

Itineracy

Celebration and Challenges

William T. Robinson

The *Discipline* defines the itinerant system as “the accepted method of the United Methodist Church by which ordained elders are appointed to fields of labor.” (§329) The process of appointing clergy to those fields of labor has evolved over the years. Growing up as a “preacher’s kid,” I learned firsthand what it means to be a part of the itinerant system. At the early age of five I remember my dad, a Methodist minister like his father and his grandfather, returning home from annual conference. He had learned that day, the last day of annual conference, that he had been appointed to a different church and that we would be moving in two weeks. There was no conference-approved moving company, so a person with a truck was hired to transport our belongings—hastily packed and only what would fit on the truck—to the next charge. This appointment was made with little or no communication between the bishop, pastor, cabinet, and congregation. Some of his appointments were a good match for his gifts and graces—others were not. However, my recollection is that the good times far outweighed the bad. It is with this knowledge and experience that I responded to my call to ministry.

In the late 1960s the word “consulta-

tion” became a part of the language of the church. The General Conference changed the *Discipline* to require consultation to take place during the appointive process. This decision caused great concern; there were both pros and cons. Would this decision help or hinder the work of the bishop and cabinet? Time has proven this decision to be of great merit in making the process collaborative with

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the right people coming together with appropriate information to make the best decision for the church and pastor. The itinerant system is at its best when the committee on pastor/parish relations is able to articulate the needs, characteristics, and opportunities for mission of the church. The same is true when the pastor’s profile reflects his or her gifts, evidence of God’s grace, professional experience, expectations, and the needs of

the pastor’s family. There are, however, those situations when the profile of the church and the pastor seem not to match and yet the appointment must be made. It is at those times that we must trust God, the pastor and congregation, and the connexional system.

The *Discipline* states that appointments are made without regard to race, gender, disability, marital status, or age. Open itineracy is a concept we acknowledge to be the just and the right thing to do. Many appointments fit this category. However, all too often what we call open itineracy is appointing an ethnic minority pastor to a white congregation in a racially changed community that has also undergone socioeconomic changes. Or, ethnic minorities and women are appointed to minimum salary white churches where there are limited resources or opportunities for success. Seldom are white pastors appointed to ethnic minority congregations. After years of open itineracy there is still a strong bias in preferring male pastors rather than female pastors, even when the profile suggests that the woman pastor has more gifts and is a better fit. Open itineracy becomes a reality when bishops and appointive cabinets make so many of these appointments they become the norm, when congregations

become so receptive that they request a woman or an ethnic minority, and when pastors embrace the concept by saying, "Yes, I will go—send me."

Although we have experienced progress, there continue to be challenges for the itinerant system:

- Collegiality issues – Pastors returning to and being involved in former appointments
- Clergy couples – Finding meaningful appointments that will not do harm to families or marriages
- Clergy ineffectiveness – Helping ineffective clergy exit ministry with dignity
- After pastor – Identifying clergy who can intentionally work with congregations where there has been clergy sexual misconduct
- Spiraling costs for full-time ministry – The cost to the local church for an elder's salary and benefits
- Tethers – Employment needs of spouses, educational needs of children,

and care of aging parents

- High cost of seminary education – Continuing to inspire persons called to ministry to complete the work for a graduate degree required for elders' orders
- Equity for local pastors – Continued reliance on local pastors but specific rights guaranteed only for ordained elders.

Despite all of the challenges, there is much to celebrate that is right about the itinerant system. It affords congregations the opportunity to experience a wide variety of leadership, preaching, teaching, and administrative styles as pastors come and go. I am still amazed how a change of appointment can make a tremendous difference in the life of a pastor and a church. Pastors can serve multiple-point charges or become the senior pastor of a multiple-staff church. They can serve a cooperative parish or an urban new church start. The itinerant system allows pastors to go from a rural North Carolina church to a general agency in New York City. Pastors may be appointed beyond the local church to a variety of ministries

including conference staffs and agencies, general church boards and agencies, colleges, hospitals, prisons, military chaplaincy, counseling, as well as ecumenical and inter-faith ministries. As the *Discipline* states, "Through appointment-making, the connective nature of the United Methodist system is made visible." (§430)

The itinerant system of The United Methodist Church has been successful in making sure there are pastors appointed to churches. However, we must find ways to address the challenges facing the itinerant system, trusting in God who calls us and goes with us as we serve in this present day. □



William T. Robinson is a retired elder of the Detroit Annual Conference. He was the first African American pastor in his conference to be appointed as senior pastor of an Anglo congregation.

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