

# OPEN FORUM

I have just read with great interest the [interviews with pastors] about trends (July/August) and one thing that really caught my attention was the length of service for each pastor. We in the United Methodist Church are finally learning (especially in the South Georgia Conference) that four year tenures are just too short. We need to learn to stay at least 6-8 years to really get things done and make changes within a charge or church. Many parishoners won't really buy into any changes knowing the pastor is not going to be around to reap the benefits. Longer tenures can help the minister to get to know each member much better and can help to create better dialogue between the two.

With many wives establishing their own careers, certainly it is better on the pastor and family to know they don't have to go through the moving process every four years.

**Marvin R. Leggett**  
Baxley, GA

The article (July/August) concerning changing the *Discipline* AGAIN regarding "orders" of ministry is beyond comprehension. Obviously, Bishop Coyner has not thought this through. For example, ordaining only those who can *prove* sacramental "need" is a play for power and a need to keep people out of some inner circle, and sounds like it is about jealousy. And so, what happens when you ordain someone to parish ministry or chaplaincy and they have a career change where that is not absolutely necessary? Rescind their orders?

Many Deacons in Full Connection have worked *very* hard to educate the populace of the denomination. Ordained Deacons are within the *long*

tradition of the Christian church. They serve in many places where an Elder would never go, and serve for low pay or no pay. Most Deacons that I have met over the years are very committed to serving as a bridge from the world to the church. It is not about recognition or power—we are not guaranteed an appointment. We have to be good and committed at what we do or we are out of work. Local pastors often are working in a "tent-making" job and serving for the love of the people of God also. They are not about a particular kind of recognition, but are partners in ministry with all of us.

How much more confused would we then be with Bishop Coyner's proposals. It sounds like he only wants particular people with voting rights and control. I know the Dakotas have a small population and probably very few local pastors, of which there are hundreds in Indiana and Ohio. We should be about more equity instead of less. How about improving upon what we have recently decided? Let's tighten up the process of ordination; let's educate the denomination on what a gift the Diaconate really is; let's give thanks for our local pastors and good ministry. Let's quit deciding about who is in and who is out and **JUST DO MINISTRY!**

**Pam Montgomery**  
Pendleton, IN

Bishop Coyner is correct when he says that "we have created a mess," speaking of our church's ordination process.

He discussed four ideas for easing the pressure of the process. What Bishop Coyner left out, as most Conferences do, is the Associate Member. In our Conference (Mississippi) we are allowed

to vote within the Bar of the Conference, but we are not allowed to vote on those who are up for ordination as Elders, nor are we allowed to vote on delegates for General Conference. In our Conference we have an Elder retreat, once or twice each year, to uplift spiritually our Elders. We also have, once or twice each year a retreat for our new Order of Deacons, also to uplift them spiritually.

The only spiritual offering for Associate Members and Local Pastors is at a national level, once each year. It seems that the Associate Member has fallen through the cracks. We are ordained Deacons, are allowed to participate in the sacraments, and do everything an Elder does, except be able to vote on important issues. District Superintendents, in the past, have told me that an Associate Member is closer to an Elder, and should have the right to attend the spiritual retreats for Elders; yet, I have never received an invitation.

It is also very difficult to explain to your church's Lay Delegate why they can vote on delegates for General Conference, and those who are being ordained, yet I, as their Pastor, cannot.

Yes, indeed, it is a mess. I am proud to serve, but if we are to be an inclusive Church, let us make every effort to be *truly* inclusive.

**James R. Cox**  
New Albany, MS

Bill Easum compellingly illustrates in the July/August issue the missional challenges of our contemporary context.

Yet, in noting the replacement of the emphasis on property and place with the concern for relationships and community, he argues that conflict must be "overcome at any price" so that "community" can be experienced, while admitting that the changes necessary to revitalize established churches will create congregational pain. He seems to want it both ways, questioning whether pastors can put aside their "niceness and mercy gifts" in order to "clean house" so that community can emerge.

The unwritten rules for pastoral evaluation suggest that "good" pastors are those who avoid conflict at all costs. Pastors whose concern for unchurched people compel them to hold accountable those preoccupied with their personal power risk negative evaluation on

leadership or people skills, which can constrict their appointment potential or connectional opportunities.

