

NO PLACE FOR WISDOM? AGE DISCRIMINATION IN THE CLERGY CALL PROCESS

JOHN CHARLES COOPER

To speak of Age Discrimination against pastors may sound strange, but Age Discrimination is not new. Despite the myth that elders were more respected in the past, the 2,500-year-old Greek drama, "Oedipus At Colonus," is a savage reply by Sophocles (then nearly 90 years old) to his son who was trying to take over the dramatist's estate on charges of senility. In the play, the character berates the younger generation for ingratitude. More importantly, Sophocles clearly proves by his masterful handling of the dramatist's art that older persons are not incapable of work and creativity. As in the case of many philosophers, composers, poets, and novelists, the productivity of extreme old age represents the high point of the creative mind's contributions to humanity. Henry Roth, author of *Call It Sleep* at age 28, recently released his second novel at age 88, the first of a projected series of five novels. Perhaps even more telling, during June, 1994 scores of men in their late seventies and eighties celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day by parachuting into France just as they had done as young men in World War II. Aristotle was right, one must live long in order to achieve happiness, and to make lasting contributions to society.

Religion, supposedly, has always fostered respect for age. The Commandment enjoining respect for parents (Exodus 20:12), which by extension means all elders, is the first Commandment with a promise: the most important of all, that of the land. Leviticus 19:23 is a beautiful call to honor "The hoary head...the face of an old man," connecting that to reverence of the Lord. Both Genesis and Deuteronomy connect extremely long life with holiness and social importance. (See Genesis 5:25,27 for Methuselah and Deuteronomy 34:7 for Moses.) And the Psalmist in Psalm 92:14 declares of the saints: "They shall bear fruit in old age."

Contrast that last sentiment with this: Federal Age Discrimination in hiring lawsuits are up 30 percent—to almost 20,000—from 1992 to 1993. If we think that is

John Charles Cooper is a visiting professor of philosophy at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky, and at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky.

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

FALL 1996 • VOL. 51 • NO. 2

only in "the World," consider this evidence that the command to honor the elder has lost force in the Church. To illustrate the dimensions of the present situation, I will cite statistics from one major American Protestant denomination, the 6.2 million member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—of which I am a pastor. Despite the fact that the average age *at ordination* in one Protestant denomination, the ELCA, through October 31, 1993 was 36.1 years, it is becoming increasingly difficult for pastors nearing 50 and older to secure calls to new pulpits. Association, Presbytery and Conference Officials are frank in disclosing this to pastors in their 40s and up. One Church leader put the situation perfectly, observing, "Congregational Call Committees want pastors 35 years old with 30 years of experience." Another leader observed, "distance and age does affect the ability to interest Call Committees in even talking with a pastor." It seems that the hoary head need not apply.

Age Discrimination is an equal opportunity evil affecting persons of both genders, as well as all races, ethnic backgrounds, and lifestyle orientations. It is not solely a problem for white, middle-aged men; it is a problem that may prove to be even more damaging to the Church than it is to the individual. In view of this all pastors must work to overcome the inappropriate understanding of the pastor's role that leads quite often to unobtainable expectations of pastoral candidates. We must all stand up for justice, and no one is better equipped to do so than the older pastor, in whom God, through the grace of time, may have begun to create wisdom.

In looking over the ELCA Clergy Roster, of 13,168 active pastors, some 10,183 are over 40 years of age (and "everyone wants a younger pastor!") while the average age at ordination in 1993 was 36.1 years—a figure which has increased by 3.1 years since 1989.

Of the 10,183 clergy over 40, 5,465 are over 50 years of age (41.5% of the entire roster). Once more, 1,871 active pastors are over the age of 60 (14.2% of the entire active roster). And 406 active pastors are over the age of 65 (3+ % of the active roster). The average age at death of pastors, over the past five years (active and retired) is 77.2 years. These figures support the conclusion of an aging pastorate, becoming older not only by passage of time **but by the growing age of the newly ordained**. There is no reason to believe that Age Discrimination will be any less a problem in the future for minority pastors (or for women) than it is for male Caucasians now. America's youth-oriented culture cuts across all sociological sectors.

Finally, although records are incomplete on pastors who leave the clergy roster *voluntarily*, not as the result of discipline, we find 394 persons recorded, whose median age is 42.5 years. If we take 36.1 as the average age of ordination that means 6.4 years of active service. To be more fair, we may take the 1982 figure of 30.6 years at ordination, but this still yields only about 12 years of active service. Probably the real length of service is somewhere between 6 and 12 years of active service, or one, and possibly two "calls". Pastors are in their prime at 42.5 years of age—or they should be. Did these former pastors come to realize that while the experience they had was appreciated, the age they had attained in gaining it was not?

