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## Elijahs and Elishas: We need each other

*Faithful Christian ministry requires holding together memory and hope. After 40 years in ministry, a retired bishop sees that both younger and older pastors have contributions to offer the church.*

by [Kenneth L. Carder](#)

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*Editor's note: This article previously appeared on the [Sustaining Pastoral Excellence](#) website.*

This summer, I attended a United Methodist Annual Conference session in which retiring clergy and new clergy were recognized in the same service. It was a powerful experience to participate in honoring those who had spent their lives in ministry and those being consecrated for a life of service within the church.

The preacher for the event masterfully spoke to both the retirees and the newly graduated seminary students, weaving together memory and hope as the foundation of faithful ministry. The climax of the service came when a representative of the retiring class placed a mantle over the shoulders of a member of the newly commissioned class.

"I transfer this mantle from our generation to the young," the retiring pastor said, "indicating thereby that the responsibilities and dedication of the older generation will be caught up and carried on by the young, and the spirit of today's Elijahs will rest upon today's Elishas."

"We who come after you take up the mantle which falls upon us," the representative of the next generation responded. "May we inherit a double share of your spirit."

As a bishop I presided at many retirement, commissioning and ordination services, but this one was especially poignant for me. Usually the commission of new clergy and the celebration of retirees are separate services, but having them together was particularly meaningful. Because I was visiting my home conference, the retiring pastors were not only my contemporaries but also lifelong friends and colleagues. In addition, five students I recently taught in seminary were among the young pastors.

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For me, the service brought into focus the importance of the church receiving and nurturing the gifts of each generation. Too often, our culture pits generations against each other, placing unrealistic expectations on the young and discarding the old as useless. The truth is both the young and the old need each other.

After more than 40 years in ordained ministry, including 12 years as an active bishop, I now spend most of my time with young women and men preparing for ministry. As I reflect with them on the past, they confront me with the challenges of the future. Together, we have exciting conversations and invigorating opportunities to learn.

I confess that I often wonder what I could possibly offer those studying for ministry. The world, the church, and even the seminary have changed so drastically over the last four decades. What were once my current events -- the cold war, landing on the moon, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy; Watergate and so much more -- are my students' recorded history.

The church these young pastors are entering is far different from the church that was left to my generation. Membership in the mainline churches is declining. The church is no longer a privileged institution in American society. The culture places little value on ordained ministry as a vocation. When my generation entered ministry, we assumed people already had faith, which we only needed to interpret for them in light of contemporary worldviews created by science and technology. Today's pastors, however, live in a culture in which most people, including even church members, consider faith in God one among many options. Instead of a faith in search of understanding, we now confront an understanding in search of faith.

In the face of such challenges, the church today is tempted to burden younger pastors with unrealistic expectations and to expect nothing from the older ones. Too many judicatory leaders and congregations assume that the renewal of the church is in the hands of the younger clergy and that the older clergy are obstacles to the church's future. Such assumptions are overly simplistic.

Faithful Christian ministry requires holding together memory and hope; therefore, the older and younger generations of pastors need each other. Any emphasis on young clergy that disparages the gifts of older clergy is idolatrous and counterproductive. It is a form of generational chauvinism. No generation has a monopoly on theological insight and vision, pastoral wisdom and passion, and personal wholeness and maturity. Both younger and older pastors have insights and contributions gleaned from their contexts and experiences that are needed by the contemporary church.

What would happen if the church offered an alternative to our culture's segregation of ages and found ways to bring younger and older clergy together to share gifts and experiences? What if we commission the retirees to enter a new phase of ministry rather than merely thanking them for past service? Perhaps we can commission them to glean from their experiences and pass the learning onto the new generation.

After all, retirement is not a biblical term. God's call to ministry does not include age-based term limits. Ask Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Annanias. Effective and faithful ministry is for all ages.

Spending time with young women and men preparing for ministry is a gift. I am learning from a generation whose experiences are vastly different from mine. They have so much to teach me. But I am also learning that my experiences offer insights that they need. We need each other. And the church needs us both.