We are, as M. Scott Peck argued, addicted to homeostasis. We are addicted to the status quo and personally vested in maintaining it. By mistakenly measuring ministry by how well homeostasis is maintained, we create *false* community. Yet when we are willing to endure the chaos ensuing from systemic change, without attempting to regulate it, true community can emerge. The challenge is to regulate our internal anxiety sufficiently to effect healthy change in the congregational system.

Perhaps it would be less risky for pastors to lead dying churches to renewal if our vision of a "good" pastor was reframed from one who keeps everything running smoothly at any price, to one who can effectively, yet lovingly, challenge the family system patterns which paralyze congregational vitality. The experience of true community is worth the risk.

**Fred Darbonne**  
Alburnett, IA

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Thank you for the May-June issue focusing on marriage. For many years I have enjoyed using in premarital counseling the "official United Methodist resource," Joan and Richard Hunt's *Growing Love in Christian Marriage* (United Methodist Publishing House, 1981).

It is now out of print and has been replaced by a revised 2001 edition. My problem so far with this revision is that in the Marriage Lifestyle Questionnaire that the fiancés complete, the following appears:

- "Your current residence
- 1) Living alone,
  - 2) Living together
  - 3) Living with others."

To me, this implies that all three are acceptable options for Christian single/engaged persons, which flies in the face of Christian tradition. (The former edition never asked this question, and the pastor got this information from the first meeting with the couple).

It is true that since 1990 I have only had one engaged couple that was not living together. But to offer the Church's blessing on or at last acceptance of this modern living arrangement is damaging in many ways. (I plan to cover the lines quoted above with a label, leaving that portion out completely from the questionnaire.)

**J. David Roberts**  
Forest Hill, MD

I thought all the articles (May/June) missed the emotional side of divorce. It seemed to me as I read the articles that the solution was simple: read a book. But as one who has struggled to pick up the pieces, or throw them away as the case may be, and start all over again...reading a book is the last thing I wanted to do.

Instead, I "wrote" two books: first, "Shattered Dreams," and then (my favorite) "Born Again," which talks about the joy of finding light amidst the darkness, finding love again, creating new dreams...finding hope.

As I see it, all you did was take a highly emotional issue and turn it into a head trip.

**Len Haynes**  
Evergreen Park, IL

I read with interest Keith I. Pohl's letter in Open Forum (May/June 2002), but wasn't sure what he was saying. His statement that "if the United States spent as much on humanitarian [minus military] foreign aid as it does on national defense the terrorists would have no cause around which to rally support" seems to suggest that the Al Qaeda and Taliban are interested in economic development. This counters the foundational premise of Al Qaeda which focuses on the complete destruction of America and all it stands for.

The "Great Satan (shatein)" of anti-American chants from the 1990s alluded to the belief of extremists that America is the land of immorality by excess in its money and pursuit of other personal pleasures. These adherents firmly believe that the only way to deal with the United States is to destroy it and rid the world of its evil. The last thing they would want is its evil for themselves.

If Keith was suggesting that if we built up other nations economically the perpetrators would have fewer people to follow them, I would ask about the financial compensation suicide bombers are seeking. There is none (though their families may be given some after their martyrdom). We are dealing with a fundamental difference in perception of life, freedom and religious practice.

I would recommend reading two articles from *Gentleman's Quarterly*, February 2002, on religious wars and suicide bombers. No amount of money or economic encouragement would suddenly make these extremists partner with us in developing a future where people of all nations, faiths and ethnic origins could live in peace. The resolution of this dilemma is to be found neither in military might nor money. It is only when the leaders of all major world faiths unite to eliminate the sanctioning of such extremist decaying of faith in God, when the person contemplating terror is convinced by religious belief that his or her actions will lead to perdition, that we will see a substantial decrease in terrorism. There is no evil more powerful than that which finds its seed in religion; and no power greater than that which can evolve out of faith to combat it.

**Tom Nichols**  
Jacksonville, FL

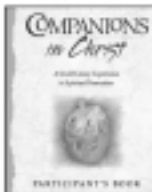
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