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Study guide:

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Get set for clergy retirement wave

Age, perspectives will change the face of the ELCA

By Robert C. Blezard

Our church is changing, and the leadership of the church is changing with it. In the next decade thousands of our pastors will retire. It may present short-term difficulties in finding people to take their places, and our church may suffer from the loss of so many experienced clerics. But their retirements may open the door for younger clergy with new ideas to lead our church.

Exercise 1: Pastoral experience

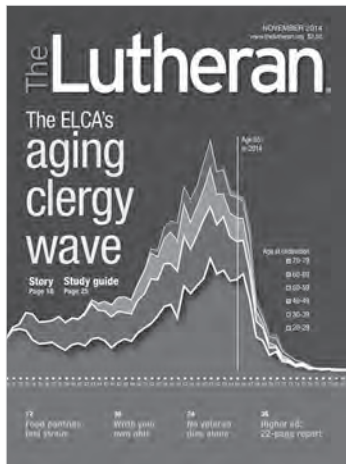
- Invite your pastor to your study group to talk. How long has your pastor served your congregation? How many years of experience does your pastor have?
- Ask your pastor (and others) to reflect on how your congregation and the church have changed since his or her ordination. How has the world changed?
- How does your pastor “stay sharp” amid all the changes?
- What has been the biggest challenge your pastor has faced in his or her ministry?
- How will the church need to evolve in the next 20 years?
- If your pastor is facing retirement in the next 10 years, ask what a new generation of ministers may bring to the church. What advice would your pastor have for the next leader?

Exercise 2: Retirement loss

- In the foreseeable future thousands of pastors will retire. How much of a blow will this be to the leadership of the ELCA as a whole?
- From your observations, what leadership assets do older, wiser, experienced pastors bring to a congregation?
- How will the loss of centuries worth of collective experience impact the church? How will the loss challenge the church? Change the church? How will the church cope?

Exercise 3: Retirement gain

- How much of an opportunity will the expected retirement wave create for the ELCA?



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- From your observations, what leadership assets do younger, less-experienced pastors bring to a congregation?
- How may the turnover in leadership challenge the church? Help transform, renew the church? How will the church cope?

Exercise 4: New leaders

- What are the biggest challenges facing the ELCA in the 21st century? Your congregation? What changes will be necessary to meet them? What kind of leaders will be needed to address them? What skills, attitudes and gifts will that leader need to possess?
- From where will those leaders come? How can your congregation help nurture and raise up those leaders?
- When a new pastor comes to your congregation, will members support that leader in making changes that may be hard?

Exercise 5: Elijah's retirement

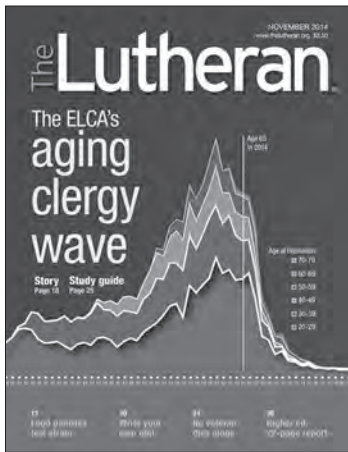
What can we learn from the "retirement" of Elijah, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets? Read 1 Kings 19:11-18 and discuss:

- What is Elijah's state of mind? His confidence level?
- Fear is a normal part of living, but why is his fear a detriment to his ministry?
- Is he really "alone" as he says in verse 14?
- Why is it time for him to retire?
- Does his current state negate his past accomplishments?
- Does God have a successor in mind?
- Does a pastor ever work totally alone?
- When is it time for a pastor to retire?
- Will God always provide leadership?

Exercise 6: David's selection

In anointing a successor to Saul, God revealed the divine criteria for leadership. Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13 and discuss:

- What was Samuel's mission? Why did he think Eliab was the one?
- How does God evaluate candidates?
- Why was David an unlikely choice?
- What conclusions can you draw about how God raises leaders



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for God's people?

- Need we fear the coming retirement crisis?

