

A Simpler Day A Simpler Way

Recently a layperson who loves to go to auctions showed me a copy of the 1868 *Book of Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church he had just purchased. It was interesting to look at that little book and to note the enormous differences between the *BOD* in 1868 versus the *BOD* in 2000. One difference is the size of course. It was a simpler day in 1868, and the *BOD* was quite small compared to the increasing size of the *BOD* in recent years.

Another difference is the focus of the *BOD*. In 1868 more of the book dealt with doctrine, and very little with discipline or rules. Our *BOD* today has only an early small section of theology, doctrine, and historical documents; but clearly the vast majority of the *BOD* deals with all manner of rules and disciplines.

But the difference which really caught my attention was the very small section for the examination of those who feel called into ministry. The 1868 *BOD* called this section, “Questions for Those Who Are Being Prompted by the Holy Spirit to Preach the Word of God.” Only three basic examination questions were asked of those candidates:

1. Have they faith in a pardoning God?
2. Have they gifts (not just grace)?
3. Have they fruits?

I know that 1868 must have been a simpler time in the life of the church, but I found myself admiring that simpler way. Today our new orders of ministry and our candidacy process can take a person from 7 to 10 years to ever be ordained! The number of “hoops” through which a candidate must “jump”

are enormous, and many seem to have very little relationship to effectiveness in ministry. We have such a confusion about our various orders and licenses for ministry, that I find even Board of Ordained Ministry members struggling to understand all of the rules — let alone those candidates who are being called by God to offer themselves in ministry to our church.

We also have created a “mess” (that is the only word I can think to describe it) in which we have separated ordination, itinerancy, and sacraments. Local Pastors are licensed and appointed to an itinerant

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ministry (without guarantees) and can serve sacraments — but are not ordained. Full Member Deacons are ordained, but not allowed to serve sacraments, nor are they able or willing to submit to our itinerant appointment system. Elders are still ordained to sacrament and are under appointment, but increasingly we have elders whose itinerancy is limited or who serve in all kinds of creative “Extension Ministry” appointments which look very much like the same kinds of secular occupations in which laypersons serve and see themselves (rightly so) in ministry. What a mess! How I long for a simpler way and simpler day in terms of those called to ministry in our church.

I know that our day will never be as simple as 1868, but here are some possibilities our UMC needs to consider as we evaluate the new orders of ministry that

we created in 1996 (surely we must evaluate them sometime, rather than just keep adding more and more items in our *BOD*.)

1. Every person who is appointed to serve a congregation should be ordained. Some might be called Local Elders (a term which was used in at least one of our predecessor denominations for those we today call Local Pastors). Their ordination (like their current License) would only be in effect while they are under appointment to a church, and Local Elders would not yet be Full Members of the Annual Conference until they have gone through those processes. But at least we would reconnect ordination and sacraments in their ministry.

2. Anyone who is ordained (like a Full Member Deacon) should be given sacramental privileges in the church to which they are appointed or in an extension ministry (like being a hospital chaplain) where sacramental ministry is needed. Otherwise, no one should be ordained who does not need that ordination to provide sacramental ministry.

3. Only those who are willing to be fully itinerant would be eligible to be Full Members of the Annual Conference. All others, including many current Deacons, many current Elders who won't move away from a spouse's employment, and many Local Pastors who can only serve in a limited geographical setting, would NOT be eligible to be Full Members of the Annual Conference. Those persons could still be Clergy Members (like Local Pastors are now)

and attend Clergy Session, but would not vote upon those being ordained and accepted to Full Membership.

4. We must find a way to shorten the time it takes for a candidate to be moved through our examination process and to be ordained, and this shortened time needs to focus upon effectiveness, upon results (fruit) in ministry, and especially upon the evaluation of the local church congregation whom they serve. We will still need a Board of Ordained Ministry, and we will still need to give candidates psychological exams and all of the rest — but the most important criteria for ordination could be those same ones from 1868: (1) Have they faith in a pardoning God? (2) Have they the gifts and grace for ministry? (3) Does their ministry bear fruit?

These four suggestions may not make

things are simple as they were in 1868, but it might be a start. I don't have all the answers to this issue, but it is clear to me that we must begin to address the question of how we will develop a more simple, direct, and effective method of providing clergy leadership for our church. □



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Candidacy Process May Be 'Too Long'

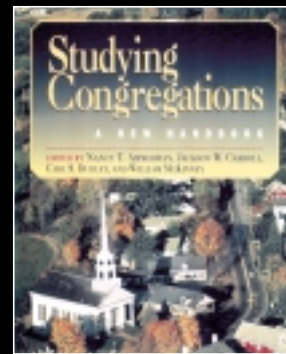
A survey conducted by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBGEM) found several questions that need to be addressed as people go through the process of ordination in the UMC. The survey was conducted this past winter in an effort "to ask what is working well and what isn't working well, in an effort to improve the candidacy process," said Mary Ann Moman, associate general secretary of the Division of ordained Ministry.

One question: the length of the process. "It could take seven to ten years to go through the total process," Moman told *Newscope*. "Is that how we want to encourage our people?" Currently, a minimum of a four-year college degree and a three-year seminary degree, plus a three-year probationary period are required for ordination. People may start the candidacy process as early as high school.

About 200 people were surveyed by GBHEM. Information that has been received from the survey has now been distributed throughout the division, Moman said, and they will determine any future course of action, including any legislation that may need to come to the 2004 General Conference. In the meantime, she said, **any person who would like to add their comments may e-mail her at mmoman@gbhem.org.**

—*Newscope* (April 12, 2002, p. 3)

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