

A RESPONSE FROM LYLE SCHALLER

Is the Itineracy a Practice or a Central Component of Our Belief System?

Back in 1906 the six predecessor denominations of The United Methodist Church reported their combined membership was equal to 6.2 percent of the population of the United States. At the end of 2004 the UMC membership at the end of 2004 was equivalent to approximately 2.6 percent of this nation's population.

In 1960 the combined Methodist-EUB membership exceeded 100,000 in thirty states. During the next four decades the UM membership in six of those thirty states dropped by more than 40 percent and in ten others the decrease was at least 30 percent.

Can those and similar descriptions of the withdrawal of this denomination from the American religious scene be reversed? This aging optimist believes the answer is, "Yes, but not without systemic changes." One point of overdue change was the central theme of the May/June 2005 issue of *Circuit Rider*—the future of itineracy.

After more than forty years of working with and studying Protestant congregations in America, this traveler is convinced that three essential overlapping components of a strategy to reverse decades of numerical decline in what is now The United Methodist Church are (1) excellent matches between the needs of the congregation at this point in its history and the gifts, skills, experience, personality, potential tenure, theological convictions, goals, and priorities of the new pastor, (2) long tenured pastorates of at least twenty years (our culture today places a higher value on interpersonal relationships than was the pattern in the task-driven culture of the nineteenth century), and (3) an increase in the number of very large congregations.

The good news on the third component is the number of UM congregations reporting an average worship attendance of 2,000 or more increased from seven in 1987 to 33 in 2000. The bad news is if the distribution of congregations by size in the UMC resembled the distribution for all of American Protestantism, that number would be at least 90.

The explanation for this emphasis on more very large UM congregations is fourfold. **First**, only the large congregations averaging at least 700-to-800 at worship are able to mobilize the resources required to meet the expectations younger generations of American Protestant churchgoers bring to church today. These range from a weekend schedule that includes three or four different worship experiences to short term meaningful and memorable experiences to relevant and high quality sermons to a variety of face-to-face groups to challenging and equipping lay volunteers to be engaged in doing ministry with fellow Christians in a sister church on another continent.

An overlapping **second** factor is American churchgoers born after 1960 can be found in disproportionately large numbers in congregations averaging over 800 at worship. A **third** factor is specialists are replacing generalists all across the American scene including the practice of law, the practice of teaching, the practice of medicine, and the practice of ministry. The larger congregations are better able to offer challenging opportunities in ministry for specialists than are the smaller ones.

Finally, a pragmatic reason is many annual conferences have underfunded promises to their clergy for pensions, guaranteed appointments, and health insurance. Keeping those promises will cost money! The larger churches are more likely to be able to help provide those dollars than the congregations averaging 18 or 30 or 75 or 120 at worship.

Back in 1965 a total of 765 congregations in the former Methodist church reported their worship attendance averaged 500 or more. The good news is in 2002 that number was 820. The bad news is if the UMC resembled all of American Protestantism in the distribution of congregations by size, that number would be at least 1,400 and probably over 1,500.

That leads us to the discussions in the last issue of *Circuit Rider*. Can or should this denomination perpetuate the itineracy? Does it produce too many mismatches and too many short pastorates? **One** option could be to poll all of the pastors currently serving congregations in the United States and be guided by their preferences. A **second** option would be to ask the Council of Bishops to study the question and agree on a design that would be appropriate for twenty-first century America. A **third** could be to refer this issue to the Connectional Table.

A **fourth** option could be a response to the plea that reversing the numerical decline will require more money and use payments on apportionments as the number-one criterion for evaluating the performance of congregations.

A **fifth** response begins with a larger perspective and relies on a systems approach. Has the UM system, including the itineracy, been producing the desired outcome during the past four or five decades? If one desired outcome is a gradual withdrawal of this denomination from the American religious scene, the answer clearly is perpetuate the itineracy!

