A NEW PARADIGM FOR CLERGY LEADERSHIP: CULTIVATING AN ECOSYSTEM OF EXCELLENCE

Monograph

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TEXAS ANNUAL CONFERENCE
EXCELLENCE IN MINISTRY: DEVELOPING FRUITFUL LEADERS CONFERENCE
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INTRODUCTION

The following monograph by Bishop Janice Riggle Huie is one of the occasional offerings of the Texas Methodist Foundation (TMF) which, as a part of its mission, seeks to support conversations on the purpose of ministry.

In June, 2013, the active bishops of the South Central Jurisdiction (SCJ) of the United Methodist Church hosted a "Bishops Week" at Whites Chapel United Methodist Church (UMC) in Southlake, Texas. The title of the event was: "Excellence in Ministry: Developing Fruitful Leaders." Unlike other Bishops Weeks of previous years where leaders from the SCJ conferences gathered to hear ideas and challenges from visiting presenters, the leadership for the 2013 gathering came from the SCJ active bishops themselves. Over 300 conference leaders, clergy and lay, gathered to hear the bishops share the efforts and the commitments of their own leadership as it related to developing excellence in clergy leadership and leading the United Methodist denomination in change.

This monograph by Bishop Huie was one of the opening keynote presentations of that Bishops Week event. She challenged the group to change the paradigm of the path to ordained ministry. We are a narrative people, and the metaphors that we use in our thinking and our work influence and determine our actions. What if we changed our metaphor for entry into ministry from a "pipeline" to an "ecology"?

The Strategic Direction of TMF: The Texas Methodist Foundation will help the Church become more purposeful and more clearly focused on her God-appointed mission through the integration of financial and leadership resources.

Our Intent: The invitation of the Texas Methodist Foundation is for you to use this monograph to support conversations of learning among leaders within your church or conference.

TEXAS METHODIST FOUNDATION

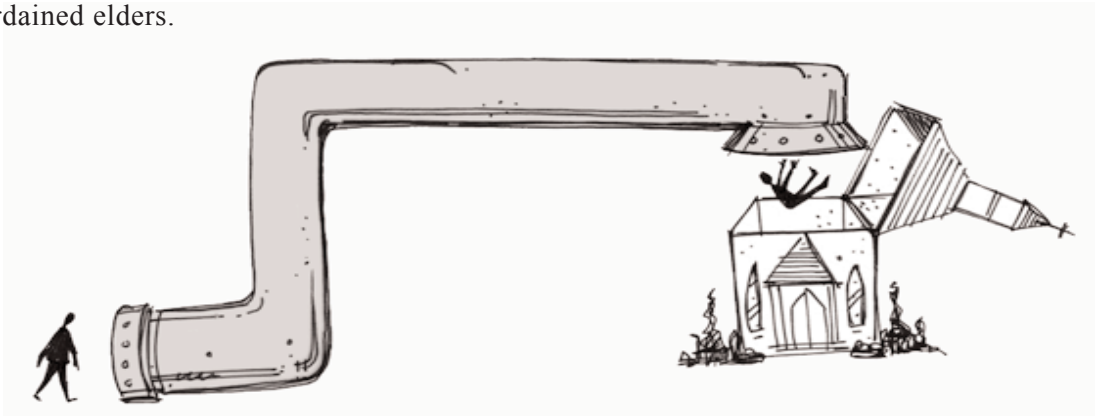
A NEW PARADIGM FOR CLERGY LEADERSHIP: CULTIVATING AN ECOSYSTEM OF EXCELLENCE

At least since 1960, the primary paradigm or key narrative for conversations regarding ordained ministry has been the pipeline. By "pipeline" Boards of Ministry and Cabinets meant the linear processes that encouraged the movement of persons from a call to ministry along a predictable path to service and retirement. Historically, the pipeline was associated almost exclusively with young people, usually 13-18 year old men, coming out of large, healthy youth groups in congregations where they regularly heard a call to ordained ministry. Those youth and young adults would be encouraged to attend conference camps and national conferences where they also heard compelling invitations to ordained ministry from some of the most articulate pastors and mentors in the conference and nation.

