Implications of aging ministers could challenge future staffing
In North America, half of Adventist pastors 10 years from retirement age

Connecting with community focus of Inter-America's first Urban Ministries Summit
Church a fixture in society, ‘not just a destination,’ Adventist mission expert says

For Adventist radio arm, Armenian stations are inroad to mission
New Armenian programming joins some 80 languages offered by Adventist World Radio

Implications of aging ministers could challenge future staffing
A recent review of pastoral demographics in the United States reveals that nearly 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist ministers will reach retirement age within 10 years, a discovery that is prompting ministry officials to examine potential scenarios to address the coming dilemma.

Namely, will the denomination hire a new crop to replace retiring ministers, or will it urge much of its experienced, aging workforce to continue working longer than previously planned? Each option has its own advantages, and church leaders say they’re exploring a mix of both possible solutions.

Retirement age is considered 66.5 for the year 2022, according to the U.S. Social Security Administration.

The choice of whether to retain ministers past retirement age into their late 60s and early 70s keeps experienced ministers on staff, church leaders say, but it leaves several generations between pastors and the young adults and teens they minister to. Yet this demographic is small – leaders say the median age of an Adventist in North America is 56.

How leaders address the situation could affect everything from hiring requirements and remuneration policies to seminary tuition and the cultural needs of the region’s diverse congregants. All aspects of developing and supporting ministers could be up for analysis.

“We’re going to be looking at how we can have top-level quality pastors in this opportunity that’s presenting itself,” said Dave Gemmell, an associate director of the Ministerial Department of the church’s North American Division (NAD).

What’s certain is that leaders will explore how to renew recruiting efforts, sponsor more graduate students for theological training and develop the recently formed Board of Ministerial Education. Until recently, NAD was the only one of the denomination’s 13 world divisions without one. The board would offer additional formal training for practicing ministers.

“We have a good system of education, but we haven’t historically had oversight of that in North America,” said Ivan Williams, director of the NAD Ministerial Department.

A caveat
Church leaders noted that the above statistics on retirement age do not include “regional” conferences, church administrative units that oversee historically African-American congregations in the Central and Eastern U.S. There are nine regional conferences within the division’s total of 58 conferences and one attached field. About 25 percent of NAD members belong to regional conferences, according to statistics from the office of the NAD executive secretary.

Statistics for this survey were gleaned from records in the NAD Retirement office. Regional conferences operate under a separate retirement structure and comparable stats aren’t available as of yet.

The entire division has about 3,460 ordained ministers and 230 commissioned ministers. There are about 920 licensed ministers, typically college theology graduates who have yet to enter the seminary or seminary graduates yet to be ordained.

The 1.1 million Adventists in NAD live in the U.S., Canada, Bermuda, and the North Pacific islands that comprise the Guam-Micronesia Mission.

**Hiring the trained**

Addressing future staffing challenges in the U.S. also presents opportunities to examine other factors in hiring pastors. Ministerial leaders say they would like remuneration practices to better reflect a candidate’s training. Currently, wages are similar for a pastor who has a doctorate in ministry compared to a pastor who doesn’t have a college degree. That fact could lead NAD officials to consider making an adjustment in salary policies.


But that decision is ultimately up to leaders at divisions, unions and conferences. Fortin says a trend in the past decade is the increased hiring of pastors who don’t have a master’s degree in theology, and sometimes no college degree at all. A seminary professor said a study several years ago found that on average about four pastors in each local conference did not have a college degree.

This practice of filling pastoral slots with Bible workers who have completed a several-week training course actually violates the North American Division Working Policy. Section L 05 states that “educational requirement for entrance into the ordained ministry shall be the completion of the seven-year ministerial training program,” specifying that college graduates “shall attend the Andrews University Theological Seminary.” Exceptions are allowed for “age” and “unusual circumstances.”

Seminary leaders say an increasingly educated membership deserves educated pastors.

“Why would the ministry not need good, solid education when other professions in North America require good, solid education, whether it’s a lawyer or someone in the medical field?” Fortin said.

One potential way to enforce the current hiring policy, Fortin said, could involve requiring a theological education before ordination or commissioning.