Exercise 7: Judas' replacement

When Judas Iscariot dropped out of Jesus' select group of 12, the disciples needed a replacement. Read Acts 1:15-26 and discuss:

- What steps did the disciples take to replace Judas?
- How did they break the tie?
- Is that how you'd want your congregation to pick your next leader?
- Does God always reveal a way? Are those ways always obvious?
- Can we trust that God will always provide a way to select the right leader?

Exercise 8: Pastoral history

If your pastor is facing retirement (or an anniversary of ordination or service to your congregation), honor him or her with a "time-line mural." Begin by hanging roll paper or poster-size sheets on a bulletin board or wall. Draw in a "time line" representing the years that your pastor has served. Invite members to write in important events in their lives of faith or in the congregation's life together, along with personal notes, photos, drawings, etc. At a special celebration (luncheon, potluck, coffee hour, etc.) invite stories and reminiscences and present the mural to your pastor.



Get set for clergy retirement wave

Age, perspectives will change the face of the ELCA

By Charles Austin

E LCA pastors are getting younger. It's not that our beloved, gray-haired pastors are suddenly dropping 20 years (and 50 pounds) and having playlists of the latest rock stars banging in their ears as they write sermons. The reason is that a large number of pastors are reaching retirement age this year and in the years ahead. As these leaders depart from active ministry, the face of the ELCA pastorate will change and become younger, both in age and outlook.

The numbers are clear. The ELCA ministerium is not wholly older, but a significant percentage is more likely to carry AARP membership cards in their wallets than credit cards from the Gap.

In the Northeastern Iowa Synod, for example, 60 of the 138 pastors under call to a congregation are age 60 or older, said Bishop Steven L. Ullestad. In the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, Bishop Lawrence R. Wohlraabe said that more than half of the rostered leaders (pastors and associates in ministry) were 65 or older.

ELCA Secretary Wm Chris Boerger, former bishop of the Northwest Washington Synod, recalls that the numbers there were similar, with more than half the active pastors over 55. In the Southeastern Synod, Michelle Angalet, an associate in ministry who is assistant to Bishop H. Julian Gordy, estimates that about half its pastors are nearing retirement age.

About 13,000 of the ELCA's almost 17,000 pastors serve in congregations. (The rest are already retired or in non-parish ministries.) Currently about 350 to 400 parish pastors retire every year.

The retirements had slowed a bit in the last five or six years, said Jonathan Strandjord, program director for ELCA seminaries. Sometimes this was because the downturn in the nation's economy made pastors look hard at the condition of their retirement and investment portfolios and decide to continue in their calls.

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It's happening everywhere

The retirement numbers for ELCA clergy parallel statistics for the country in general. According to AARP, about 10,000 baby boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—retire every day. While the number of older people in the workforce expanded in the early years of this century, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics research says the retirements of people 60 and over may actually shrink the number of people in the national workforce.

A study by the American Medical Association four years ago showed that half of the practicing doctors in the U.S. were reaching retirement age, and that relatively few doctors kept working past the age of 65, at least in terms of providing direct patient care.



MICHAEL D. WATSON PHOTOS

Heidi L. Torgerson-Martinez

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Nancy Winder, an assistant to the bishop of the Northwest Washington Synod, didn't keep statistics but saw pastors delay their retirement. "Anecdotally, what happened [in the economy] in 2008 and 2009 definitely changed some people's plans for retirement," she said.

But the improvement in the economy and the advancing age of the pastors who put off retiring mean that the bulge in retirements is likely to continue for the next eight to 10 years, Strandjord said.

"We are looking at the retirement situation in all our conferences," said Marie C. Jerge, former bishop of the Upstate New York Synod. "We know there is going to be a lot of turnover in the next few years."

As larger numbers of older pastors retire from active ministry, some of the skill and wisdom they gained in decades of service also departs. "I'm retiring the all-star team," said Bishop Jeffrey S. Barrow of the Greater Mil-

waukee Synod, who said future retirees would include "good pastors, some of whom have served 20 to 30 years in their congregations."

As those pastors leave the scene, some connection between congregations and synods and nearby clergy might also be lost, Winder said. "We will lose," she added, "the collegial relationships built up over the years."

But Jerge and other bishops said many retired pastors continue to serve in some way. In Upstate New York, for example, three retired pastors who aren't called to parishes are conference deans, overseeing colleagues in the synod's regional districts.