Young people who responded publically or privately would be encouraged to go to a United Methodist college or university where they would be shaped and formed in the United Methodist ethos. They often majored in religious studies and took courses in Old Testament and New Testament taught by professors who were themselves United Methodist clergy. Students formed lifetime friendships with students with similar aspirations. Tuition was fairly inexpensive, and scholarship aid covered most, if not all, of the cost. In the South Central Jurisdiction, schools like Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, Wesleyan College, Lon Morris College, Hendrix College, Philander Smith College, Oklahoma City University, Centenary College, Central College in Missouri, and Southwestern University in Kansas were essential sections of the "pipeline."

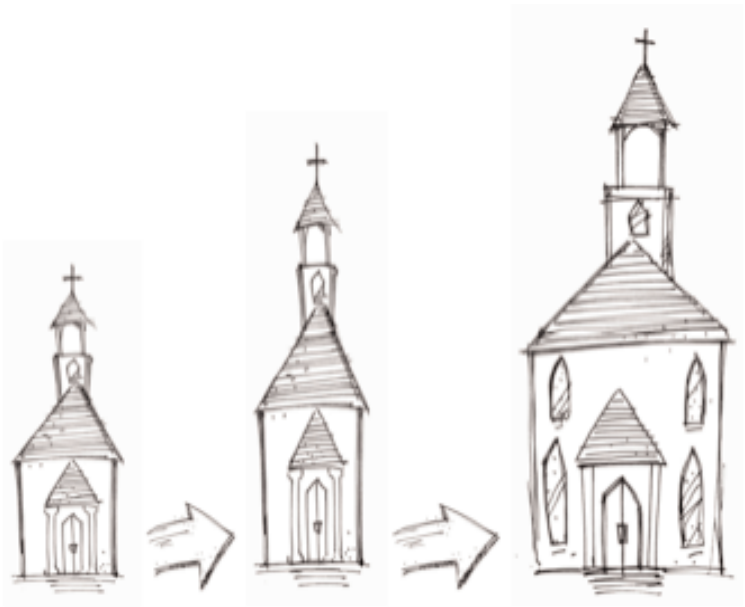
College students who went to state schools got picked up in strong, vital Wesley Foundations that provided an alternative section of the pipeline to ordained ministry. An announcement of intention to attend seminary usually meant that the prospective student would be granted a License-to-Preach. Closely linked with annual conferences, these United Methodist professors and Wesley Foundation directors continued to encourage these college students along the pipeline to a denominational seminary. In the South Central Jurisdiction, most students attended Perkins School of Theology (Perkins) or St. Paul's Seminary. In 1968, the UMC authorized 13 seminaries in the United States to meet pastoral needs.

After the first year of seminary, a student was ordinarily ordained a deacon in their home conference. Even persons with student pastorates usually completed seminary in three years. Peer relationships were strengthened and new ones were formed. Most students graduated with little or no indebtedness. Following graduation, students returned to their home conferences for one year of probationary membership, after which they were ordained elders.



The next section of the pipeline traversed the early appointment years. A bishop usually deployed a young pastor to a small rural church for two years, then another slightly larger small church for another two to three years, and so on, until they were finally assigned to a middle-sized or large church by mid-career. Salaries were low. Continuing education opportunities occurred primarily through the seminaries. Minister's Week at Perkins, for example, was a major event in this jurisdiction.

Tenure played a key role in advancement through the pipeline. Although the United Methodist Church experienced steady decline from 1968 forward, hundreds of strong churches remained vital. Pastors were expected to make members, not disciples. "Tending the flock," "loving the folks," and "keeping folks happy" were expected outcomes of leadership. Pastors who paid their apportionments and didn't engage in major misconduct could expect to do reasonably well. If a pastor served long enough, had enough friends, and didn't say too many controversial things, he/she might even be invited to serve as a district superintendent. Few clergy or laity noticed that congregations were shrinking.



While this portrait is a bit of a caricature, it may not be as out of proportion as we might wish. However, the world has changed dramatically in the last half century. Clearly, the pipeline isn't working anymore. It has cracks and leaks in every part—beginning with the diminishment of youth groups in congregations with a strong culture of call and continuing with multi-layered, tedious, discouraging entrance processes for young adults and fewer vital congregations in which to serve.

The processes by which even the most dedicated Board of Ministry or Bishop or Cabinet can change any of the realities of the last half century are extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, the paradigm of a pipeline is far too linear and mechanistic to make sense in today's world. Working harder at what we are already doing won't give the church excellence in ministry. It won't develop the kind of fruitful leaders we need. **Change comes from the margins. Pipelines are closed systems.**

WE NEED A NEW NARRATIVE

We need a new narrative, a new paradigm, for moving toward clergy excellence. I believe the metaphor of an "ecosystem" is a much more helpful and thoughtful narrative for our context. What do we mean by "ecosystem"?