**Who’s at the seminary now**

Fortin said the seminary graduate program has about 350 to 400 students enrolled, depending on the
semester, and about 100 graduate each year. Church leaders estimate that about 200 pastors per year will be needed to fill future vacancies.

Walt Williams, an NAD Ministerial Department associate director and director of the seminary’s In Ministry Center, said more second-career students are entering the seminary, many of whom are attractive hiring options to conferences seeking a candidate with more life experience.

The seminary continues to experience an ongoing shift in demographics. Nearly 20 percent of the seminary’s current enrollment of graduate students is women, up from 15 percent a decade ago, Fortin said.

Also, ethnic demographics of seminary graduate students have shifted slightly. Caucasians still make up the seminary’s largest ethnic group at about 35 to 40 percent, but Fortin said that figure is down from about 50 percent in the last decade. About one-third are Black, 15 percent are Hispanic and 12 percent are Asian, Fortin said.

**Funding education**

Another consideration up for review by NAD officials is which party will pay for a seminary student’s tuition. Williams said he has noticed a shift in the last 10 years: where conferences once hired college theology graduates for an internship and then sponsored the candidate at the seminary, they now increasingly hire seminary graduates.

Part of that shift may have resulted from an incentive program to motivate conferences to hire seminary graduates. Several years ago the division began offering increased subsidies to conferences to hire unsponsored graduates fresh from the seminary. Some conferences are increasingly waiting to earn the incentive rather than risking sponsorship on an undergrad, with graduates frequently getting nothing to offset their debt.

“Now you have more theology majors going straight to the seminary without that one- or two-year break of an internship, which was very valuable,” Williams said.

In many cases, it has also increased the debt load of more graduates. Now, only about one-third of seminary students are sponsored by conferences.

Division leaders want to reverse that trend. NAD now subsidizes the seminary’s graduate program with about $3 million annually based on 200 students, with another $1 million of subsidies for unions and conferences to sponsor graduate students.

“We want more sponsored students,” said Tom Evans, NAD treasurer. “We don’t want conferences going to the seminary and hiring graduates at the last minute with the graduate having paid for everything.”

NAD Ministerial leaders say most of the conference hiring rate hinges on the economy. Williams, the ministerial associate director, said hiring has picked up some in the past year for the first time since the recession, but also proffered, “the floodgates have yet to open.”

Still, most graduates find jobs. Fortin said seminary research suggests that about 85 percent of newly minted pastors are hired “within a year or two.” Some of those positions are in chaplaincy and not in the traditional pastoral role at a congregation, he said.
Williams said he hopes that conference leaders continue to employ and train young pastors with a long-term focus in mind.

“Any farsighted conference that I’ve been in tends to hire younger pastors,” he said. “It’s going to take such courage to plan for the future.”

“But I understand the challenge of administrators who have older pastors on staff who want to remain employed.”

Connecting with community focus of Inter-America’s first Urban Ministries Summit

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Miami, Florida, United States
Libna Stevens/ANN staff

Seventh-day Adventist leadership pledged at the church’s first Urban Ministries Summit in Inter-America to better connect with the more than 36 million people living in three of the region’s largest cities: Mexico City, Mexico; Bogota, Colombia; and Caracas, Venezuela.

Experts from the world church’s Office of Adventist Mission and international authorities on urban evangelism met in Miami last week to train more than 100 church leaders from the Inter-American Division on best metropolitan ministry practices.

“Our intention for this summit is to equip church leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary for unique focus on the cities,” said Samuel Telemaque, Adventist Mission coordinator for the church in Inter-America.

Historically, the Adventist Church has focused its energy and resources on rural evangelism. But the challenge of urban ministry remains and must be addressed immediately, said Inter-American Division President Israel Leito.

Last year, Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson first called on church leadership worldwide to prioritize outreach to urban centers,
where half of the world’s population now lives.

According to Leito, the division has already allotted special funds for urban ministry in Inter-America. He said funding is expected to continue as the church endeavors to reach secular, post-modern society with the Adventist message of hope.

For a church with more than 150 years of existence, “our methods have not been working in the large cities,” said Gary Krause, who directs Adventist Mission for the world church. Krause suggested that Adventist churches and institutions located in urban regions should serve as centers of influence in the community.