A successful pastor in Kentucky put it succinctly: "With ordination at over age 36, and call committees getting 'hinky' when you're in your mid-40s, you've got one call you can count on."

THE PROBLEM

Despite preaching against prejudice, the American Protestant Church, as an institution, is guilty of the worst sort of discrimination, Age Discrimination, self-destructively directed towards its own leadership cadre, the ordained pastorate.

This is not a thoughtless charge. Any Church official will frankly disclose the problem. "I have difficulty placing pastors over 40 years of age," one Southern Church leader remarked. "Perhaps the best we can do is secure an interim pastorate," a Midwestern leader observed. It is not surprising that Church officials routinely inquire of older pastors seeking new positions, "Are you ready to retire?"

There seems no place for the victim of age discrimination in the Church to turn. Church leaders are usually sympathetic but offer no alternatives except to suggest interim pastorates. It is high time the various denominations in their Assemblies took notice of this problem and formulated plans to overcome it. Ignoring the issue will not make it go away, for, over time, the situation will drive pastors approaching middle age from the ministry. "Younger" middle-aged pastors will see the *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin* clearly etched on the wall blocking their future and leave. History teaches us that discrimination not only destroys individual lives but the institutions that discriminate, also.

I invite the lay leaders of the Church to unite to address the problem, both as a University Ethics Professor and as a 61-year-old pastor who knows now, in my own life, what minorities, the handicapped, and women have long known was a hateful and destructive misuse of their talents and strength: Discrimination. As an active participant in Church activities I have seen the frustration boiling within pastors, of all denominations, who feel blocked in their careers, but worse, in their ministries.

My arguments here are based on both what I've been told by pastors and on the statistics made available to me by concerned Church staff members.

WHY THE CONGREGATIONAL PREJUDICE AGAINST OLDER PASTORS?

Why do congregational leaders so often think that a younger pastor would serve them better than an older pastor? This is the crux of the problem: local congregational lay leadership. Church leaders didn't invent the situation, they discovered it in the experiences of pastors with Call Committees.

First, Call Committees may believe that an older pastor may not be as physically healthy and as energetic as a younger pastor when they say, "We need someone with lots of energy!" However, self-starters, highly energetic persons among the clergy, tend to be self-starters and working dynamos throughout life, not just in their youthful years. The same observation is true of every field, professors, military officers, and mechanics. Youth and age have little to do with personality and motivation. Church leaders recognize that there are many underachieving younger pastors, too. People live longer and are healthier and active longer now than was the case in even our parents' lifetimes. Again, illness, accidents, and the need for operations occur in younger persons' lives, also. If a pastor was vigorous and hard working in his early years the odds highly suggest that he will be vigorous and active in his later years. Indeed, a Methodist pastor friend of mine is vigorous and active at the age of 83!

The trend to favor younger pastors is a prime example of the enslavement of the

churches to secular culture. The cultural fashion for 75 years has been to worship youth and beauty. We're all familiar with this charge but we all seem equally powerless to rise above it. The billions spent on cosmetics, exercise equipment, dieting plans, and hair coloring shows what many of us truly worship. According to Luther's interpretation of the First Commandment, this is *idolatry*, for whatever you place all your hopes in and the desire of your heart on is really and truly your god. Our clothing styles show where our trust is, as do the types of autos we drive, and also our popular speech. "Young is good, old is bad," is written on our foreheads. What is written there also says, "We fear age because we deeply fear death." In a Christian, that is unbelief.

Yet, deep in our minds are images of "the old woman" and "the old man," interpreted, if only unconsciously, as "wise." Our dominant fashion of worshipping youth grows out of Sigmund Freud's outlook: sex is all important, and death is a terror to be pushed away as long as possible. Youth-oriented culture is almost synonymous with the rise of the cinema, and later television, with its exhibitions of beautiful women and virile, younger men. The question for the Church is: "How do we make an exodus from this crass cultural enslavement that denies the spiritual and spurns the glorious hope of Resurrection?"

It's hard for us to believe that one's later years are better than one's youth, but the testimony of the wise and the good are all on the side of age. Our Creator surely knows what He was doing in establishing the life cycle. Growing older is not a sufficient condition for becoming wise but it certainly is a necessary condition.

