family, friends, local churches, and pastors is essential to a person’s ability to take steps to respond and become a pastor.

As a response to the 2006 Lewis Center report, the Florida Annual Conference had to make a mindset shift from assuming that young people would naturally pursue their calls to

¹⁴ “Journal of the One Hundred Forty-Third Session of the Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church,” The Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, ed. William S. Echols, 1985, https://www.flumc.org/files/fileslibrary/archives+history/journal+archive/1985_florida_journal.pdf.

¹⁵ Lewis Center Report, 2005.

ministry to intentionally investing in ministries that would create a culture of call so young people could be empowered to pursue their calls to ministry. This shift was the first step towards concrete actions which have changed the culture of the Florida Annual Conference towards inclusion not only of young clergy but diversity in all aspects of clergy. Bishop Ken Carter, resident Bishop of the Florida Annual Conference from 2012-2022, articulates this mindset shift in the Florida Conference: “I always felt like any young adult clergy could go somewhere else. I had a mindset of trying to make Florida, as far as possible, a desirable and good place to be in ministry. We had to see people where they were and what they wanted to do next.”¹⁶ The Conference had to move away from an “attractional” model of clergy recruitment towards an active or evangelistic model – resulting in creating a culture of call.

Part 3: Florida Takes Action

The Florida Annual Conference responded in several concrete ways to increase the number of young clergy in the Conference, and this response was most felt by millennials, who were between the ages of 10 and 26 in 2006, when these initiatives started. In interviews and surveys of millennial clergy now serving in the Florida Annual Conference about their ministry journeys, a common pattern arose: they had an experience of God’s grace in church, youth group, or camp; they were involved in a local church or campus ministry in college where they heard a call to ministry; and a pastoral mentor helped them enter the ordination process. All three of these pieces had to be in place in order for young adults to hear and respond to a call to ministry and complete the United Methodist ordination process by age 35. While the local church is the primary location where young adults discerned and explored a call to ministry, the

¹⁶ Bishop Ken Carter, Interview with the author, January 29, 2025.

Florida Annual Conference could influence some of these aspects, and the presence of the Conference is often felt in the background of the experiences of the millennials who were ordained after the changes implemented in the 2000's.

In a first step to create a culture of call for younger generations of future clergy, the Florida Annual Conference invested money and effort into youth and young adult ministries. Bishop Carter calls this strategy “over-investing in the young.”¹⁷ He realized that denominational resources of the UMC are channeled to people in the Baby Boomer generation and older generations through pensions and higher salaries, and he wanted to shift that financial investment to support children, youth, and young adult ministries. Another response was intentionally making appointments for new clergy coming into the Conference based on the person's gifts, not based on a “paying your dues” system. Finally, the Florida Annual Conference underwent a complete overhaul in their process for becoming a ministry candidate and in the process of ordination, resulting in a more welcoming process for all clergy, including younger clergy.

In a financial step toward “over-investing in the young,” the Florida Annual Conference continued to support Warren Willis Summer Camp, which had been in existence since 1949, several United Methodist campus ministries at universities in Florida, and established a pastoral internship program. Another financial response was to appoint Rev. Emily Hotho in 2010 to serve as the Associate Director of the Center for Clergy Excellence to focus on young clergy recruitment. For those completing the ordination process, Bishop Carter worked with the Florida United Methodist Foundation to give a \$5,000 gift to all clergy upon their ordination to help alleviate student loan debt.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In Florida, the Warren Willis Camp continues to be a significant place with a culture of call. Local churches send hundreds of children and youth every summer to attend one of the week-long camp sessions, where students participate in traditional camp activities in addition to daily small group, devotions, and worship time. Many students make a commitment to Christ for the first time while at camp, which is an essential first step in hearing a call to ministry. Warren Willis Camp is also a place where young adults can hear and respond to a call to ministry. The camp counselors are college students, and they serve for eight to ten weeks in the summer, attending nightly worship and leading small group sessions with their students. Many of the millennials serving in the Florida Annual Conference today note that the camp was formative in their faith journey and in their call to ministry, whether they attended as a camper or served as a counselor or both.

