



# Congregational Resource Guide

Resources for Congregations

## “So that...” Leadership, Accountability, and The Future Church An Interview with Lovett Weems



### Overview

Lovett Weems encourages new thinking on church leadership, and in particular, how best to support young clergy and the church they will inherit. Some of his latest work through the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary has focused on researching young clergy, youth ministry, and the future church.

This interview discusses Lovett Weems's work and research on the following:

- Part I: Young Clergy
- Part II: The Future of the Church
- Part III: Youth Ministry
- Part IV: Thoughts on Leadership
- Resources and Continued Reading

### About Lovett Weems

The Reverend Doctor Lovett H. Weems, Jr. is Executive Director of the The Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary, where he is also Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership. Based on his experience and research, he has written extensively on leadership practice and theory. He is a prolific author, with more than 250 published articles and books. Many of his books on leadership are used regularly as seminary textbooks.

Before becoming Director of the Lewis Center, he served for eighteen years as President of Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri, and for three years as Vice President of Wesley Theological Seminary. For twenty years he served as a pastor and administrative leader in the United Methodist Church. He is a past president of the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools in the United States.

The Congregational Resource Guide staff interviewed Lovett Weems in June 2006.

### Interview

**CRG: Much of your work focuses on leadership, young clergy, and the future of the church. Can you tell us about each of these and how they relate?**

*Lovett:* I've been drawn into these topics from different directions.

We know that leadership transitions are times of great opportunity and also of great vulnerability. Secular literature tells us that derailment is most likely to occur during times of transition. In terms of clergy leadership, these transitions include: entering fulltime ministry after graduating from seminary, leaving one ministry setting and

beginning at another, moving to a new church that is a very different in size or type from a previous one, or shifting from being a pastor to being a judicatory official or denominational leader.

We have followed young clergy through transition from seminary, studying the probationary process in the United Methodist Church. We surveyed all seminary graduates who'd been ordained in the previous five years. That research drew us to the issue of younger clergy. We followed up on the perception that there aren't as many young clergy, and that the young clergy we did have were having difficulties. That led us to the Clergy Age Study and to consider the church these young leaders were going to inherit and lead in the future. That exploration led me into the emerging church conversation. I was invited to be guest editor of an issue of *Circuit Rider* magazine on reaching emergent generations.

## Part I: Young Clergy

### *CRG:* What have you discovered through your work with young clergy?

*Lovett:* I have heard from a lot of younger clergy through my research, working with the Center's Lewis Fellows (an interdenominational group of young clergy convened to learn about leadership and support each other in their ministry), and the age study. Fewer young people are choosing to be ordained ministers. Our results found that the percentage of clergy aged 35 and under has changed from 15% in 1985 to 5% or less in 2005.

I'm concluding that we must rethink a lot of issues related to young clergy. One issue is the **recruitment** of young people into the profession and to serve as church lay leaders. Recruitment might be the easiest part, but it needs to be addressed along with everything else. It will probably be most effective after we've dealt with some other issues.

One of the other big things that needs to be addressed is the **nature of the church itself**. Organizations get the leadership they deserve, not the leadership they need. Declining organizations have a declining leadership base and, just when they need the best leadership, they're not attracting quality younger leaders.

There's also got to be rethinking about how younger clergy are **deployed** in those early years. Most new clergy are put in situations where they are just doing time; usually in situations where they are not learning a lot about the new church—the church of the future. They often have to deal with some very **dysfunctional situations**. They might be experiencing an **age difference** of sometimes 50 years or more between their constituency and their own age.

There's a need for **more support** for younger clergy. There needs to be a lot more listening going on. There's a lot of struggle...and the church is going to pay a high price for it.

### *CRG:* Is there specific advice you have for those working with young clergy?

*Lovett:* I think that when a seminary student is working in a congregation, the congregation and the student share similar hopes. The student so badly wants to succeed while the congregation so badly wants the student to succeed. When someone is out of seminary and working full time in a congregation, that collaborative attitude changes.

