Erik Alsgaard

Does It Still Work?

Three Views on Itineracy

Itinerant — *adjective:* traveling from place to place or on a circuit.

Itinerate — *verb:* to travel from place to place.

"The itinerant system is the accepted method of
The United Methodist Church by which ordained elders
are appointed by the bishop to fields of labor.
All ordained elders shall accept and abide by these appointments."
¶338, *2004 The Book of Discipline*

The itinerant system is the "accepted method" The United Methodist Church uses to deploy its ordained elders, but is it essential to what it means to be United Methodist? Is it an open-to-all process, or is it more open to some than it is to others? Does the itinerant system still work in the twenty-first century?

It depends whom you ask.

"It's a system that still can be used," said the Reverend Robert P. Gardner, pastor of Warren UMC in Memphis, Tennessee. "It can still bring fruit in today's world, harvesting souls and meeting the needs of people."

For the Reverend Mariellen Sawada Yoshino, pastor of the Wesley UMC in San Jose, California, for the past nine years, the itinerant system is about all she has ever known. She grew up a "preacher's kid."

"I grew up thinking that the itineracy was not only normal but exciting," she said. And now, as a pastor, she still sees the itineracy as a positive thing.

"I have been fortunate to experience the itineracy as a positive system in which pastors and churches might be in ministry together," she said. Churches gain from the definite differences in the gifts and graces of individual pastors, and pastors gain from the uniqueness of each church community."

Sawada Yoshino's "itineracy experience" as a pastor has been positive too.

"It has been graced with wise, flexible, and compassionate bishops and cabinets who have been able to hear the needs of the churches I have served, as well as my needs."

She cites two examples from her life to illustrate this. The first is when the Japanese American Church had a specific need, and

Robert P. Gardner is pastor of Warren UMC in Memphis, Tennessee.

Mariellen Sawada Yoshino is pastor of Wesley UMC in San Jose, California.

Bill Ritter is pastor of First UMC in Birmingham, Michigan.

she was able to transfer her conference membership from Kansas East to the California-Nevada Conference.

"And when I married and desired at least one year without any major changes, I was enabled to stay in my appointment," she said.

Such flexibility is not always found, however. For Gardner, he says the itinerant system is anything but an "open" system.

"The eleven o'clock hour is still the most segregated hour in this country," Gardner said, "and black pastors are limited to serving black churches."

That has been his experience, at least. A member of the Memphis Conference for twenty-two years, he has served, he said, "every African American church of good size" in the conference.

Gardner was appointed to Warren UMC last summer, an African American church he had previously served. He wondered why he was appointed back to a church he had already served, when there were other congregations available.

His superintendent told him, "'There is no place left to send you'," Gardner said. "He also asked me to take or seriously consider going on honorable location."

Gardner speaks with the tone of one who has been through the system and come out with some bumps and bruises.

"In terms of The United Methodist Church advertising itself as having an open itineracy, it is not," he said. "We boast of having an open itineracy at annual conference, we do 'show and tell' and say that we're such an inclusive church. It's a sad day."

The itinerant system has other limitations.

"As I hear the stories of the itineracy throughout the country, I realize that it is a great system of ministry when the decision makers are graced with wisdom, flexibility and compassion," said Sawada Yoshino. "When the decision makers are not, the system seems greatly flawed."

Especially when it comes to the large membership church.

At First United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Michigan, for example, the Reverend Bill Ritter oversees a staff of five active clergy, two retired clergy, and a total of forty-one people on the church's payroll. Increasingly, he said, he's looking for people to provide specific ministries, something the itinerant system isn't good at providing.

"We're looking for people who can bring a very unique set of gifts and talents to the needs of this congregation," Ritter said. "Generally speaking, the system is not set up to identify, nurture, and appoint specialists. The system is set up to identify, nurture, and appoint generalists."

Ritter, who retires this summer after forty years of service—thirty-five as a senior pastor or member of a staff—said his own personal experience with the itinerant system has been great.

"Anything I say about the appointment system has to be conditioned by the fact that it has been wonderful for me personally," he said. "I have never asked to move. On three occasions, I was asked to move and said no, or said I'd rather not, and that request was honored."

None of those conversations have occurred in the past twenty-five years, he said.

"I haven't been put in the difficult situation where a move was ever mandated," he said, "or anybody told me this is the last bus out, or those kinds of things. The moves that happened . . . all seemed to be a logical point in the journey."

But logic and understanding seem to be in short supply from the cabinet when it comes to appointing associate pastors in large churches.

"Private hires work better for us than appointments," Ritter said, "unless you have a superintendent and/or a cabinet who is willing to work very closely with you to help you accomplish those things."

The longest serving associate at First UMC, Ritter said, is an ordained Episcopal priest. Father Rod Quainton came to the church seven years ago through a series of connections between the church, its members, and a seminary. It was Ritter who went to then Bishop Donald A. Ott of the Michigan Area and said, "We'd like to do this," not the cabinet coming to the church.

"Generally speaking, and I will be quoted on this," said Ritter, "it is easier to work with people you have hired yourself and whose primary loyalty is to you, than it is to work with people who have been hired by the conference and whose primary loyalty is to the cabinet. I'm not afraid to say that and get quoted on it. In fact, there are all kinds of us out there who think that."

If the itinerant system is broken, as some say it is, what can be done to fix it?

For Gardner, back in Memphis, itineracy is a system that is not working to its full potential.

"Open itineracy is not so much about advancement in the church," he said. "It should be a system giving all the clergy an opportunity to serve all the people. We clearly don't have it, though."

He chalks this up to a certain mentality.

"Unfortunately, superintendents and bishops have gotten into the 'this is the way it is' mentality," he said. "Other black pastors too. Changes to the system have to start

with the leadership. Everything rises and falls on them."

Gardner would like to see leadership in the denomination take on compassionate but bold leadership. He knows that by and large, most people accept what the leaders say and do.

"What we have is a failure of nerves (to make any changes) on part of our leadership," he said. "Whatever changes we make in this Kingdom, it has to start here."

Gardner has been to numerous workshops and meetings on open itineracy, but he says they have had little impact, if any.

"I've been in the Memphis Conference for more than twenty years, and been to workshops and seminars on this issue. When they're over, we go essentially back to business as usual," he said.

"Yes, there are isolated cases of advancement in this area," he said, "but they are much too, too slow."

Gardner recommends that cabinets begin to set goals and work intentionally at making open itineracy a reality.

On the other hand, he said, "We've done that, and progress is still very slow."

For Ritter at the three thousand-member First UMC in Birmingham, the stress of the itinerate system on his church is real.

"The conference wants you to post a position and then they want to use that position to appoint somebody," he said, "somebody who either needs or wants an associateship, and somebody who generally is a generalist. The fit is not always productive."

One change Ritter would suggest: changing the way seminaries educate their students for ministry.

"Seminaries are, in the main, in the business of training generalists," he said. "Seminaries have been very slow to recognize that in an increasingly pluralistic society, congregations have to build programs and ministries that are unique to their setting and to their constituencies."

Increasingly, he said, there is a need for new clergy who specialize in certain aspects of ministry, be it youth ministry, young adults, adult education, or pastoral care.

"We didn't even have the word 'spiritual formation' as part of our common language twenty-five years ago," Ritter said. "Now we have an associate who has that as part of the job title." ❑

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