“Instead of expecting them to come to us, we go to them like Jesus did,” Krause said. “The church is not just a destination; the role of the church is to equip, train and empower its members to be in the community.”

Evangelism is not a spectator sport, Krause suggested. “Jesus mingled, showed sympathy. He ministered to needs, won confidence and bid people to follow Him,” he said, citing Christ’s example of evangelism as the only effective way of drawing people to the church.

Participating in marathons, health summits and urban evangelism series have connected with residents of Bogota, Colombia over the past several years, church leaders from the region said.

In Caracas, Venezuela, one Adventist outreach group performs cultural presentations in plazas across the city. Other ministry teams reached the community through health outreach, a church planting movement and even a vegetarian restaurant.

Learning a region’s culture can also help evangelists reach urban communities, said Samuel Wang, associate director for the Center for East Asian Religions and Traditions. Wang spoke to a group of pastors from Venezuela on reaching the more than 1 million Chinese living in the country. He advised pastors to learn the Chinese culture. Knowing that the Chinese value family life and a healthy lifestyle can help pastors cater their ministry, he said.

Still, challenges persist across the region. Tomas Torres, president of the church in Central Mexico, said he is reminded of the difficulty of reaching secular, post-modern society every day as he heads to work in Mexico City.

With more than 20 million people and a ratio of one Adventist per 575 people, the task is huge, he said. Yet Torres said the church in Mexico City has endeavored to strengthen its leadership and membership by training them before they venture out to minister.

Kleber Goncalves, director of the denomination’s Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies, based in Brazil, agreed with this focus on training.

“Working with the postmodern person is not a job for just any person or pastor,” he said. “Pastors must be well trained in this area because it is in a different context and it does not happen overnight.”

Training is just what Josney Rodriguez, president of the church in East Venezuela, is excited about. He has already lined up Goncalves this year to train a special group of pastors who will head up urban ministries in Caracas.
So far, more than 10,000 active church members have been recruited to impact their communities in Caracas, and additional training will follow, Rodriguez said.

Ultimately, the goal is connecting with the community, said Rick McEdward, Global Mission director for the Adventist world church. “We need to be creative with the proclamation of the gospel. It’s about seeking to reach outside of our comfort area,” he said.

Krause encouraged summit attendees to challenge local leadership to commit to identifying the needs of the community. Then, local leaders should join forces with church ministries to ensure that centers of influence are created within each urban community.

“Those churches involved in the community are the ones that are growing and in contact with the world,” Krause said.

For Adventist radio arm, Armenian stations are inroad to mission

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Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Shelley Nolan Freesland/ANN staff

Adventist media officials say two new Adventist World Radio FM stations in Armenia will connect with residents of the world’s oldest official Christian country.

AWR recently began broadcasting programs in Armenian, the latest in a line-up of more than 80 languages offered by the radio arm of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A radio station in the capital city of Yerevan and another in Vanadzor will carry programming on spirituality, health and family.

“Many young people are moving to the capital for jobs and education, and the nation is facing hard economic times, especially in the villages and small towns,” says Vigen Khachatryan, Media Center director for the church’s Trans-Caucasus Union Mission, based in Tbilisi, Georgia.

“Radio programs can help the church’s outreach efforts in Armenia,” Khachatryan says, adding that the historically Christian nation is more open to spiritual issues than many secular European countries.

Knarik Petrosyan, a student at Yerevan State University, is heading up a production from a studio built by AWR. The team includes businessman Tigran Stepanyan, who serves as presenter and programmer, and the entire Mkhitaryan family. Hovik is a journalist and his wife, Gegecik, is a teacher.
Their son, Joseph, is 10 years old. The family has broadcast experience from their involvement with earlier radio work in Vanadzor.

“The most challenging problems in Armenia are smoking, alcohol, decrease of family values, atheism and poverty,” Khachatryan says. “Our programs will offer hope, help in overcoming secularism, more complete family principles, assistance with stopping smoking and drinking, and more.”

Within the next few months, Armenian programming will also be available online – on demand at awr.org and as podcasts through awr.org and iTunes. AWR officials say online access is particularly valuable, as there are more than 4 million Armenians living outside of their home country.

Armenia is home a population of some 2.5 million people, about 800 of whom are Adventist church members.

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