Thirdly, it is often the older persons in congregations who seem most set on "having a younger pastor." In speaking with other clergy of several denominations, they have noted this, too. I've also noted the desire of elderly ladies to "mother" younger pastors. To think that normal, family-type psychological relationships are not operating in a pastor-congregational member setting is foolish. Church members often see younger clergy as the son they never had, or a substitute for the one they did have who didn't turn out the way they wished. Older men may dominate the younger male pastor, both out of father-son dynamics and out of the power differential established by their professional success and greater wealth. Unconsciously, older members of the congregation may sense that they will neither be able to mother or father nor dominate an older pastor. With both their drives to nourish and to control thwarted, such church members may, without consciously realizing it, become dissatisfied with the local church. "We need a younger pastor" translates into "We need someone we can control."

WHEN PARANOIA ISN'T PARANOIA

One bad reason for ignoring age discrimination is the facile response (by those who so far have not been discriminated against in this way) of "sour grapes." The implication is that a person is griping because they weren't called to a desired congregation. Now, pastors are human and "sour grapes" is always a possibility, but it stretches logic to consider the many cases that are self-reported and reported by church leaders as all "sour grapes." That response simply won't wash, logically.

Another, even more broadly expressed but still irresponsible response, is to put charges of age discrimination down to middle-aged, white male "paranoia"—persecution fears—in an

age of "affirmative action." Once more, there may be cases of middle-aged, white male "paranoia" out there, but the likelihood that such insecurities on the part of all pastors who find it difficult to receive new calls is the "reason" for the perceived situation is logically improbable.

The real overthrow of this charge of "paranoia" or self-servingness is a simple reality check. Not many persons, on the clergy roster or not, are going to change race, gender, ethnic or linguistic background, *yet all of us—regardless of race, gender or ethnic group—are going to age over the coming years.* (If we're fortunate!) If age discrimination in the employment of pastors is not effectively checked now, it will affect minority members of the clergy in the coming decades just as surely as it affects white males in the second half of life now. There is no reason why, given the conditions developed over the past 75 years in our society, that congregations won't want a younger Black, Hispanic, Asian or Native American pastor. *Age is the great leveler, it discriminates against no one.* Those who believe the age discrimination suffered, chiefly, by white male pastors now, will not affect minority members in the ministry eventually, are deluding themselves. The worship of "youth" is color-blind and gender-blind.

IS THERE AN ECONOMIC BASIS FOR AGE DISCRIMINATION?

Perhaps the most important reason for difficulties in securing a new call by older pastors is the same one given for many other inequalities in the United States, the Economic Reason. Congregations, especially smaller ones, may seek younger (often newly ordained) pastors because the new pastor may accept a lower salary than a pastor with many years of experience. Someone has suggested that there may be a "glut" of pastors at the upper end of the age scale. A reality check of the Lutheran congregations shows that to have no basis.

Why? The ELCA has many smaller congregations that have no pastors, some of which have been vacant for long periods. An ELCA study revealed that there were 1,639 vacant congregations as of October 25, 1993. Of course, 945 were congregations with 175 or fewer members. In point of fact, many of the very small congregations were probably unable to pay the accepted salary for a pastor of any age or any number of years experience. While some of the "larger" small congregations may be able to meet the expected salary (barely) for a young, or inexperienced, pastor, most probably cannot. Therefore, since smaller congregations (at present) cannot "afford" a well-trained pastor of any kind, it is false to hold that these smaller congregations necessarily desire younger pastors in order to save money. We see that an argument that is probably true, i.e., higher expected salaries keep very small congregations from having any full-time professionally trained pastoral services, is used by an *illegitimate switch* to prove that older pastors are simply priced out of the market in such cases. Actually, older pastors, without children at home, may well be willing to take lower salaries than younger men fresh out of Seminary or Graduate School. Offering older pastors these congregations at salaries such congregations may be able to pay might mean the strengthening of ministry throughout the Protestant churches.

In any case, the economic issue needs to be addressed. Several potential solutions immediately come to mind.

- First, congregations (smaller and otherwise) that have financial difficulties affording full-time pastoral leadership could use Assembly or Convention subsidy to enable ministry to take place.

- Second, very small congregations that are not realistically expected to grow might close or merge into more viable units so as to be able to support pastoral ministry. Actually, such consolidation is going on, to a degree, in every mainline denomination.
- Third, very small congregations that have promise of growth might be served by the "Tentmaker Ministries" of pastors who earn their living in universities, counseling centers, as consultants, as public school teachers, or by retired pastors.
- Finally, salary expectations could be lowered. More cannot be expected from lay people than they can reasonably do. Let the "market" regulate itself, as economists, business leaders, and politicians are continually chanting. There may be pastors, glad for a new challenge, who will not let a lower salary stop them from accepting a call. That is, after all, the way it has been for centuries.