The coming retirements also mean that virtually all the pastors who were ordained before the 1987 merger that formed the ELCA will no longer be serving parishes. Therefore the "residual memory" of the

Making the decision

Most pastors never lose their sense of vocation or the idea that God has called them to a mission. Richard O. Johnson, a pastor who served in the Sierra Pacific Synod, actually retired a year early, at age 64. He said the biggest factor was an opportunity to teach, even if only part time.

That was "combined with a weariness after 29 years in one parish and

a sense that it was time for a change, both for me and for them," he said.

But there was also a call: "[I felt God] was calling me to do something else, even though it wasn't quite clear what that was yet."

Johnson was having second thoughts, but then remembered a time early in his ministry when it looked as if he would be without a call and

income. As that situation neared a critical stage, a call arrived.

"So," he said, "as I was contemplating retirement, I remembered that God had been faithful in that situation, and so why should I be anxious now? If God was calling me to a new path, the way would be well-prepared."

Charles Austin



Barbara Berry-Bailey

predecessor church bodies, which has had a significant impact on the life of the ELCA, will fade. Future pastors will have spent their entire ministry, in some cases their entire life, in the ELCA rather than having had formative or professional experiences in the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America or the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches that merged nearly three decades ago.

Bishop Claire Burkat of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod sees a need to maintain an age balance in the synod as larger numbers of older pastors retire, something she has been considering for four years. “That kind of balance won’t happen unless you work for it,” she said.

Since the bulge in retirements over the next few years is—statistically at least—a sure thing, it might look as if the ELCA won’t have enough pastors. Some might also fear a shortage by looking at the number of people graduating from seminary. Earlier in the ELCA’s life, about 250 seminarians graduated each year, Strandjord said. Last year there were fewer than 200.

But a clergy shortage isn’t likely to happen, say ELCA planners and several bishops interviewed for this article. “I’m not hitting any panic button,” said Wohlrabe as he considers the possible retirements of about half of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod’s pastors. “There are still going to be people out there to do the work.”

It appears that some of those are people who—according to the numbers—are or should be retired. “It seems there is a trend that people are working longer,

Portico handles clergy retirement funds

As a ministry of the ELCA, Portico Benefit Services (formerly Board of Pensions) helps more than 50,000 members “use their benefits to live well for life—during their working years and throughout retirement.”

It works with pastors, associates in ministry, diaconal ministers, deaconesses and lay employees sponsored by more than 7,000 organizations—ELCA congregations, synod and churchwide offices, seminaries, church-affiliated institutions, social ministries and other faith-based organizations. This includes retirees with retirement account balances, annuities or Medicare supplement coverage.

The Lutheran asked Portico about its preparations for a possible wave of clergy retirements in the coming years. Stacy Kruse, chief operating and financial officer of Portico, offered the following:

“Yes, we’re well aware of the anticipated retirement of larger than average numbers of clergy in the next few years. This issue has been, and continues to be, a focal point of Portico’s strategic planning. The leaders of this church, our plan members, are an important part of this church community, and it’s our ministry to anticipate and help them meet their needs—during their service years and into retirement.

