

Network hopes to avert clergy shortage

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DURHAM, N.C., (ABP)—In a demonstration of their commitment to develop young ministers, about 40 churches have signed a covenant to coordinate their efforts and—they hope—avert a clergy shortage.

Founding members of the Shiloh Network signed their agreement recently at the close of Baptist Heritage Week at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C. Church representatives also discussed mentoring methods like retreats, fellowships, seminary scholarships and financial loan programs.

Though aided by Duke and other institutions, the network was founded as an initiative of local congregations. The name Shiloh comes from the Old Testament account of Samuel hearing his call to ministry at a temple at Shiloh.

“The whole idea of creating call in a small church is relevant for us in terms of raising up leaders,” said Gregg Hemmen, pastor at Cane Creek Baptist in Hillsborough, N.C. “Raising leaders from among us who are skilled and helping them to feel that ‘Yeah, I am equipped to do this’ is a great thing,”

said Hemmen.

The network will help curb clergy shortages and put vigor into congregational cultivation of pastors, said Curtis Freeman, director of Duke's Baptist House of Studies. Otherwise, he said, churches could be left with a short supply of leadership.

While seminary enrollment is up nationwide, only a third of seminary students intend to work in a church, a study by Auburn Theological Seminary revealed. Further complicating the problem, today's seminary student typically is older than in years past and pursuing a second or third career, which means they will be in the clergy pool less time.

In the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, 33 percent of pastors were more than 55 years old in 2001, while only 7 percent were younger than 35, Freeman noted. That means in the next 10 years, almost five times as many leaders will retire as the young clergy who take their place.

Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas is ahead of most congregations in stemming that clergy drain. Wilshire's Pathways to Ministry program includes training for high school, college and seminary students.

The church receives funding from the Lilly Endowment to maintain a pastoral resident program.

"If churches really love what God is up to in their church, they will want another generation to follow in that vein," Pastor George Mason said. Wilshire's congregational "self-esteem" is higher than ever, he said, thanks in part to the way members feel involved in the program.

"They see themselves as an incubator for the ministry," Mason said. "We have been growing greatly in our understanding in this regard. The congregation has a sense that they have something to offer."

Leaders at Wilshire Baptist envision a three-year revolving emphasis for the Shiloh Network at their church, he noted.

Organizers of the Shiloh Network plan to involve some of the same elements recounted in the biblical account of Samuel's call. They hope to integrate each phase of the covenant—calling, qualifying and connecting—as Shiloh candidates and initiatives develop.

Calling involves naming specific people who have the skills and aptitude to become ministers.

Qualifying means fostering those individuals through education, whether it be internships, seminary or other learning opportunities. Connecting means advocating, grooming and placing pastoral candidates with selected bodies of worship.

Frank Granger of First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., came to the same conclusion that others had regarding the “clergy crisis” among churches nationwide. As the church's minister of education, Granger saw the network as a way to support local seminaries and leaders.

“I see that it is significant for a church to invest in theological education, because whether they realize it or not, that's where their future leadership will come from,” Granger said. “We need to support these schools, and I see the network as a way to do that.”

For its recent 175th anniversary, the Athens church invited people whom the church has ordained. For Granger, that told a lot about the state of things when it comes to young leaders.

“Through our whole history, we've ordained 18 people,” Granger said. “We've ordained six since 1972 and three in the last five years.”

The difference in ordination will come from lay involvement, he insisted.

The key for his church, he said, is “getting more focused in the congregation as a whole. I’m convinced we’ve got to get this to the lay leadership.”

Part of that congregational involvement involves money. As members of the network, each church must contribute \$500 annually—or 0.1 percent of its annual budget, whichever is smaller—to support of the network. While some churches may have limited budgets, Granger said, one thing he appreciates about the network is that it allows each entity to creatively find a way to participate.

“Our missions ministry has a certain amount of money available for this type of thing,” Granger said. “I see this as a part of missions, and this was a one-time gift that fit that description.”

Mason agreed.

“Churches that have very little resources can still do this with not a lot of money,” he said. He plans eventually to create a website detailing the network so interested churches nationwide—no matter the size, location or budget—can glean information and resources for their own participation. Some of that information may detail ways churches can tailor logistics of their involvement to fit their congregation.

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