

Suggestions for Churches with a Young Pastor

Churches that receive a young pastor need to remember how lucky they are. Many congregations say they want a younger pastor, but few have the opportunity. They ought not, however, assume their church will automatically reach younger people simply because of the age of the pastor. Having a young pastor might improve the likelihood of a congregation connecting with young people, but not without openness to other kinds of change. Congregations sincere in their desire to work with a younger pastor to reach emerging generations must be flexible and open to new ideas and possibilities. Take the initiative in asking the young pastor for ways in which your church can become more inviting for younger people.

Congregants are encouraged to treat a young clergyperson as a pastor, not as they would act toward their children or grandchildren. It can be helpful to consider how one regards other young professionals. A patient being treated by a young doctor, for example, may not be able to help thinking, “That doctor is young enough to be my child or grandchild.” But that kind of thinking is quickly set aside in deference to the doctor’s professional role. In the end, many older people find themselves reassured when dealing a younger professional who has the benefit of more recent training. This is the same kind of regard the congregation can offer to a young pastor. Show respect for your pastor by avoiding any remarks about age that could appear to lessen the pastor’s standing. One reason such support is important is that, while laity quickly discover the gifts younger clergy bring and accept their leadership, the same may not be true for staff now supervised by someone younger than they are. Pay special attention to language you and others use for young clergywomen, who routinely report the use of “little lady,” “cute,” and “darling.”

Church members can also take time to remember what it was like to be young or to be responsible for a young family. Then they may not be too quick to criticize a young

pastor who struggles with the number of night meetings on the calendar. Expecting around the clock availability from a pastor is unreasonable, regardless of his or her age.

Remember how important your support and care can be for young pastors. Many patterns and attitudes are shaped in those early years of ministry. Pray for them. Invite them for a meal. Understand their special challenges. Many are away from their support networks. Increasing numbers bring substantial educational debt. Be their advocate for adequate compensation, proper parsonage standards, and observance of maternity and paternity leave. Also encourage habits that can sustain the pastor over a long-term ministry such as regular Sabbath, time for renewal and sermon preparation, vacation time, and continuing education.

Younger and older generations in the church would do well to keep in mind the adage “We’re all in this together.” Especially within the community of faith, what unites us in Christ is far greater than what divides us as representatives of one generation or another. We are called in “all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love and making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit . . .” (Ephesians 4:2-4 NRSV)

Adapted from The Crisis of Younger Clergy by Ann A. Michel and Lovett H. Weems, Jr. (Abingdon Press, 2008) with additions from young clergy participants in the Lewis Center’s Lewis Fellows Program. Used by permission.

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