In addition to Warren Willis Camp, campus ministries are another place where young people can come to Christ and explore a call to ministry. Gator Wesley at the University of Florida and the Florida State Wesley Foundation are two of the largest United Methodist campus ministries in the United States, with strong student leadership. Florida Southern College is a United Methodist-affiliated four-year university with a robust religion department and several campus ministries. These places, in addition to certain vital local churches, are places with a culture of call - many millennial pastors now serving in Florida will trace the influence of a Wesley Foundation or on churches like First UMC in Lakeland, Hyde Park UMC in Tampa, or Christ UMC in Fort Lauderdale on their experience of calling, both in their experience of God's love and in allowing them to serve in ministry to hear their call to ministry.

The work of the local church is integral to young people experiencing a call to ministry. However, an Annual Conference can be intentional in how it is appointing staff and allocating

resources to support young adults who have heard and are responding to a call to ministry. In 2010, the Florida Annual Conference decided to create a new staff position within the Conference Office specifically aimed at recruiting young clergy. Rev. Emily Hotho, a young clergy woman, was tapped to be the Assistant Director of the Office of Clergy Excellence at this time. The Office of Clergy Excellence is focused on recruiting and encouraging new clergy and equipping current clergy to succeed in ministry. They are the office tasked with administering the ordination process for the Florida Annual Conference, which is overseen and implemented by the Board of Ordained Ministry, made up of clergy and lay members who evaluate and approve candidates for ministry.

Prior to her role in the Office of Clergy Excellence, Rev. Hotho had been working in the Conference Office in another area, and she volunteered as a mentor for candidates for ministry in her district. She learned that young people entering the candidacy process were waiting months to be assigned a mentor, and it was discouraging to be stalled in their process.¹⁸ Rev. David Dodge was the Director of the Office of Clergy Excellence at the time, and he wanted to try group mentoring to allow multiple candidates to be assigned to one or two mentors instead of one-on-one mentoring. The Assistant Director role was developed to design this new group mentoring program, to visit students in seminary who were from Florida or interested in coming to Florida, and to actively recruit young people to respond to a call to ministry.

The shift from one-on-one mentoring to group mentoring was not the only change implemented in the Florida Annual Conference candidacy process at this time. Rev. Hotho developed retreats that would take place twice per year that new candidates for ministry were required to attend to learn how to become a Certified Candidate in the Florida UMC and take

¹⁸ Emily Hotho, interview with the author, January 30, 2025.

their required psychological evaluations from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the UMC. The retreats were extremely successful. In our conversation, Rev. Hotho recalled times when there would be eighty or more potential candidates at these retreats twice per year. The candidacy retreat provided two clear times each year for new candidates for ministry to start their process. After the retreat, potential candidates were assigned to mentorship groups based on their districts, with one or two clergy persons assigned as their mentors. This shift led the way for even more dramatic changes to the ordination process that would come under Rev. Sara McKinley's leadership of the Office of Clergy Excellence starting in 2016.

Another part of Rev. Hotho's role was visiting United Methodist young adults within and outside of Florida to talk about being called to ministry. She visited seminaries to check in on candidates from Florida, to maintain a connection with them as they moved toward graduation and seeking their first appointments. She traveled to campus ministries and large church youth groups in Florida to talk about calling and starting the process to become a candidate for ministry in The United Methodist Church. She traveled to the Warren Willis Camp weekly during the summer to offer a workshop on calling and becoming clergy. In 2011, she organized a group of 35 young adults from Florida to attend Exploration 2011, a national event organized by The United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry in St. Louis, Missouri. Of those 35 young adults, over half are now ordained or seeking ordination in the Florida Annual Conference, and several others are working in lay ministry roles.¹⁹

Finally, a simple and tangible financial investment in new clergy which helped young clergy was to provide all those approved for ordination with a \$5,000 check from the Florida United Methodist Foundation. Bishop Carter and others in Conference leadership realized that

¹⁹ See Appendix 1

many clergy starting their first appointment come with lots of student loan debt due to the rising costs of undergraduate and graduate studies required to become ordained. He worked with the Florida United Methodist Foundation to establish a fund that could be used to provide this gift to all clergy who were approved to be ordained, a practice that continues today.