Note that these last three possibilities require no "top down," Convention or Assembly, involvement. They can be put into practice at the local and regional level.

SOME SUGGESTIONS TO LAY LEADERS FOR A SOLUTION TO AGE DISCRIMINATION

Age Discrimination in clergy selection needs to be addressed with hard nosed solutions for the spiritual health of the Church. Lasting solutions will only come from the pooled wisdom of the deacons, elders, presbyters, lay leaders, pastors, Conferences, Meetings, Synods, Assemblies, Presbyteries, and the Assemblies of the several denominations. Here are some directions that this group thinking might explore:

- Adopt an "Age Affirmative Action" Program within the churches.
- The Publication Board could prepare educational materials on Age Discrimination and how to overcome it in both video and workbook forms, to be studied at meetings, Assemblies and at the National Convention of the SBC and other denominations, as well as made available to all congregations.
- A course entitled "Calling A Pastor" could be prepared by the Publication Board and offered to every congregation seeking a pastor. This course should cover all aspects of calling a pastor, not just material on Age Discrimination. It should address ethnic and racial discrimination, as well as attempting to build a reasonable set of expectations for the pastor.

Just recognizing the damage done to the morale of the ministry and the longer term ill effects on the larger Church caused by Age Discrimination in the clergy call (and retention) process is a good start. Becoming aware of just what we are doing to fellow Christians (our pastors) and to Christ's Church in depriving the first of employment and the second of the slowly matured wisdom of Christian leadership should make every Deacon, Elder and other leader an advocate of keeping mature pastors. Recognizing the internal dynamics, the prejudice against age and the desire for "younger preachers" should help, too. Are we aware of just how *controlling* many of us are? Are we aware that the desire to exercise such control may be a very real resistance to the Holy Spirit? It is the Spirit, after all, and not our knowledge and power who is the true leader, guide, and counselor of the Church.

It is time every church member comes to terms with the fact that God made the world and the ways in which it operates. No one starts out at full power, with all knowledge. The young, no matter how well-educated, have much—one is inclined to say, *everything*—yet to

learn. God calls a person to the ministry but he doesn't at the same time fill his head with Greek, his heart with sensitivity, and his mind with experience. All that knowledge and learning takes time—a lot of time. Even the life of holiness, of growth in sanctification, takes time; in fact, a lifetime. There is nothing wrong with youth. Youth is youth, but youth means no experience. I Timothy 5:22 warns the Church not to lay hands quickly on anyone. Christian leadership needs to be developed. Like everything else that God makes, from apples to mountains, it takes time. As Paul tells Timothy: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." (I Timothy 5:17)

We often decry the contemporary breakdown of traditional family values today but, generally, have no real clue as to why the decline in respect for self and others and in the fear of God has occurred. Some American philosophers spoke of this decline as much as thirty years ago, and traced it to a breakdown of respect for authority. The basis of all authority is the respect of the younger for the older. Once that is gone, respect for all forms of secular and churchly authority goes, too. The preference of the Church's Call Committees for younger men and the rejection of older pastors is a clear case of the breakdown of respect for authority among "Christians." Is it any wonder that more and more "Christian" homes are broken by divorce? Is it a surprise that the children of "Christian" homes end up on drugs, pregnant, murdered, or in prison? Traditional family values jump out at us on every page of Scripture, and they all rest on the basic, fundamental respect of the younger for the elder. Brethren, think seriously about these things!

Discrimination is discrimination, and while we must make the Church aware of discrimination in its many forms, it is not enough if we neglect to educate against the one kind of discrimination that will eventually hurt everyone, from white males to Hispanics, Blacks, and Native Americans as well as the handicapped: our pervasive discrimination against older persons in the ministry. Even more importantly, we must make room for older pastors, many of whom, by God's grace, bear a hard-won wisdom from the past down to now, and on to the Church of the future. The answer of any servant church to the question, "Is there no place among us for wisdom?", must be a resounding "Yes!"

Pastor Cooper wishes to note that he deliberately did not name pastors and church leaders quoted in this article, yet all quotes are factual. He apologizes for demolishing certain arguments with Logic but that is a condition that affects people who teach Logic as well as Ethics. Dr. Cooper, particularly, wants to thank the Department of Research and Evaluation in the Chicago office of the ELCA and, especially, to Martin Smith of that office for his efforts in getting current and invaluable statistics which the author has used in this article. He is also grateful to United Presbyterian, United Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and Southern Baptist pastors, staff persons, and theologians who shared their experiences and insights so generously and openly with him. In the end, all labels fade away and we are all servants of Christ and pastors of His One Body, the Church Universal throughout all time and throughout the world.

