



# Itinerant General Superintendency

Russell E. Richey and Thomas Edward Frank

With its quaint language, the Third Restrictive Rule of 1808, still part of the United Methodist constitution, provided that General Conference "shall not change or alter any part of rule of our government, so as to do away Episcopacy or destroy the plan of our itinerant general superintendency." So Methodist episcopacy was protected from legislative attack. In our forthcoming volume, however, we argue that over the last century the potential of "general superintendency" has been greatly diminished. "The plan" eroded from within, as James E. Kirby showed in *The Episcopacy in American Methodism*. Step by step the church edged toward a more regionalized, "diocesan" form of episcopacy.

The bishops, acting in Council over the last two decades, have moved to brake that localizing drift. Teaching and missional initiatives in the Council, a heightened sense of the episcopacy as a teaching office, episcopal eagerness to seek the church's unity (both within and without), concern over leadership and its mechanics, and the style of our conferences have opened fresh possibilities for itinerant general superintendency. Yet, this counter-movement, focused within the Council, has, we believe, still a long way to go in making itinerant general superintendency the reality for the individual bishop. The longer momentum still has power to localize and fragment. One might argue that the longer momentum has broken apart the terms of the office and given each its discrete task.

- bishops superintend in conference, often single conferences, making their ordering local, diocesan-like.
- bishops exercise teaching or word or general responsibilities in council, a collective rather than personal witness.
- bishops remain itinerant by virtue of participation in general agencies, through global visitations, and through presence in one another's conferences.

*Step by step the church edged toward a more regionalized, "diocesan" form of episcopacy.*

By localized superintendency, general *episkope* or oversight in Council, and itinerating on agency assignment, United Methodist bishops live and work with the three dimensions of the episcopal office but as a fragmentation or fracturing of their fundamental calling.

Our book, from which this essay is excerpted, asks how the promise of itinerant general superintendency can be more fully realized. And can it be realized, insofar as possible, both with respect to the Council as a whole and to the individual bishops whom we call to exercise itinerant general superintendency?

### Thought Experiments

In April 2003, the Judicial Council ruled (No. 961) that a constitutional amendment will be necessary in order to

set aside a bishop for a term of four years as Council of Bishops president without residential duties in an episcopal area. We want to take the occasion of this constitutional attention to episcopacy to pursue and advocate a more general assessment of our *episkope*. If "itinerant general superintendency" expresses the genius of our missional vision of the episcopacy, how might the office now be conceived, with respect to its authority and exercise both by individual bishops and in the Council?

We propose four "thought experiments" or proposals, one predicated upon a different reading of the Constitution than that adopted by the Judicial Council, others requiring changes in the polity and practice of episcopacy. Each of the proposals accents one of the terms of the United Methodist doctrine of *episkope*.

Each evokes at least one basic rubric of the order of elders to which bishops are ordained. Each recalls one dimension of Christ's office. Each reminds us of an aspect of Francis Asbury's exercise of leadership, discussed schematically in our volume, Chapter 3. These connections—to one of the terms of our plan of itinerant general superintendency; to one of the ordination rubrics (service, word, sacrament, order); or to one dimension of Christ's office (servant, prophet, priest, king)—remind us that in thinking about episcopacy we open up fundamental theological and practical-theological issues. Though we accent one of the above connectives with each proposal, in fact, all are inseparably linked in the import and exercise of the episcopal office.

## "General" Election

Our first thought experiment is that bishops be once again elected by the body that alone is and has been empowered to speak for the church, General Conference. Election there would make bishops symbolically "itinerant general superintendents," would encourage the delegates to think about the general needs of the church in their balloting, might elicit candidacies whose experience and talents have already been tested on a church-wide basis, would make more thinkable appointment on a connectional basis, and in a variety of ways could enhance the cross-fertilization that broader episcopal deployment and exchanges permit.

By making bishops clearly servants of the entire church, this proposal corresponds, we suggest, with *the plan* of itinerant general superintendency. It also underscores the connectional *service* by the bishops in various of their episcopal initiatives, most dramatically in that on children and poverty. It evokes memories of Francis Asbury's dramatic initiative in demanding the convening of a general conference of the preachers to exercise an elective role in the selection of bishops for the church and the necessity thereafter of such a general gathering for episcopal elections. And, of course, service, now one of the four basic ordination rubrics, points us unmistakably to Him who models our leadership, Christ the suffering *servant*.

## Itinerant Presidency

Either General Conference or the Council might elect one of the active bishops as president of the Council. The Council acquires administrative leadership in this pattern. However, by accenting presidency in *sacramental* terms as well as

executive, the church would be invited to think of its president, less in terms of the modern corporation's or the U.S. presidency, than in relation to Christ's priestly office. It would be fitting that the Council president be thought of as our chief sacramental officer. He or she would itinerate across the church, as did Francis Asbury, the church's first chief priest.

A Council presidency would enhance *itinerant* general superintendency by giv-

*These roles might entail the taking over some or all of the tasks currently assigned to GCOM. Alternatively, GCOM might be thought of as a structure within the Council that functioned to provide the administrative back-up and coordination needed for the Council and sought by present proposals for a four-year presidency.*

ing it a substance and consistency that it has lacked. It will make it more possible for the bishops to exercise their constitutional duties of oversight, by giving them a continuing organization for their work. Additionally, a Council president understood sacramentally and representatively rather than as CEO might enhance rather than erode the authority of the bishops generally and would pose less of a power, operations or constitutional challenge to General Conference.

## General Oversight of the Church's Mission

If the prior pattern accents itinerancy, our third proposal emphasizes the bishops' *general* responsibilities, particularly their oversight of the church and of the church's work. Here, too, the election of bishops by General Conference would make clearer the expectation that they exercise leadership of the whole connection.