I spend a good bit of time with United Methodist clergy in their first three years. I see them make a lot of mistakes. I see a lot of mistakes that congregations make, too. From the young clergy perspective, I often see two things that aren't helpful.

First: when young clergy have good ideas, they go and preach on them. Then they institute the ideas. They don't consult or think about how they will be received. That's a classic mistake.

The second is when young clergy know that they have to work an idea through the system. They take the new idea—say natural church development, appreciative inquiry, or the idea of hiring a half-time youth worker—to the governing board. The board says no. Then what do young clergy do? It's almost as if they don't have other options.

A third and better option is to do much more preparatory groundwork. Unfortunately, it's not like the old days where most of the buy-in was done before taking the new idea to the full board. You got your support beforehand. As the idea was discussed, support was given, but the idea changed along the way. Today, decisions are made without other involvement, or only in formal settings—neither of which are very conducive to change or adaptation.

**CRG: Change can be difficult for young clergy to manage. Do you have other observations about the interaction between younger and older clergy?**

*Lovett:* Change is hard because the ruts are so set. Young clergy relate stories about when they're asked for their opinion about something. They'll respond, and then the older person will push back, "Oh, no. I've got kids of my own, and I'm sure they don't think like that!"

Younger clergy aren't better, they are just younger. Less than 5% are under 35 years old, and I know that more than 50% are older than 55 years old in some judicatories. In the United Methodist Church, most clergy are retiring at 62 or younger. Not many serve all the way to age 70.

## **Part II: The Church of the Future**

**CRG: What other issues come up as you think about young clergy?**

*Lovett:* The church is going to have to demonstrate that it can **reach more people**—younger and more diverse people—before there's much of a turn around in people who are drawn to the church's mission.

The larger issue is **how do you reach younger generations for the faith?** If you don't have younger clergy, it's less likely that you're going to do well reaching people in their 20s and 30s. This includes some of the "successful" mega churches. They are based on a boomer model. They are the first to acknowledge that they have gaps—20s and 30s represent that gap.

**CRG: Where have you seen signs of hope, of potential success, closing the 20s and 30s gap?**

*Lovett:* The Emergent Church or the Emerging Conversation is one example of something that holds promise. That conversation provides what I think of as a "zone" in which people of different theological stripes can have a very good discussion.

I have used Robert Webber's book, *The Younger Evangelicals* with young students who have no evangelical theological background. They identify with this book. They say, "This is the first book that understands who I am." I've also seen it with older clergy who have no evangelical theological background and yet they are able to enter the zone. They can talk with those who come out of an evangelical background without it being a left/right conversation. It's a safe zone. There's a new

conversation going on there. I think that's one of the most helpful things. And, contrary to what you might think, people engaged in the emergent conversation like old hymns—the conversation is not only about contemporary worship or if you have a Five o'clock Come-As-You-Are service. That conversation tends to be dealing with churches that are smaller not larger; and it's not generally about contemporary worship or not. It's about drawing on icons and things from the past. Unfortunately, the conversation tends to be pragmatic. Theologians are not thinking very deeply about these things.

**CRG: Other than the Emergent Church conversation, are there areas that go to the "zone" you describe?**

*Lovett:* The Missional Church conversations, which tend to revolve around the Gospel in our Culture Network. There's a lot of overlap with the emerging church conversation. The Missional Church movement is much more theological and ecclesial. It is attracting interest by a number of persons, including younger people.

There are also things going on around **youth ministry**.

### **Part III: Youth Ministry**

**CRG: You've described the importance of thinking about youth and the future of the church. What are you observing in Youth Ministry?**

*Lovett:* Within a relatively short period, several major books on youth ministry were published. Kenda Creasy Dean had a new, very substantive book, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. It provides a solid theological foundation for youth ministry. Carol Lytch wrote *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*, a sociologically-based work. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton wrote *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. These are thick, in-depth, thoughtful books—most things on youth ministry are pretty thin. I hope that's a sign of things to come.