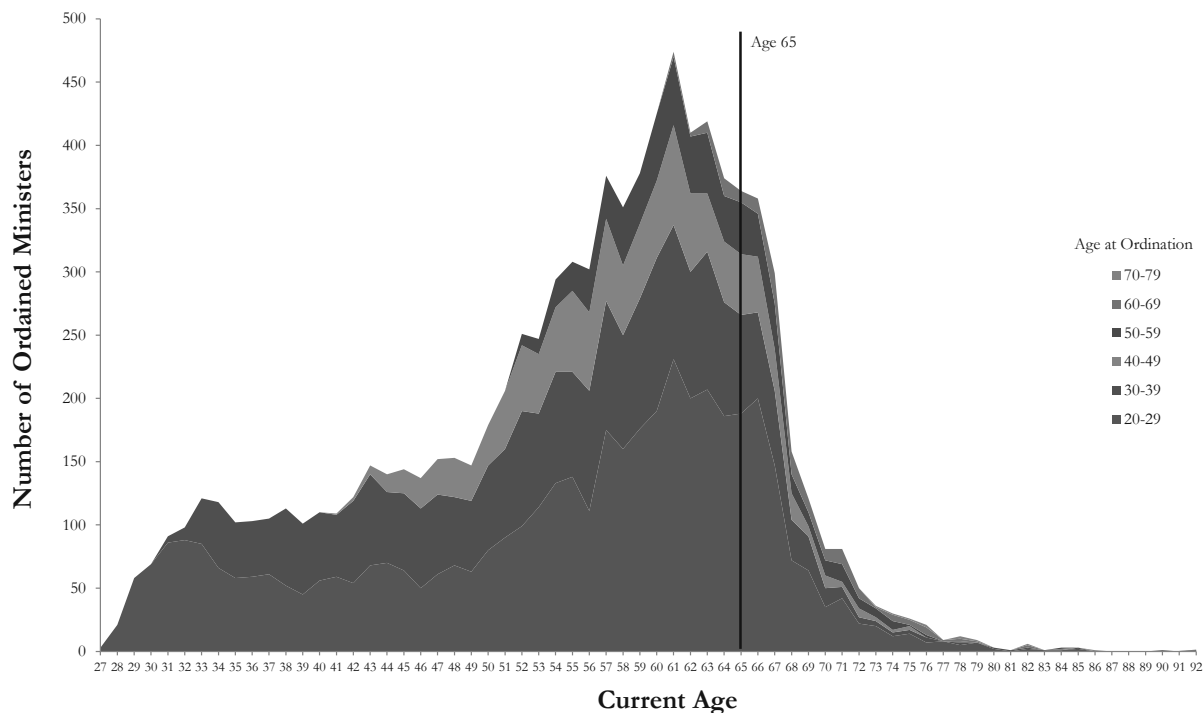
“Portico Benefit Services is aware of forecasts related to pastor demographics, including anticipated retirements. Unlike retirement benefits paid by Social Security, ELCA retirement assets are held in trust. Contributions made today are deposited into the trust, segregated and earmarked for each member’s use upon retirement. Similarly, the annuity assets are held in trust and adjusted based on investment performance and mortality experience.

Neither trust relies on future cash flows to pay current benefits. That’s why retirees are not dependent on active clergy to fund their retirement.

“While we help our members accumulate retirement assets during their working years, we’re focused on supporting them for life, equipping them to live well physically and financially throughout their retired years,” Kruse said. “Members can now access financial planning through Ernst & Young, more rigorous financial planning tools and guidance through Fidelity Investments, and the very popular Silver-Sneakers Fitness Program.”

Charles Austin

Age of Ordination for Active ELCA Ordained Ministers



Source: ELCA Roster Database, N=9,133

Created by Research and Evaluation, ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop, 9/2014

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and not just for financial reasons,” said Bishop Kirby Unti of the Northwest Washington Synod. “We are seeing sort of a rehabilitation of age, and 70 is the new 60.”

Unti said more people over the traditional retirement age find “meaning in what they do and support for them as they do it.”

Wohlrahe said, “It is the exception rather than the rule that people say ‘65 and I’m done.’”

In the Northeastern Iowa Synod, many people over 65 are vibrant, healthy and want to keep on going, Ulles-

tad said. Continued active ministry also seems attractive to second-career pastors who came to ordained ministry when 40 years old or older, he added.

“I don’t see anyone working just because they need the money,” Ullestad said, stressing the commitment the pastors have to the church and their ministry.

Wohlrahe noted that “some of the old lines between ‘active’ and ‘under call’ and ‘retirement’ are being blurred.”

Fears of a pastoral shortage are also alleviated by

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Issues pastors weigh when considering retirement

1. Their call. What is the Spirit telling them about how they should spend the rest of their life? In full-time ministry? In their current parish?

2. The nature of their ministry. Is their work “finished,” or at least have they accomplished most of what they saw necessary? Is it time for the

congregation to have a new face, a new voice, a new leader?

3. Their health. Can they handle the physical strains of weekly preaching, meetings, counseling sessions, sermon preparations, extra services during Lent and Holy Week? Are there signs of diminished physical or mental capacity? Has the

ministry become a tiring burden?