Three summers ago, my husband, Bob, and I took our grandchildren to Yellowstone National Park, the first national park to be established in the world and now an ecological laboratory. The Federal government established Yellowstone with the mission to preserve and pass on its living legacy of geological features, wildlife and forests to future generations. Yellowstone is a very complex ecosystem, and I will reflect on only two elements that influence the whole system.

THE ROLE OF FIRE

The first element concerns the role of fire. For the first 100 years of the park's existence, the Park Service practiced a policy of extinguishing all fires. Since their mission was to preserve the park for future generations, the Park Service reasoned that all forest fires should be extinguished as quickly as possible. Therefore, when lightening or volcanic heat started a fire, the Park Service put it out.

Believing that they were protecting the legacy, the Park Service became so good at putting out fires that their policy worked for over a hundred years. However, there are consequences to over-protection and excessive caretaking. Dead and dying trees, along with underbrush, covered more and more of the park. In 1988, simultaneous lightening strikes ignited multiple fires. Because of the accumulation of dead wood and underbrush, as well as drought and heat, the fires raged for two months. Over one-third of the park was destroyed. In the aftermath, the Park Service asked, "What can we learn from this?"

Fire is essential to the health of the Yellowstone ecosystem. In fact, it is a natural process. Initially, fire is destructive and causes loss. In the long term, fire is the primary process that clears out the underbrush and makes space for new growth. Fire also creates the conditions for new birth. The lodge pole pine tree can re-seed only if there is enough heat to melt the resin coating on the seed of the pinecones. The heat causes the seed to pop out, releasing two little "wings." The updrafts and downdrafts of the fire carry the seeds to renew the forests. Excessive caretaking against a natural process was actually detrimental to maintaining a healthy Yellowstone ecosystem.

Thirty years after the fires, those burned areas of Yellowstone are the most lush and beautiful of the whole park. Today the Park Service does not over-protect. They allow all naturally-started fires to burn themselves out. They only extinguish those fires started by humans and the ones necessary to protect human life and property.

THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF WOLVES

The second element of the Yellowstone ecosystem involves the re-introduction of an endangered species. By 1922, gray wolves were nearly extinct in the lower 48 states. Lots of people liked it that way, especially ranchers. Wolves don't know park boundary lines, and they like beef. In 1996, the year I became a bishop, the Park Service decided not to just manage their current ecosystem, but to lead it to sustainability. They re-introduced gray wolves.

The decision was extremely controversial. Ranchers and other groups fought the plan, but the Park Service leadership was determined to try to re-balance the ecosystem, even though they weren't certain it would work. They created policies and procedures to try to deal with ranchers' concerns. Wolves from Canada were then re-introduced into the northern edge of the park. Since 1996, the wolves have been fruitful and multiplying. The controversy continues as ranchers lobby to remove wolves from the endangered species list.

In the meantime, the changes in the whole Yellowstone-Teton ecosystem are astonishing, and the Park Service is learning. For example, elk overpopulation has been a major issue for decades. With the re-introduction of wolves, however, the elk population is becoming more normalized, as elk are a major food source for the wolves.

Elk are especially fond of willow trees. Prior to repopulating the wolves, willow tree stands had declined significantly. Today new willow stands are thriving near the rivers, lakes and marshes. More willows mean improved life for the beavers—which need willows to build their lodges and dams. Beaver dams slow down the flow of the water. That improves conditions for fish spawning. Now there are more fish in the rivers. Because their populations are more normal, not as many elk starve to death in the winter. Despite three million human visitors a year, Yellowstone is alive, vital, growing, and a legacy to be passed on to future generations.

FROM PIPELINE TO ECOSYSTEM

Scientists concur that the following qualities commonly characterize an ecosystem. An ecosystem is:

- A complex set of relationships among the living resources, habitats and residents of an area that interact as a system.
- Diverse and varies greatly in size.
- Controlled by external and internal factors.
- One in which every element is dependent on other elements of the system. If one part is changed, it impacts everything else.
- Sustainable when all elements live in balance and are capable of reproducing themselves.
- A dynamic entity—subject to periodic disturbances and feedback loops.