Part 4: Local Churches Take Action

In 2012 the Florida Annual Conference started a summer pastoral internship program matching young adults to churches where they could be pastoral summer interns. They modeled this program on other internship programs which were in place in local churches, particularly the program at First UMC in Lakeland, Florida. They met with Rev. David McEntire and the team at First UMC Lakeland to develop their Conference-wide program.

Though internship and employment opportunities in churches like First UMC Lakeland, young adults could experience ministry as part of their discernment, which contributed to what Bishop Carter called the “ecosystem” of calling in the Florida Annual Conference during this time. I interviewed Rev. David McEntire, the senior pastor at First UMC in Lakeland from 2007-2022 when he retired, to better understand the church’s flagship internship program. This has been one of the largest churches in the Florida Annual Conference for many years, and it is located about half a mile from Florida Southern College, a United Methodist university.

Pastor David was aware of the need for young clergy to serve the church from early in his ministry career, and throughout his ministry he felt a personal responsibility to come alongside young people discerning a call to ministry. After he was appointed as the Senior Pastor at First UMC in 2007, he found out that the church had been left an endowment for seminary scholarships, and the senior pastor was responsible for distributing that fund. At the time, the

fund was limited to those studying to become pastors who were from First UMC. He met with Dr. Waite Willis, a professor in the Religion department at Florida Southern College, who had a number of students from other churches who were discerning their calls but didn't know what it looked like to be a pastor or how to experience ministry before going to seminary. Though the UMC has a process to become a Certified Candidate for ministry, it is not a hands-on approach.

Pastor David approached the family that left the endowment and asked if their endowment fund could be used for pre-ministry students discerning a call to ministry. He got permission from them to create a scholarship that would provide for one intern per quarter – sometimes two. He worked with seminaries and Florida Southern College to identify students to intern in the fall semester, spring semester, and summer. Over Pastor David's fifteen years as pastor, he had 42 interns. Of the 42 interns that Pastor David mentored, 35 have gone into pastoral ministry, and the majority of them are in the Florida Annual Conference. Several of the millennial clergy currently serving in the Florida Annual Conference will trace the influence of First UMC Lakeland in their discernment journey. Pastor David's goal in the program was for future clergy to have a hands-on ministry experience in a healthy church: "When you experience a larger church that has healthy systems, you are well-equipped for ministry."²⁰

The goal of the internship at First UMC Lakeland was to help students see the whole life of the church that a minister might encounter. Interns attended a variety of meetings, including Church Council and staff meetings. They became part of the church's visitation team, conducting homebound and hospital visits. Pastor David shared that no one ever complained about an intern visiting them. The students would go on visits with a pastor a few times and then would go alone. Interns participated in worship and worship planning, and those who were in seminary

²⁰ Interview with David McEntire

were often given the chance to preach. With each intern, they would work out a contract with the set number of hours to be worked, expectations, and a rough schedule.

Pastor David shared that he enjoyed watching people discern their call to ministry. And those who discerned that pastoral ministry was not what they were called to do were just as celebrated as those who went on to pursue a career in ministry. It was rare that an intern didn't work out because most of the interns were recommended by their professors or schools to participate in the internship program.

Even outside of a formal internship, hands-on ministry opportunities offer space for someone to hear a call to ministry. Besides the pastoral internship program, First UMC Lakeland also runs an after-school program for at-risk children and youth called Neighborhood Ministries. This program provides after school care for low-income children from thirteen local schools. The students are offered a snack, game time, and tutoring until their parent or guardian picks them up. Neighborhood Ministries is staffed by college students from Florida Southern College and other local colleges in the Lakeland area. Many of the college students who worked with Neighborhood Ministries discerned a call to ministry, either as a clergy person or ministries with children or youth, through their experience working with Neighborhood Ministries.

Pastor David realized that just giving young adults access to serve in the church allowed them to discern a call to ministry in a tangible way. The pastoral internship program and Neighborhood Ministries at First UMC Lakeland helped young people to see that they had gifts and graces to offer the church. Around 2017, Pastor David approached the family who left the scholarship endowment once again to ask if the fund could be used for other ministry interns beyond pastoral ministry. They agreed, and the church started offering internships in youth, children, and music ministries in addition to pastoral ministry. This allowed young people who

might not feel called to pastoral ministry to still experience hands-on ministry to further discern their call.