4. Their family. Do they want to spend more time with a spouse, move closer to grandchildren or travel and see the places they have dreamed of visiting? Is a spouse in need of care?

5. Their finances. Will what their pension and

Social Security provide be adequate? Will there be a need for additional income through supply preaching or other work, and will that be available? Can they afford to move to a retirement home or—if living in a parsonage—buy a place to live?

Charles Austin

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statistical and financial facts. “We have between 2,000 and 3,000 congregations where the Sunday attendance is 50 or fewer,” said Kenneth Inskeep, executive for ELCA Research and Evaluation. The issue is whether such congregations can or should continue to support a full-time pastor.

The smaller number of pastors available for regular calls is not a critical problem, said Barrow of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. “There will be a bunch of retirements,” he said, “but I would have to temper that fact with the fact of a shrinking church.” Not all retiring pas-

tors have to be replaced on a one-to-one basis as some congregations look for an alternative to the full-time pastor who served them for many years.

It’s anticipated that many small congregations will close or merge. If they close, a pastor is no longer needed; if they merge, move or otherwise reorganize their work, the new ministry can provide a more stable platform for future pastors. Ullestad said retirements and other vacancies in small congregations in the Northeastern Iowa Synod have brought about “many conversations, and quite often they have revitalized their mission.”

The statistically shrinking church is a reality, Barrow said, citing a Wisconsin city with 20 Lutheran churches where “20 years ago, most had multiple staff.” Today, he said, many of those churches have less than full-time ordained ministry.

Some retirees may serve those smaller congregations, but, Inskeep said, “there may be a distribution problem.” When they retire, many pastors move to popular retirement places like the Carolinas and Florida, he said, “so they will not be available in North Dakota or in some metropolitan areas.”

In the Southeastern Synod, Angalet said she is frequently contacted by active and retired pastors who seek the temperate climate of the Southeast.

The bulge in retirements is also likely to have a beneficial impact on the ability of clergy to move from one call to another and perhaps on the number of pastors available for vacant congregations to interview. It is also more likely that the older pastors will be replaced by those 20 or 30 years younger.

ELCA Secretary Boerger says this will improve the possibilities of healthy calls for seminary graduates and notes that “many of the newer people in the ELCA are younger and might appreciate a younger pastor.”

While it’s not quite a “youthquake” with thousands of Generation X pastors or millennials suddenly flooding into ELCA pulpits, soon the majority of men and women in those pulpits will be born after 1975. And although their ministry will change, it looks like many of the “old guard,” pastors born during the baby boom decades and earlier, will—because of their commitment to ministry—still be around. □

When your pastor retires

- 1. Prepare.** Often a pastor’s retirement is announced early, six months or even a year before it happens. Begin immediately to start “thinking ahead,” as this will help dissipate the sorrow caused by the departure. You might feel anger at the pastor for retiring and “leaving you.” Let that go. This is the natural course of events in life.
- 2. Give thanks.** Thank God for the ministry of your pastor (and remember previous pastors as well).
- 3. Let it happen, with proper dignity.** The kind of farewell will depend upon the pastor and the congregation, but plan a suitable time for doing a ceremonial close to a particular person’s ministry.
- 4. Remember, they can’t come back.** A pastor who leaves a congregation leaves. It’s inappropriate to ask Pastor Schmidt to do your grandson’s baptism because he officiated at your daughter’s wedding and “knows the family so well.” It’s inappropriate to ask the previous pastor to officiate at a funeral of a congregational leader he or she knew well. Such things undermine and compromise the ministry of the new pastor. It is appropriate to invite previous pastors for major anniversaries of the congregation, such as the 75th or the 100th.
- 5. Give the new pastor time.** Things won’t be the same as they were under the beloved pastor who retired. The new pastor will be significantly younger and the times have changed. Don’t be quick to make comparisons with the pastor who has retired.
- 6. Keep the previous pastor in your prayers.** Birthday cards or cards to recognize the anniversary of their ordination are appropriate. And it is OK to say that the previous pastor is “missed.” But do not do so in language that puts down his or her successor.

Charles Austin



Author bio:

Austin is a retired ELCA pastor and former journalist for secular newspapers and church publications.