A major longitudinal study by Dean R. Hoge and several others traced a group of suburban youth in the Washington, D.C. area to determine what variables influenced their continuing to be church goers when they were 38. There were a lot of things that turned out not to be significant, such as how religious their parents were, but participation in a youth group showed a strong correlation.

On one hand, it's looking at the new generations and the new questions they present. On the other, it's looking for those enduring factors that we know make people more likely to be involved in a faith community. The research that the Search Institute in Minnesota did served as the background for the *America's Promise Program*. If a certain number of factors are either present or missing, kids are going to be at risk. It's the same with our Youth Ministry programs.

**CRG: How might this research on critical influences advise Youth Ministry?**

*Lovett:* How do we provide for youth some of those things that have a positive influence? My sense is that in most congregations, youth are "dealt with"—"dealt with" just as too many younger clergy are within their denominations. They're so marginalized. Too often, Youth Ministry is a ministry we have to hire somebody to "take care of." We want Youth Ministry to be vital, but we don't really want to deal with it.

**CRG: : Obviously a lot has to happen on the structural level, but are there a few specific things that would steer those working with youth in the right direction? Something that would offer a spark of hope?**

*Lovett:* If they approach youth ministry as they would stewardship or congregational finance, they bring to their work predictable expectations—"we need a program," "we need an answer," "we need something." But in reality, they've got to begin with a solid sense of where they are. Has there been any assessment of the current conditions? An audit of existing youth ministry opportunities or needs? The questions become not so much do we need a full-time or a part-time youth worker, or how much are youth workers being paid, but rather where does youth ministry fit in the church's broader ministry? How viable is youth ministry in our setting?

#### **Part IV: Thoughts on Leadership**

**CRG: In your book on leadership, you hit a good balance between pushing change ahead and pacing that change so it is not derailed. Do you think new, eager clergy are overly anxious?**

*Lovett:* Yes, a lot of new clergy don't have good regulators. I once had a student who asked if I ever made mistakes, and I said yes, but not many, since I kept my ear to the ground. You push, but as Rosabeth Moss Kanter says, "Good leaders take risks, but they don't commit suicide." Clergy are making judgments all the time. How many times to go visit at the hospital. How long to preach. Negotiating change is just another of those judgments.

**CRG: Is there teaching that might help develop that instinctive knowledge?**

*Lovett:* There's a story I use in class about two nurses in a neonatal intensive care unit. One was a newer nurse and the other, a head nurse who had been practicing for a long time. The new nurse checked the vital signs of a particular baby. All of the machine readings were normal. The head nurse checked the same signs and felt it necessary to make an urgent call to the baby's doctor. It turned out there was a major problem. By the book, everything was okay, but the head nurse had learned something over her 30 years experience. What was that?

Instinct is not something taught like accounting. How can you teach someone to know what a silence means in a meeting? Or what that offhand remark means? Is it something intuitive; or is it just a gift that someone has? It's something that you have to cultivate. Teachers and those supervising young clergy have to want to do that.

Tom Frank talks about listening—about paying attention—as a spiritual discipline. I'm afraid that some things are just passing people by. They're just not getting what's going on there.

**CRG: Could you talk about faithful leadership versus fruitful leadership?**

*Lovett:* "Faithful ministry," the watchword of my generation, was typified mostly by Mother Theresa's statement, "We're not called to be successful; we're called to be faithful." I believe that, and I've said that. But I don't say it anymore because it plays to a lack of accountability that many clergy feel. It's almost as if faithful is more a condition. It's part of *being* instead of *doing*.

Faithfulness is always directional. It's not riding a stationary bicycle—it's a Boston marathon! It's faithful in a direction—faithful *toward* the reign of God. You're faithful *toward* justice. You may not end up where you are headed. You may plant

one kind of seed and another crop grows—God has that kind of sense of humor—but it's not, "Oh, I'm not doing this. I'm not doing that. I'm being faithful." No, it is faithful *in a direction*. You are risking. You may make mistakes in that. You may not be successful.