The internship program at First UMC Lakeland and others like it have been made possible through large endowments or gifts given to churches and the Annual Conference for the purpose of enabling young people to respond to a call to ministry. However, any church could implement some aspects of a pastoral internship with lay persons discerning a call to ministry. The investment of time and mentoring is as important as the financial investment given through an internship or a part-time job to a young person. The key is providing space for young people to have a hands-on ministry experience so they can discern their calling and respond.

Part 5: Changes from the Top-Down

Like all churches, the Florida Annual Conference has recently faced the reality of a shrinking Conference budget. For example, in the years since 2020, the Florida Annual Conference has reduced steadily funding for campus ministries in Florida. It has gone from supporting 10 campus ministries to 8 and combining some campus ministries located in the same city. Rev. Hotho's position was eliminated in 2016, due to Conference budget cuts and her desire to serve in the local church. Around that time, Bishop Carter brought a group of young people to the Conference office to hear how they wanted to be supported in ministry, and they expressed that they did not want a staff person dedicated to recruiting young adults. They preferred to have opportunities to innovate in ministry.

Bishop Carter then worked with other Annual Conferences and a team to develop MLab, a series of conferences about innovation in the church where young clergy could come together. And while MLab supported young clergy who had begun to serve in their local churches, there

was no longer a dedicated staff person paying attention to the “pipeline” of the next generation of young clergy coming out of local churches and Warren Willis Camp.

Another strategy used by the Florida Annual Conference to increase the number of young clergy was to become intentional about appointing new clergy in general and young clergy in particular to churches that would fit their gifts instead of making them “pay their dues” in remote or difficult church assignments where they might get burned out. Bishop Carter shared that he and his Cabinet, made up of the District Superintendents or supervising clergy and other key Conference staff learned to “be flexible in terms of a sense of call... We tried to see individual people to serve in particular appointments.”²¹ When making pastoral assignments, Bishop Carter and his cabinet also tried to understand the cultural and family context of pastors so they could succeed. Bishop Carter shared, “I felt Florida could be chaotic due to natural disasters, so we needed to work with people more... We did not have the luxury of sitting back and saying, ‘You fit in to our way of thinking.’”²²

This value of younger generations also applied to Bishop Carter’s choice of leadership in the Annual Conference. As an example, Bishop Carter shared that when he arrived in Florida seven of the eight District Superintendents were going to retire from that role. A District Superintendent’s term is six to eight years, and The United Methodist Church has mandatory retirement at age 70. Instead of seeing Conference leadership roles as only for those who have served a long tenure, Bishop Carter values different generations working together. Especially when working on change in the church, he was intentional to listen to clergy who had at least 20-25 years left to serve: “I don’t think it’s fundamentally right for retired people or people about to

²¹ Interview with Bishop Carter

²² Ibid.

retire to build the house they would not live in.”²³ Bishop Carter also embraced reverse mentoring – learning from younger generations instead of just sharing wisdom as the expert in the room.

This value of younger generations having a voice in the future of the Annual Conference can be seen in how the leadership of the Florida Annual Conference changed over Bishop Carter’s ten years and beyond. The Board of Ordained Ministry, which evaluates candidates for ministry, now has one-fifth of its members in the millennial generation. The appointive Cabinet currently has one millennial serving as a District Superintendent and several other members who are part of Generation X. Other Conference committees and Boards also have young clergy serving as members and leaders, following Bishop Carter’s lead. This shift in leadership is evidence of an overall mindset shift to value the contributions and leadership of young people, which has led to more young people serving as clergy.

Part 6: Hospitality as a Tool for Discernment

In *Unreasonable Hospitality*, restaurateur Will Guidara writes of the need for a shift in the mindset in American culture regarding hospitality:

For most of this country's history, America functioned as a manufacturing economy; now, we're a service economy, and dramatically so... you have an incredible opportunity to be just as intentional and creative - as unreasonable - about pursuing hospitality as you are about every other aspect of your business... Which means addressing questions I've spent my career asking: How do you make the people who work for you and the people you serve feel seen and valued? How do you give them a sense of belonging? How do you make them feel part of something bigger than themselves? How do you make them feel welcome?²⁴

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Will Guidara, *Unreasonable Hospitality: The Remarkable Power of Giving People More Than They Expect* (New York: Optimism Press, 2022), 7-8.