That leadership might be expressed particularly in strengthening further the epis-

copal direction of the church's agencies. This model, with its expectation that the bishops individually and collectively undertake missional guidance for the church, recalls Christ's *prophetic* office and the *word* rubric for ministry. It builds on the Council's considerable success with teaching and missional initiatives and locates the oversight by the bishops and the Council not in a single office but in the missional activities of the church's agencies.

This third thought experiment echoes other proposals to enhance episcopal voice in and roles within general agencies and in the coordination of their work. Episcopal stewardship or trusteeship, already represented by presidency of boards, might involve creation of task groups within the Council functioning something like congressional oversight committees, establishment of other Council committees to take responsibility for coordination of denominational policy, and acknowledgment of the bishops as the primary "connectors" between local and conference concerns and denominational work. Bishops and episcopal committees would thereby give even greater leadership to the church in mission.

These roles might entail the taking over some or all of the tasks currently assigned to GCOM. Alternatively, GCOM might be thought of as a structure within the Council that functioned to provide the administrative back-up and coordination needed for the Council and sought by present proposals for a four-year presidency. However organized, such assignments expect the bishops to continue to speak a needed word to the church and to lead by symbolic action. Missional roles recover Asbury's episcopal voice for the bishops collectively and individually. They accent the "general" aspect of the Methodist understanding of *episkope*, evoke the word as a basic ordination rubric, and recall the prophetic dimension of Christ's office.

## Superintendency of Conferences

Our final proposal evokes Christ's *royal* office, *order* as ordination rubric, and the presiding or *superintending* dimension of episcopacy. It recalls the preeminent role that Asbury played in setting agenda for conferences and, by his appointments, set-



**Russell E. Richey is Dean of the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.**



**Thomas Edward Frank is Professor of Church Administration and Congregational Life at Candler School of Theology.**

ting agenda for circuits and stations. Asbury chaired in active fashion, bringing in proposals, making motions, speaking to matters under discussion. While William McKendree's innovation of the episcopal address recalled that earlier role, it did so in quite minimal fashion. Post 1808, one might say, bishops in conference lost their voice, being expected to speak only when spoken to, that is, to preside only.

While bishops have hardly been voiceless, their presidency might to advantage be restored to its Asburian activism. United Methodists will not, we suspect, wish to emulate our Episcopal kinfolk and transform the COB into a House of Bishops. However, we could find ways within present understandings to re-establish an active presidency. Bishops might, for instance, preside in many more contexts than they do now and their presidency might entail far more of what inheres in such an office in most other organizational cultures. One current idea, as we understand it, is for bishops to serve as chairs of General Conference committees. In addition, the bishops in Council and in committees thereof, might as general officers of the church receive all petitions, legislation, reforming ideas, agenda from across the connection and from the general agencies. They might establish priorities within such submissions. They might recommend how items might be aggregated or divided. And, in various other ways, the bishops might prepare the legislative agenda for the church.

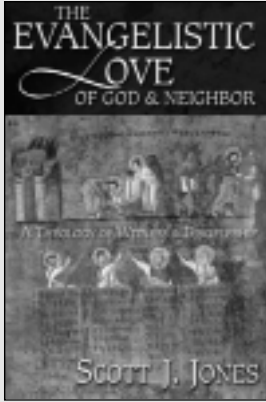

Of course, they would continue to preside in general agencies and the enhanced activities in general conference might be coordinated in some fashion with responsibilities in general agencies such that bishops would be widely accorded primary spokesperson and representational roles on the church's behalf. Those stronger connectional leadership profiles would doubtless also enrich and enhance the COB's relation to the church's life and work. An episcopacy even stronger in its connectional leadership would bring the wider church's concerns and ideas and resources to bear in the annual conferences, as we have seen already.

### Questions for the Church

These four thought experiments, all predicated upon and each clearly demanding significant change, might serve—as our volume as a whole is intended to do—to invite our reflection about what our bishops can and should offer the church in the way of leadership in the decades ahead. The call for a presidency of the Council indicates,

# Scott J. Jones

**offers insight on the connection between Christian essentials and United Methodist traditions**


eBook edition  
also available

In the comprehensive *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship*, Jones proposes grounding the practice of evangelism in an understanding of God's love for the world, specifically as seen in the incarnation of God in Christ. Evangelism must be a ministry to the whole person, Jones argues, where typical distinctions between soul-winning, social action, and church growth evaporate.  
**UI6-0687046149. \$19.00**


Throughout *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, Jones insists that for United Methodists, the ultimate goal of doctrine is holiness. He clarifies the nature and the specific claims of "official" United Methodism in a way that moves beyond the current assumption that the only alternatives are a rigid dogmatism or an unfettered theological pluralism. In classic Wesleyan form, Jones' driving concern is with recovering the vital role of forming believers in the "mind of Christ," so that they might live more faithfully in our world.  
**UI6-068703485X. \$24.00**

---

CIRN001108 4275



Published by  
**Abingdon Press**



**Cokesbury**  
Shop by phone, in-store, or online  
Cokesbury.com | 1.800.672.1789

we believe, the conviction on the part of the bishops that they can exercise more authority and give more guidance than that with which the church currently empowers them. This volume begins with their conviction, assumes further that significant revisioning of the episcopal office will require constitutional change, posits that our conception of the office offers us far more in the potential for such leadership than the diocesan inertias can possibly

yield, and therefore revisits the foundations of Methodist episcopacy. □

**This article is excerpted and adapted by the authors from their new book, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition* (Abingdon Press). Available January 2004. See pg. 27 to order.**