John Wesley had a set of three questions: is there faith?, is there fire?, and are there fruits? The concept of fruitfulness led Wesley to do things that, in his mind, he really didn't believe. He was not convinced, in theory, that women should preach—but it was the fruits of their preaching that led him to sanction it. He didn't think that there should be lay preachers; but he supported it because he saw its fruits. In a sense, he was able to rise up above his principles by seeing the reality of what advances the gospel.

I'm not as concerned about thinking about fruitfulness as setting a goal so we'll know if we've made it or not. I'm convinced that when you focus on the outcome, you make the journey. It's only when you say we will do this program **so that...**that you know how to run the program.

**CRG: Can you provide an example of "so that..." in action?**

*Lovett:* In a workshop I've done with clergy and laity, after asking if they know what a vacation church school is, and they all said they did, I asked them to complete this sentence. "We will have a vacation church school next summer so that..." And virtually no one could provide an answer. Finally, after they got into small groups and worked, one group came up with, "We will have vacation church school next summer so that the children of our church will come to know and love God more. We will reach children in the community we haven't reached otherwise."

I said to them, "Before you did that work, if you had said to me, 'we'd like you to direct our vacation church school,' I would have thought it was about putting on a vacation church school and I would have done that. But now you've said to me, 'we've discerned that God is calling us to have a vacation church school for the children of our church, but also so that we reach others...'" Knowing that is going to shape who is asked to teach, what time of day to meet, if the publicity is in one language or two, and if there's a tuition fee or not. All of those details will be shaped by that "so that..." work. I'm encouraging people to consider this throughout their work. "Our finance committee meets *so that...*", "we have a bulletin *so that...*"

**CRG: What do you think is the biggest impediment to the "so that..." process?**

*Lovett:* I don't know if it's that mainline churches want to get away from forty years of decline or what, but anything that has goals—to say you want to reach more people, younger people, or to invite more diverse people—is disparaged with the comment, "That's numbers." There are lots of numbers we look at, that we monitor, but profession of faith doesn't tend to be one.

I don't understand. It's kind of like the big elephant in the room. Republicans want to get more people. Democrats want to get more people. The Sierra Club and The National Rifle Association want more people. Somehow it's not appropriate for the church, and so people say we don't want just numbers. But we don't say that when we want more diversity. We really do want some numbers. We really do want more. But you don't have more until you have more people.

Go back to my example of vacation church school. Until we say we are going to reach more people, we won't turn around and look at our communities and really engage. Many of our folks say we want to go deeper, "We want to make disciples." I think that's a copout. It's not engaging the world that's out there.

**CRG: So, some churches are uncomfortable changing their perspective to have a concrete goal—to answer "so that..." or work for greater numbers. Why is that?**

*Lovett:* When organizations have been around for a while, it's very hard to change. My guess is that a lot of the newer churches and religious movements are going to run into their own stages of maturity and lose some of their flexibility.

Nancy Ammerman, after studying thousands of churches, has said that when churches have the opportunity to change—although there are many possible options—most choose to keep doing things the same old way.

Dan O. Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, gave a report a few years ago on how seminaries and churches relate. He went back to his hometown of Grove City, Ohio. In that zip code, there are 62 churches. He studied six churches. Three from the 19th century: Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian. And then three from post WWII: Nazarene, Baptist, and Roman Catholic. In 1956, 50% of the town's population attended one of the first three churches. Today, 60% of the town's population attend one of the three other churches. While the original three churches have grown steadily in membership, today they represent just 10% of the town's population.

The amazing thing is that all of the churches grew, and they all changed. When organizations, including churches, are young, they have to be very responsive to their environment or they don't stick around. There comes a time when there's a critical mass. If a particular person doesn't join the church, the church isn't going to close. In fact, the church is in pretty good shape. All the focus shifts to making and keeping members comfortable.