The questions Guidarda asks apply to the institutions that govern the church as much as they do to the local church. Prior to 2017, the Florida Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry had a reputation for being adversarial, confrontational, and simply mean, which made the Florida Annual Conference an inhospitable place to pursue ministry. The Board of Ordained Ministry was not asking themselves if candidates for ministry felt seen and valued. They were not concerned with making them feel welcomed, even with the information coming out of the Lewis Center about the decline of young clergy.

However, Bishop Carter and other key leaders in the Florida Annual Conference realized the connection between the decline in young clergy and the arduous ordination process that had been the norm in Florida for many years. This realization led to dramatic changes in the ordination process in the Florida Annual Conference under Rev. Sara McKinley as the Director of Clergy Excellence and Rev. Dr. Brett Opalinski as the Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry starting in 2016. Based on their work with a team of laity and clergy, in 2017 the Board of Ordained Ministry implemented a more encouraging process – a move toward hospitality – welcoming new clergy into the Conference instead of making them prove themselves to the highest degree. Unsurprisingly, this shift has led to more new clergy and young clergy becoming ordained as elders and deacons since 2017.

Before 2017, a candidate for ministry would create an application for provisional status or ordination by answering a series of long-answer questions, recording a sermon, submitting transcripts from college and seminary, and various other required forms. Their application would be reviewed by the Board of Ordained Ministry, made up of seventy-plus clergy and lay members, and the candidate would be offered an in-person interview (or not). The interview would involve a small group and a large group interview where the candidate was grilled on their

written answers. They were then voted on by the entire Board and passed or not. As an example of the rigor of this application process, in 2005, only four of the sixteen applicants were approved for ordination.²⁵ For many on the Board of Ordained Ministry, it was a point of pride that most people did not pass the Board on their first try.

When Rev. Sara McKinley was appointed as the Director of Clergy Excellence in 2016, she had already served as a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry for twelve years. She knew that the process was not a positive experience for new clergy, and she took it upon herself as a personal mandate to improve the application and interview process.²⁶ Since she had just served on the Board of Ordained Ministry for twelve years, she had the trust of the Board and credibility in trying to revamp the process. Rev. Opalinski and Rev. McKinley worked closely with a small group of members of the Board of Ordained Ministry so there was integrity behind the changes that were made.

The team started with a few values: to make the process simple, conversational, and to maintain high standards of clergy who were approved for ordination. To simplify the application process, Rev. McKinley sought input from candidates for ministry to understand where there were redundancies in the process and to eliminate them. The first changes were changes in the forms that were used. Forms that were redundant were eliminated, and forms that asked for too much detail were revised. There are guidelines in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* for what information needs to be shared as part of the ordination application process and which questions all ordained clergy must answer. In addition, the UMC General Board of Higher Education and Ministry creates boilerplate forms to assist Annual Conferences to gather

²⁵ Annette S. Pendergrass, "Report on the Ministry of the Ordained - Division of Ministry: Board of Ordained Ministry," *2005 Journal of the Florida Annual Conference: Part III Awards, Reports, and Resolutions*, 2005, 173.

²⁶ Sara McKinley, Interview with the author, January 21, 2025.

information from ministry candidates. Rev. McKinley and her assistant, Holly Finley, went through every form that was asked to be completed by ministry candidates in the Florida Annual Conference starting from day one to ensure the information gathered was truly necessary and not redundant to lessen the burden on candidates and to eliminate wasting of time.

In addition, the UMC requires all ministry candidates to undergo a psychological evaluation as part of their application. Rev. McKinley's office revamped the psychological evaluation process in the Florida Annual Conference. They told the evaluating psychologists exactly what information they wanted about the applicants and in what order to stay focused on how the candidate's psychological profile could impact them in ministry. Their office also stayed on top of the newest standards for psychological testing, using the latest Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-3 which came out in 2020. They made sure people got feedback about their testing in a way that was constructive instead of negative. Applicants meet with a psychologist who has interpreted the results of their psychological testing, and their candidacy mentor meets with them one-on-one to go over the overall results and to share some potential strengths and growth areas for ministry. This shift influenced the entire UMC connection – Rev. McKinley and Holly Finley did a training in Dallas for other Annual Conferences to learn how the Florida Annual Conference had changed their psychological evaluation process.