I am suggesting that these same qualities can describe our clergy leadership ecosystem. Like all ecosystems, our leadership ecosystems can be healthy or unhealthy, fruitful or unfruitful, sustainable or unsustainable. A diagram of an annual conference ecosystem might look like the following:

It's a complex ecosystem; every element influences every other one. Furthermore, our clergy leadership ecosystem sits inside the larger ecosystem of The United Methodist Church, and neither system is sustainable in its present form. However, notice the extent of the margins for change. If change most often happens at the edges, an ecosystem of loosely interrelated parts has much larger and complex edges than a linear and controlled pipeline. The opportunity for change to regain excellence in the ecosystem far outweighs the prospect of fixing a linear and broken pipeline.

Dr. Lovett Weems of the Lewis Leadership Center has just completed an overview of changes in congregations and clergy in the South Central Jurisdiction ecosystem in the last decades. For the purpose of the study, Dr. Weems assumed that a UMC congregation requires a minimum of 100 persons in worship attendance to pay for the salary, housing and benefits for a full-time pastor and to fund mission, property and ministry. (Most

SCJ cabinets set that number at 125.) In the last ten years, the number of churches in the South Central Jurisdiction averaging 100 in average worship attendance declined by 414 congregations or 25 percent. Elders appointed to congregations declined by 16 percent; part-time local pastors increased by 27 percent. Elders under the age of 35 have increased slightly from 5 percent to 6 percent. Elders age 55-72 increased from 41 percent to 52 percent. Using the ecosystem narrative, the forest is on fire.

Cabinets, Bishops and Boards of Ordained Ministry are the leaders for annual conference clergy ecosystems. They play key roles in determining the excellence, fruitfulness and sustainability because they determine or interpret policies, practices and processes for the clergy leadership. It is vital that they address imbalances and learn to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. To improve ecosystem health and vitality, they will need to make changes quickly. (The larger general church needs to make changes, as well, but these changes will likely follow annual conference changes.)

SHIFTING THE ECOSYSTEM: ADDRESSING OUR EXCESSIVE CARETAKING

I offer two possibilities for "eco-action" intervention. The first concerns the current imbalance of "excessive caretaking" with little regard for the needs of the mission field. A layperson tells his/her pastor that God has called him/her to ordained ministry. Our default response is to affirm that person and help him/her move toward ordained ministry. Frequently, there is little conversation in the congregation or District Committee on Ministry about the following questions: What is this person's potential to serve in rapidly changing mission fields? What does their past behavior indicate about their future capacity to make disciples or to manage change or to start something new and grow it? Without evidence of egregious misconduct or psychological reasons, leaders find it very difficult—if not impossible—to say "no" to someone who says that God has called them. When questions arise, congregational and district leaders frequently say to one another, "I know there is a nice little church somewhere out there where he/she can serve." Pastors, Superintendents and Boards of Ministry continue to help more candidates along toward ordination, and these nice persons, with limited capacity, become elders with security of appointment. As the years go by, church after church declines under their leadership.

As the data from Dr. Weems indicates, the number of "nice little churches" in our jurisdiction has decreased 25 percent in the last ten years. Is it possible that "the system" has over-functioned to protect pastors who simply do not have the capacity or will to lead congregations into the mission field?

Given the state of our clergy ecosystem, thoughtful leaders, with an eye to the future, will want to ask, "Does this potential new pastor have the capacity to re-seed the church for the next generation?" "Can he/she 'turn-around' a declining congregation?" "Is their past experience so indicative of fruitful ministry—especially with the young—that expending all the resources necessary to become an elder is worth their investment of time and money?" "Given the shrinking financial resources of the UMC, are the costs worth the investment of the church's time and money?" "Can we find new ways to help persons be attentive to new calls of ministry?" The church will need an increasing number of part-time local pastors to serve the increasing number of smaller congregations. Some persons may be better suited to meet these needs. Other persons might best serve as part-time Local Pastors or Certified Lay Ministers.

SHIFTING THE ECOSYSTEM: RE-INTRODUCING YOUNG CLERGY

The second possibility for correcting the imbalance in the clergy leadership ecosystem involves re-introducing an endangered species. Three weeks ago, I ordained as an elder a very nice gentleman who is 69 years old. In Arkansas, I actually retired a pastor on Thursday night, at age 70, and ordained him as elder on Friday night. In another conference in this jurisdiction, the average age of the persons being ordained as elders this year was 60. These examples sound extreme; however, the average clergy age in our jurisdiction is 56 and the average across the United States is 57.