Some of Clayton Christensen's work on disruptive technologies comes into play here. He studied the disk drive industry. In just a few years, there were four generations of drive technology. A different company led each successive generation. The mythology was that one company became strong, led the generation, and then fell into poor management—giving another company the edge as leader of the next generation. But it wasn't that at all. Christensen found that the original companies were doing very well—but they were doing very well *servicing their existing constituency*. Another company came in to fill the new niche, and did it very well.

In England, John Wesley and the small groups of field preachers represented the disruptive technology of their time. Everything that made The Church of England The Church of England made it impossible for it to change and adapt.

**CRG: Given that they are institutionalized, how can most churches or other institutions embrace new ideas?**

*Lovett:* It's best to create something new that is connected-to but different-from what's expected or established. Our Center is a good example. We're part of the seminary, but we're something separate, too.

In an academic institution, the very things that make you strong—your curriculum, credentials, contact hours—all these things, make it virtually impossible to respond quickly to something emerging or new.

Christiansen would say that the only way that companies can take on something new is to break off something, to have something that stands on its own. Hewlett Packard did that when desktop printing was not something they did. They broke it off. Employees in the new division focused on that new thing. Those employees said, "we're everything." It was like the place continuing education has at a seminary. It's there, but it's always at the margin. But if it's broken off, it can be a school of lifelong learning. With that unique identity, it can grow and thrive.

**Resources and Continued Reading  
related to Lovett Weems's Work and Research:**

**The Lewis Center for Church Leadership**

4500 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20016. 202-885-8757.  
[www.churchleadership.com](http://www.churchleadership.com)

The Lewis Center is "building a new vision for church leadership grounded in faith, informed by knowledge, and exercised in effective practice." Based at Wesley Theological Seminary, the center crosses traditional boundaries to "define a holistic understanding of Christian leadership" that combines the latest thinking from the business, academic, and religious communities into creative and practical application. The Center conducts research, hosts learning events, provides resources, and works to insure that leadership remains an important piece of the theological educational experience.

**Circuit Rider Magazine: *Emerging Generations Issue***

Lovett Weems, Guest Editor. Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House. Vol. 30, No. 2, March/April 2006.

Young clergy in a new culture is the theme of this issue, sent to all clergy in the United Methodist Church. Topics include the need to recruit and develop young clergy, ways the United Methodist Church is trying to make young persons into disciples, and how these efforts are fueled by the emergent church conversation. Includes an overview article by Lovett Weems, *Leadership for Reaching Emerging Generations*, and *Unless We Become Humble People*, an interview with Brian McLaren, a key voice in the emergent church movement.

***Theological Schools and the Church: Finding a Future Together***

Daniel Aleshire, Opening Address, 2004 Biennial Meeting of The Association of Theological Schools. Available as a PDF download.

Aleshire, Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), describes his research in an Ohio town, comparing six churches in 1954 and again in the year 2003. While all six churches grew and evolved, the percentage of the town's population involved in the six churches shifted dramatically. In 1954, 50% of the population attended three of the older, more established churches. In 2003, 60% of the population attended three, newer churches.

**The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World**

Robert E. Webber, Author. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002.

Robert Webber explores 21st century trends in evangelical thinking. Building on the 1974 classic *The Young Evangelicals* by Richard Quebedeaux, Webber describes how today's "younger evangelicals" think differently about the church

than did "traditional" (1950-1975) and "pragmatic" (1975-2000) evangelicals. Current thinking is driven largely by the cultural shift from the 20th to the 21st century. Webber explores differences in theology, worship styles, attitudes towards history and art, and communication styles.

**Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church**

Kenda Creasy Dean, Author. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004

Adolescence is full of passion, and the church, advocates Kenda Creasy Dean, must embrace passion to interact effectively with teenagers. Ministry based on the "theological resonance" between the Passion of Christ and the passion of youth results in a fruitful and meaningful faith. This faith is strong enough to hold youth when faced with the pressures of popular culture. A model of youth ministry that includes Christian practices yields what Dean calls a "curriculum of passion." The Academy of Parish Clergy named this book one of the *Top Ten Books* of the Year in 2005.

**Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens**

Carol E. Lytch, Author. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004

Author and pastor Carol Lytch considers the factors that attract teenagers to church and what keeps them there throughout later High School, typically a time of high attrition. For ten months, she interviewed teenagers, parents, youth workers, pastors, and others involved in "successful" youth ministry programs. The result is a helpful resource of ideas rather than prescriptions that "congregations and parents can [use to] foster faith in early teenagers that will help them value the church as a place to obtain identity, belonging, and growth."

**Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers**

Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, Authors. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Religion is important to most American teenagers. That's what researchers report in this book based on the largest and most detailed study of youth and religion conducted in the United States. Statistics and interpreted interviews reveal many facts that are contrary to most assumptions about teenagers. Parents' and other adults' beliefs and practices, for example, play a significant role in teenage religious choice and practice. Religion is valued by teenagers and helps shape their lives, though not always through traditional religious institutions or teachings. The bible and traditional religious teaching is giving way to a new form of faith, "moralistic therapeutic deism," in which God is primarily an agent of personal service. The book's postscript includes specific suggestions for those working with youth and religious communities. The book was winner of the 2006 *Christianity Today* Book Award for Christianity and Culture Description.

***The Relative Influence of Youth and Adult Experiences on Personal Spirituality and Church Involvement***

Thomas P. O'Connor, Dean R. Hoge, & Estrela Alexander, Authors. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. December 2002. Vol. 41, Issue 4, pp. 723-732. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

This study explored the influences affecting personal religious and church involvement. A group of young adults were studied at age 16 in 1976 in their

middle-class homes in suburban Washington, D.C. and then again at age 38. For personal spirituality—defined as private prayer, attending Bible classes, and reading religious material—key influences included denominational affiliation of one's youth, involvement in a church youth group, and having a transformative experience about church in high school. For church participation, the adult influences of being inactive in church after high school, switching denominations, having children and going to church with one's spouse were the determining factors.

#### **Books by Lovett Weems:**

##### **Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church**

Lovett Weems, Author. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003.

Change that happens too quickly can undermine and destroy even the healthiest system. Yet, not changing or adapting is also unhealthy. Lasting change is a process, asserts Weems, that builds on the church's existing cultural foundation—it's identity, values, assumptions and past practices. Weems advocates for change that builds on and renews, rather than replaces, the past.

##### **Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit**

Lovett Weems, Author. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999. *Available in print, as an E-Book with either Adobe or Microsoft Desktop readers. Downloadable leader guide available: Leader's Resource Guide.*

Reclaiming a vision of church leadership inspired by the Wesleyan movement is at the heart of this book. Drawing on early Wesleyan principles such as beginning with where people are, focusing on service, and remembering the poor can well advise the future. Weems describes the practices of Wesleyan leadership, such as leading from the center and the edge, living in tension, and making "connection" happen.

##### **Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity**

Lovett Weems, Author. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993.


Four essential aspects to insure effective church leadership are explored: vision, team, culture and integrity. "Vision" is the imagination of the future. "Team" refers to those needed to turn the vision into a reality. "Culture" refers to the point of change or transition. "Integrity" is the "congruency of the vision and reality for both the leader and the church."

##### **John Wesley's Message Today**

Lovett Weems, Author. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991.

This Pocket Guide provides an overview of the central tenets of John Wesley's theology, including: the image of God and original sin, stewardship, justification by faith, the witness of the Spirit, and Social holiness. Included are study questions suitable for personal or group reflection about how Wesley's beliefs influence today's Christianity.

*This interview is part of the "Wise Voices" effort, which gathers thoughts and essays from people who know congregations. These are leaders with know-how—through first-hand knowledge, academic study, or practical*



*experience. If you are or know of a "Wise Voice" we should include, please contact us at [info@crg.org](mailto:info@crg.org).*

**The Congregational Resource Guide,**

[www.congregationalresources.org](http://www.congregationalresources.org), is a free, non-commercial guide to resources developed specifically for congregations. Provided as a gift to American congregations from the Lilly Endowment Inc. through The Alban Institute in consultation with the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and other specialists.