Another change implemented to simplify the process was to shorten the required Residence in Ministry period from three years to two years. In the *Book of Discipline*, all those who are approved as Provisional Deacons and Elders must go through a Residence in Ministry (RIM) program for two or three years before they can apply for ordination. Florida had chosen the longer period, but Rev. McKinley did not see that one more year of RIM was making a

difference in the quality of the applicants for ordination, and she quickly moved to shorten the time frame.

There were also several changes made to the interview experience to become more hospitable to candidates. First, there was a shift in language from assigning a “contingency” that an applicant had to complete before they could become ordained to calling them “growth assignments.” In addition, candidates were invited to share in meals with the Board of Ordained Ministry before and after their interviews. This gave the candidates a chance to meet members of the Board in a less intimidating way.

I mentioned above that prior to 2017 applicants would turn in their application and may or may not be offered an interview based on their paperwork alone. Another change Rev. McKinley made in 2017 was to eliminate the annual “reading week” in November when the Board of Ordained Ministry members would gather to read applications and determine if someone would be offered an interview. Rev. McKinley shared, “In 2016 I made the calls to the ones who did not get an interview, and I came back to Brett and said this is awful. I’m never doing that again.”²⁷ After 2016, Reading Week was eliminated, and all applicants who turned their paperwork in on time were automatically offered an interview with a small group.

The biggest change that took a bit more time to implement was to the overall application and interview process. The *Book of Discipline* can be changed every four years through the action of the United Methodist General Conference, and in 2016, some questions for ordination and other procedural items were changed, so the Florida Annual Conference had to change their applications based on those revisions. This opened the door to other changes to be made to the overall application and interview process. Rev. McKinley and her team worked in 2016-17 to

²⁷ Ibid.

determine helpful and necessary changes, some of which were simple to implement right away and others of which took time to really shift the culture of the Florida Board of Ordained Ministry to become more welcoming to new clergy. They shared their proposed changes with the Board of Ordained Ministry in January 2018, and they were approved and went into full effect immediately.

Prior to 2017, the applicants for Provisional Membership and Ordination were divided among small groups of Board of Ordained Ministry members to be interviewed before being interviewed by the large group. The members of the small groups would each read a different part of the application: Theology, Leadership, Proclamation, and Personal Growth. There was no expectation that everyone would read the entire application of any applicant.

One of the changes made after 2017 was for all small group members to read the entire application of each candidate they would interview. That way the small group would gain a more complete picture of the applicant, and if the applicant missed something in one aspect of the application but addressed it somewhere else, the small group would all be aware. This meant each small group interviewed fewer applicants but read more of their applications. The small group would vote on whether or not to approve the applicant for provisional status or ordination, and they would share their recommendation to the large group, who would take another vote based on the small group recommendation. This change also did away with the large group interview altogether.

In practice, the changes took time to take root. The small groups were tasked with looking at the entire candidate, and at first the Board members did not like it. Trust took time to build between the small groups and the larger Board. If Rev. McKinley and other leaders on the Board of Ordained Ministry saw that certain small groups were not letting people through, they

changed the group members or addressed the issue. Some of the “old guard” members of the Board thought standards for approval of clergy would be lowered through this new process, but this was not the case. Instead of lowering the standards, the standards were clarified and shared with the applicants and the Board of Ordained Ministry. In addition, the definition of a successful application was standardized across the Board of Ordained Ministry and the more local District Committees on Ministry (DCOM).

In the Florida Annual Conference, before a ministry candidate is seen and interviewed by the Board of Ordained Ministry, they are first interviewed by their DCOM. The entire Annual Conference is divided geographically into districts, and the District Committees on Ministry are responsible for approving candidates for ministry first. When an applicant applies to be a Certified Candidate for Ministry, they need to have completed the group mentoring process and the psychological evaluation, as well as being recommended by their church and articulating their call to ministry. At that point, there are no educational requirements to complete, though applicants must be 18 years old. Some of those applying to become a Certified Candidate are seniors in high school, others are college or seminary students, and some have completed seminary studies. Certified Candidates must apply for recertification every year, and when they are ready to apply for Provisional status, the DCOM must approve their paperwork before it is seen by the Board of Ordained Ministry. Prior to 2017, the DCOM’s were part of the gatekeeping culture in the Florida Annual Conference, and standards varied widely from one district to the next. Some DCOM’s were too restrictive while others were too permissive. Candidates in school out of state also had to travel to their annual DCOM meeting in order to be recertified, a meeting that could take 15-30 minutes in person.

