



A Letter of Thanksgiving

For the Common Good

Dear Nan and Woodie,¹

My best recollection is that I first heard the words “open itineracy” from the two of you perhaps more than thirty years ago. You were quite passionate about the matter, seeking the fullness of ministry that could be achieved by each person who offered himself or herself in leadership. You wanted opportunities for all those the church had set apart, but I believe you also wanted the church to be a sign to the world of God’s wonderful gift of a diverse creation.

Acting on the commitment to appoint women and men according to congregational and community needs as well as considering the gifts of each clergyperson seemed the right and faithful thing to do, but as you well remember it was not a task easily accomplished. Our church had been ordaining women for only about twenty years back then, and, for the most part, nonwhite persons were considered for appointments only to the communities from which they had been set apart.

Your two commissions encouraged the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to train annual conferences, cabinets, and bishops to consider how they could be more proactive and positive in appointing clergywomen, clergy couples, and racial and ethnic pastors. I can remember teams traveling around the country meeting with groups—hearing their reservations and concerns, experiencing outright resistance, and, yes, also beginning to witness the excitement and possibility that could be known as the church practiced open itineracy.

It wasn’t always easy. For many years it seemed that racial-ethnic and women pastors were to be relegated primarily to smaller parishes or appointed as associate ministers. The salaries were low and expectations sometimes limited. Some of the smaller parishes were so glad just to have someone to lead them that they hesitated to complain if they had been sent a leader very different from what they had always known, but, of course, resistance was frequently present.

For many years, district superintendents had difficulty being bold as they introduced nonwhite, female pastors. Staff parish committees experienced shock and disbelief—and then fear, as they announced the new appointment to members of their congregation.

Remember, Woodie and Nan, all those workshops your agencies initiated, planned for, and staffed? You sought to dispel myths and challenge assumptions about whether a person who was not the “usual” gender or race/ethnicity would seek to force his or her culture, music, style, theology, and so forth upon the fearful congregation? Much as the workshops tried to prepare people for the change that might come to them, the fear of the unknown seemed so overwhelming to some they simply announced they would not accept a person of another color or culture; they would not accept a woman.

Thank God the General Conference had decided such announcements could not be tolerated in The United Methodist Church. Clearly stating: “Appointments are to be made with consideration of the gifts and evidence of God’s grace of those appointed. . . . Open itineracy means appointments are made without regard to race, ethnic origin, gender, color, disability, marital status, or age.”² Congregations all across the denomination would have been deprived of the gifts and witness of many who had been called, trained, licensed, and ordained had the Holy Spirit not led you and others to ensure deeper understanding of the biblical story and then implementation of church law fulfilling that heritage.

You know as well as I that the task of fully implementing open itineracy in our church is not yet achieved. It can happen that

- bishops hesitate, worrying about how much change a congregation can reasonably be expected to accept;
- cabinets want to protect pastors and congregations from conflicts that may emerge as new possibilities for ministry and learning emerge;
- clergy colleagues are reluctant to accept or are even jealous of opportunities provided for women and racial and ethnic leaders;
- boards and district committees on ministry are not vigilant in addressing the racism and sexism hidden in themselves;
- congregations fail to hear the apostle Paul’s interpretation of God’s good news: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but

the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:4-7);

- the pastors themselves are fearful of hostility and rejection either for themselves or for their families.

Still I am certain you join me in rejoicing in the great strides to which The United Methodist Church has committed itself in these few short decades. In nearly every conference in the United States, racial, ethnic, and women pastors are considered routinely for any appointment that matches her or his gifts, training, and experience.

There are fewer congregations reacting with surprise or dismay when finding they will receive a woman or a cross-racial/ethnic appointment. Cabinets are grateful for the larger numbers of racial/ethnic/women pastors who have heard God’s claim upon their lives, have responded faithfully, and provide the personnel resources needed in the conferences (although with the reduction of numbers of appointments available I worry that women, racial, and ethnic pastors may again be at risk). Fewer women, racial, or ethnic persons are leaving ordained ministry because of the frustration of not having their gifts fully recognized and utilized. Bishops, cabinets, and boards of ministry have accepted their responsibility to “support and encourage the ministry of all Christians . . . [and to act as] prophetic voices and courageous leaders in the cause of justice for all people.”³

And so I say thanks to you, Nan and Woodie, for the vision

and work you (along with many others) provided for our church. The commitment and diligent efforts toward open itineracy surely have aided pastors who might otherwise have been ignored, rejected, or left out. But even more important, open itineracy has been for the upbuilding of the whole church as more and more of God’s gifted ones are deployed and received into leadership ministries. “We aren’t yet where we want to be—but we surely aren’t where we used to was!”

*With gratitude and hope,
Sharon Rader*

1. Nancy Grissom Self and Woodie W. White were general secretaries of the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women and the General Commission on Religion and Race in the 1970s when the writer was beginning her clergy ministry.



2. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004*, para. 430.
3. *Ibid.*, para. 404.1.

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