The endangered species in our ecosystem are elders under the age of 35. The data from the Lewis Leadership Center indicates that only 6 percent of the elders in our jurisdiction are currently under the age of 35. In 1984, 15 percent of UMC elders were under the age of 35. Although reliable data is not available, a photo of the 1969 entering class at Perkins indicates that the percentage of elders under the age of 35 was probably even greater in the 1960s and 1970s. The good news is that the South Central Jurisdiction is better off than most of the other U.S. jurisdictions. The bad news is that every conference is at historic lows. Going all the way back to John Wesley and Francis Asbury, our clergy have never before been this old—by decades.

It is helpful to ask, "What changes occurred in the clergy ecosystem in the last 40 years?" Two key changes affected all U. S. conferences. Both were well-intentioned, with some positive outcomes, and both had huge unintended consequences for investing in future generations.

In 1982, the UMC committed itself to a 20-year sustained and concentrated focus on funding the pensions of retired clergy. Later that commitment was extended to 30 years and then to 40 years. The church rightly invested enormous financial resources in its most precious resource—its clergy. Beginning in 1982, annual conferences across the United States conducted capital campaigns and re-aligned conference budgets to underwrite unfunded pension liability and to secure current pensions for pastors. Conferences adjusted to very large increases in pension apportionments. Naturally, those changes impacted local church budgets. Over the last 35 years, significant amounts of clergy and lay time, energy, and financial resources have been expended toward investing in the futures of retired clergy. I am a major beneficiary of these investments. Virtually all pastors over 50 years of age, with at least 30 years of service, are also significant beneficiaries.

The UMC now has over $4 billion in pension reserves. The Texas Annual Conference itself has over $65 million in pension and health benefit reserves. It is time to ask the question, "What are we investing in the recruitment, training and support of gifted, young, diverse clergy?" The Texas Annual Conference spends more than most, but it is only a small percentage of the conference budget. What would it look like for annual conference leadership to re-balance its clergy ecosystem by both creating new funding streams and re-directing some of its current streams to invest in gifted, diverse elders under the age of 35 with the capacity to reach diverse new mission fields? For example, is it time to invest a portion of conference earnings in pension reserves on behalf of future leaders?

During those same years, a second major change was occurring in annual conference clergy leadership systems, with less publicity and thoughtfulness, that created an environment that discouraged young people from entering the ministry while making it easier for those over 35 years of age to become ordained pastors.

The practice became codified in the *Book of Discipline* in 1996. Many United Methodist colleges and universities slowly moved away from their denominational heritage and toward an expanded definition of liberal arts schools. As United Methodist professors retired, they were replaced with professors who had little interest in encouraging their strongest students to consider a vocation as a United Methodist pastor.

College and seminary costs began rising faster than inflation, and the financial support from the general church declined dramatically as a percentage of seminary budgets. Scholarships decreased relative to tuition, and students were expected to carry more and more of the expense. Internships were added to curriculum, which added more costs. Seminary indebtedness grew rapidly.

In the meantime, the denomination added numerous layers and length to the entrance processes for ordained ministry. In an effort to "weed out" ineffective pastors at the beginning of their career, provisional membership was extended from one year to two years to three years. The candidacy process was added and then extended. At its most expedited, candidacy certification alone now takes a minimum of nine months, and usually 12 to 18 months. Candidates who filled in the squares and completed all the requirements got ordained. Fewer and fewer young people saw ordained ministry as an option. These incremental changes resulted in a preferential option for ministry for persons over the age of 35.

Between 1972 and 1996, the *Book of Discipline* encouraged persons who were over the age of 35 to consider responding to their call to ministry by becoming local pastors or associate members. During all those years, the Book of Discipline, under "Special Conditions/Exceptional Promise" (paragraph 416) contained these requirements for probationary membership for candidates over the age of 35:

- Served as an associate member for a minimum of two years under full-time appointment
- Completed a Bachelor of Arts or equivalent degree from a certified college or university
- Completed two years of advanced study prescribed by the Division of Ordained Ministry beyond the five-year ministerial course of study required for admission to associate membership, in cooperation with the United Methodist theological schools
- Has been recommended by three-fourths votes of both the Cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry as a candidate who demonstrates exceptional ministry

In 1996, the General Conference removed that provision. Instead of asking, "Why aren't more young people entering ordained ministry?" the General Conference simply made it easier for persons older than 35 to move toward ordained ministry. The interaction of changes such as these has resulted in the unintended consequence of the fewest young elders in the history of the church.