After 2017, The DCOM's job was reframed as walking alongside Certified Candidates to get them to the point where they could apply to be a Licensed Local Pastor or a Provisional Member, as they discerned. Certification interviews still took place in person (though that has now changed – all interviews take place via Zoom since the COVID pandemic). However, recertification interviews were moved online to Skype and other video conference platforms.

Rev. McKinley traveled around the Florida Annual Conference conducting trainings for the District Committees so they could consistently recommend candidates who were ready to move to provisional status. With the training provided by Rev. McKinley, standards were clear across all DCOM's so that ministry candidates could work on growth assignments as they moved through the process before they interviewed with the Board of Ordained Ministry. The Board of Ordained Ministry also had to trust the District Committees. If a candidate was recommended by the District Committee to apply for provisional status, then they got a chance to complete their application and to receive an interview. Rev. McKinley continued to give feedback to the District Committees if they were moving really unprepared candidates forward in their process to let them know which standards were not met.

Changes in the culture of the Board of Ordained Ministry to become more welcoming and positive took longer to implement at the District level. However, it was important to the integrity of the process for the DCOM's to be aligned with the Board of Ordained Ministry standards and values. Prior to this revision process, some DCOM's were unaware of the Board standards and were sending candidates who were not prepared to go before the Board. When they eventually did not get through, it created animosity and a sense of defeat for many applicants.

By 2018, the Florida Board of Ordained Ministry application process had kept its most important aspects: a written application reviewed by committee and a conscientious interview process, while also allowing candidates to be welcomed as clergy colleagues at a higher rate. During the interview, the idea is to have a conversation with the applicant, not to “grill” them or trip them up. The provisional candidates also attend annual check-in interviews to give updates to their small group and for the small groups to provide guidance and feedback along the way before they apply for ordination. This is in addition to monthly local meetings among provisional candidates and a mentor pastor as they prepare for their final ordination application and interview. As a result, in 2023, the Board of Ordained Ministry approved eleven applicants for ordination, a 76% approval rate.

In addition to this change in process to become more hospitable, the makeup of the Board of Ordained Ministry also changed during this time to be more hospitable to younger clergy. Every four years, new people are added to the Board of Ordained Ministry for 12-year terms. In 2024, ten of the forty-three Board members are in the millennial generation. This makes a difference as these younger Board members can bring their experience to bear on the applications of younger candidates.

Part 7: Hearing, Discerning, Responding

Why does any of this matter? Why is it important to have young clergy serving in churches? First of all, there is the commonsense reason: people relate best to leaders from their own generation. If you want more young adults to come to Christ and stay in the church, one way to help in that effort is to have younger pastors in the pulpit. Second, logistically, younger clergy are needed to fill the void left by the Baby Boomers in pulpits and in other institutional

leadership roles in the church. The young clergy in the 1970's and 1980's in The United Methodist Church were from the Baby Boomer generation. This generation was starting to retire in 2005, and by 2034, the youngest Baby Boomers will have reached the mandatory retirement age of seventy in The United Methodist Church, leading to many pulpit vacancies and a loss of institutional knowledge held by those in leadership from this generation. Finally, having young clergy can be seen as a measure of the vitality of an Annual Conference or any denomination. Young clergy had to come to Christ at a relatively young age in order to hear and respond to a call to ministry and become a clergy person before they reach age 35. It takes a vital and intentional church to reach children, youth, or young adults to bring them to Christ and nurture their call to ministry in a relatively short time.

There are many variables and outside factors to consider when looking to increase young clergy in a denomination or church but leveraging resources while also changing existing institutions to cultivate a culture of call has resulted in positive growth in the number of young clergy in the Florida Annual Conference while elsewhere the UMC has seen decline in its young clergy. In listening to the individual stories of young clergy in the millennial age group in the Florida Annual Conference, the common themes arise of a local church which nurtured a love of God and led them to a relationship with Christ by middle school; an experience of leadership and service in their teens and twenties in a local church, campus ministry, or camp; and pastoral mentors who encouraged them in their discernment and helped them in the ordination process.²⁸

As churches seek to grow the number of young clergy serving in them, only focusing on young adult ministry is too late. Vital children's ministries and youth ministries are essential. A call to ministry is not heard in a vacuum. It can often take time before someone can understand

²⁸ Stories heard through interviews and surveys completed by millennial clergy serving in the Florida Annual Conference.

that God is calling them into ministry and to take steps to respond. If that process can start sooner, then churches will see more younger clergy serving as pastors.

And once a child or youth forms a relationship with Christ, continued nurture and spiritual growth are vital to help them grow deeper in their faith. Not everyone is called to ministry, but every Christian, through baptism, is called to share the love of God. If we ignore children or youth or young adult ministries, we cannot be surprised when young adults are no longer hearing or responding to a call to ministry.

Bishop Carter refers to the “ecosystem” of calling in Florida, made up of local churches, Warren Willis Camp, campus ministries, DCOM’s, and the Board of Ordained Ministry. Each part of the ecosystem can play a role in the life of a child, youth, and young adult as they discern a call to ministry. However, in The United Methodist Church’s present reality, when budgets are being cut to compensate for churches which have disaffiliated from the denomination, programs to support children, youth, and young adult ministries are being cut as well. The effects of those cuts will not be felt tomorrow. But down the road, in ten, fifteen, twenty years, we might experience another wake-up call like the denomination experienced in 2006 with the first Lewis Center report, when we see a decline of young clergy – not because they are not called but because we have not supported them to hear and respond to call to ministry.

To counter the effects of these financial cuts, churches, Conferences, and denominations will have to double down on their intentionality. If we look at the three consistent factors needed for a young person to respond to a call to ministry at a young age (coming to Christ, serving in ministry, and mentoring from a clergy person), they can all be implemented using existing resources in local churches and ministries. Very little outside funding is necessary. Outside

resources can be helpful, but investing time and focus on children and youth, even when budgets are being cut, could help to make up the difference those funding cuts would create.

From 2006 to the present, the largest and lasting change that the Florida Annual Conference experienced which has increased the number of young clergy is a shift in mindset. Shifting the focus of the Conference from those nearing the end of their ministry careers to those who were just starting out created a change in the way appointments were made, budgets were designed, and even the ordination process itself. This change in mindset can also be made on the local church level. Ministries with children, youth, and young people can be seen not as something extra but as the core of the church's ministry to ensure we are passing on our faith to the next generation. A mindset shift like this can be harder to implement than a mere change in fund allocation.

It's also important to note that this mindset change did not result in dramatic increase in young clergy overnight. The overall percentage of ordained elders under the age of 35 is still only 7.1% of the elders serving in the Florida Annual Conference, up from 5.25% in 2005. However, there are many more clergy who are under age 35 in the ordination process, and though they might not become ordained until after they are 35, they will still make an impact on the local churches they serve and on the Florida Annual Conference as a whole because the Conference has made it clear that it values young clergy.

Even small, incremental changes can make a large long-term impact. The millennial clergy in leadership roles today can help to determine the direction of the Florida Annual Conference in the future. And though the Florida Conference has relatively more young clergy serving now than it has in the past, this is not the time to stop. Each new generation needs the

same level of investment and intentionality in order to hear, discern, and respond to a call to ministry.

There is a saying: God doesn't call the equipped, God equips the called. And while the "called" and God can do some of that work one-on-one, the church, both the local church and larger denominations, can help or hinder that equipping. By cultivating a culture of call – actively and intentionally seeking to support people discerning a call to ministry – churches will not only see an increase in the number of clergy sent from them but will also experience vitality and growth through the gifts of young people in leadership which would not have been offered to the church. This could be a great gift, otherwise lost, if churches and denominations ignore ministries with young people and continue to contribute to the decline of young clergy in the United States. Change is possible, but only through intentional action can it be experienced as a reality.

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Appendix 1

Group Photo of the Florida attendees to Exploration 2011



Photo Credit: Kathy Gilbert, United Methodist News Service