When our leadership looked at the Texas Annual Conference ecosystem six or seven years ago, the element that seemed most glaringly out-of-balance was a virtual absence of elders under the age of 35. The data indicated that the Texas Conference was below the national average. Because spotted owls are an endangered species, conference leaders began referring to clergy under the age of 35 as "spotted owls." As leaders responsible for the care of the ecosystem, they asked themselves, "What changes should we make in our processes?" "How could we re-introduce spotted owls into our ecosystem?"

Over approximately three years, leaders developed the Emerging Leaders Initiative to increase the number of gifted, young, diverse clergy in the conference. Virtually all the funding had to be raised from outside the conference budget. Leaders networked with other "edge" organizations, such as the Texas Methodist Foundation and the Lilly Endowment, to learn which processes were most beneficial. The key elements of the Emerging Leaders Initiative are the following: Texas Youth Academy, College Pastoral Internship Program, Ambassador's Grants, and Advancing Pastoral Leadership.

The Texas Youth Academy is a two-week advanced discipleship summer program for high school juniors and seniors who show promise for clergy and lay leadership in the church. The College Pastoral Internship Project allows young people to immerse themselves for ten weeks in the daily life of a church and consider the possibility that God is calling them to serve as a pastor. The Ambassador's Grant provides reimbursement for seminary tuition and fees incurred by the most promising young clergy entering the Texas Annual Conference. The funds provide encouragement and financial stability to these young pastors. For young pastors who demonstrate the highest potential, this ministry provides a transformational experience of leadership development, beginning with their growth as disciples of Jesus. Through this accelerated process, which includes intensive clergy retreats over two years and an annual follow-up retreat for three more, Advancing Pastoral Leadership expects to impact at least 75 percent of our 100 strategic congregations and cultivate visionary leaders for the future.

In addition, Texas Conference leaders created processes to expedite candidacy and to make it possible for many provisional members to qualify for ordination in two years. The Bishop and Cabinet have implemented a focus on mission-field appointment making. They try to place young pastors in situations conducive to rapid learning and with the greatest opportunities to reach younger generations. The Emerging Leaders Endowment has been created to provide financial resources for future young clergy. The number of young clergy in the Texas Annual Conference has increased dramatically, and they now serve in every district.

The Texas Annual Conference process has not been without controversy. Older pastors sometimes feel unappreciated. Other pastors see this emphasis on the young as discrimination against the old and those who entered as second career pastors. Pastors who expected to advance as a result of tenure are disappointed.

The Texas Annual Conference, however, is already seeing positive changes as a result of the significant increases in younger clergy. Young clergy connect more readily with younger generations of laity. Many large churches are seeing growth in worship attendance primarily as a result of adding worship services aimed at younger people and led by young pastors. Many young pastors serving as senior pastors are seeing substantial growth in mission and reaching new people. In addition, young pastors are the primary pool for church planters. Conference leaders expect other positive changes over time.

ASKING NEW QUESTIONS

Using the narrative of a clergy leadership ecosystem, what changes might your conference make that could tilt your system a step toward fruitfulness? Who are your endangered species? How could you re-introduce them? Where do leaders need to withdraw support and excessive caretaking? What needs to go away? Are you willing to invest in the young? Which resources might be re-designated for the future? Where can conferences partner with one another to benefit the whole ecosystem?

I believe that annual conference leaders have observed enough and learned enough over the last 40-50 years to intervene in the entrance processes of our clergy leadership ecosystems to move them toward vitality and sustainability. The time is right to shift from excessive caretaking of those who express a call to ordained ministry to mission field-based decisions about who will be licensed and/or ordained. Given today's realities, the UMC needs only pastors who have the capacity to turn around existing congregations and/or start new congregations that re-seed the church for the future. The time is right to re-direct at least a portion of existing financial assets and to develop new funding streams to recruit, equip and support gifted, young, diverse clergy. The time is right to move away from tedious processes and encourage young entrepreneurs who are ready to engage in ministry now. The time is right to move from a preferential option for "more of the same" and be attentive to the margins of the ecosystem to connect with a new world.