TWO CENTURIES OF CHANGE

The current system of ministerial placement traces back over two centuries. It was designed in an era when top-down command and control systems of authority were widely acceptable in the western world. It was designed when American Methodism consisted largely of small congregations with the vast majority located in rural areas, when functions were seen as more important than relationships, when Methodist preachers rarely married (and when they did, they ceased to itinerate), when women were neither licensed nor ordained to preach, when parenthood and preaching were perceived to be incompatible roles for a Methodist minister, when the annual allowance of \$80 in 1800 (after allowing for inflation the equivalent of \$560 in 2005) was not expected to shelter, feed, and cloth a family. It was designed and amended in an era when institutions were small, when very few parishioners had completed six years of formal education, long before specialists had begun to replace generalists, when the number and variety of expectations people brought to church were limited, when preachers were

perceived to be interchangeable commodities and any elder could serve any appointment, when the concept of the consent of the governed was still a revolutionary slogan (and strongly opposed by John Wesley), when American-born blacks were still perceived to be an inferior group, when the immigration from abroad consisted largely of newcomers from Europe, and when most American Christians either walked to church or depended on horses for transportation.

One consequence is when congregations were small, when ministers were expected to be evangelists and preachers, rather than leaders and pastors, when distances made it difficult for parishioners to switch congregations, when the synonym for "average quality" was acceptability, not mediocrity, and when church law placed a low ceiling on tenure, it was relatively safe to "pound a square peg into a round hole and pray it won't pop out for at least a year" (to quote from a district superintendent in Indiana in 1965).

If you can recreate that environment in your episcopal area in the twenty-first century, you should be able to make this form of ministerial placement as effective in 2010 as it was as recently as the 1880s.

A strategy to reverse decades of numerical decline in what is now The United Methodist Church are

- (1) excellent matches between the needs of the congregation at this point in its history and the gifts, skills, experience, personality, potential tenure, theological convictions, goals, and priorities of the new pastor,
- (2) long tenured pastorates of at least twenty years (our culture today places a higher value on interpersonal relationships than was the pattern in the task-driven culture of the nineteenth century), and
- (3) an increase in the number of very large congregations.

Who or where in the UM system is the person or agency or voice who has both the authority and the responsibility to initiate the process required to change the system so it can and will produce the desired outcomes in an era when the number of people worshiping God in Protestant congregations in America continues at a record high year after year?

In most of contemporary America, however, the religious scene is marked by a demand for excellence, relevance, and choices. One consequence is the competition among Christian congregations for future constituents is at an all-time high.

Today the correlation between long pastorates and the ministry of healthy large congregations has been documented so often that creating excellent matches between pastor and congregation is now a high priority. The old goal of filling a vacancy has been replaced by the goal of creating the perfect match.

From this observer's perspective the most persuasive argument for retaining the current system of ministerial placement is NOT perpetuating a Roman Catholic polity. The number-one value is as a tool in implementing a rolling twenty-year ministry plan that includes (a) reducing the number of congregations averaging fewer than 100 at worship, (b) increasing the number averaging more than 800 at worship, (c) re-establishing a stronger presence in the large central cities plus the older suburbs, and (d) reversing decades of numerical decline.

That rolling twenty-year time frame would enable the cabinet to plan ahead and provide the appropriate pastoral experiences for ministers who will move into key leadership positions five, ten, and fifteen years down the road. One way to nullify that advantage is to replace the bishop every four or eight or twelve years with a successor who comes in with a different set of values, goals, and priorities and insists on replacing that ministry plan. All too often that new ministry plan is based on a completely different set of values, goals, priorities, and tactics. Long term consistency is required to maximize the

assets in the current UM system for ministerial placement. One consequence is the normal tenure for a bishop in any one episcopal area should be at least sixteen years and preferably longer.

WHAT ARE KEY VALUES?

Those three paragraphs raise two other questions. The more important is whether the UM system is designed to encourage or discourage annual conferences to engage in long range planning? The system designed about two centuries ago clearly was one that discouraged long range planning by congregations, pastors, superintendents, annual conferences, and bishops. That is compatible with short pastorates, small congregations, a rural constituency, and a conviction that today the focus should be on preparing for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

A related question should be discussed in terms of categories. Does the itineracy belong in the same category with other practices, such as discouraging ministers from marrying, limiting ordination to males, a low level of compensation for pastors, church-owned parsonages, limited tenure in the same appointment, travel by foot or horseback, an anti-seminary stance on the education of clergy, weekend worship only on the Sabbath, the future role of divorced clergypersons, health insurance for parish pastors, housing allowances for pastors, distrust of local leaders, both lay and clergy, to be able to shape their own future, retirement at age 65 (or 70? or 55?), guaranteed appointment for elders, and the geographical definition of a congregation's service area (which is widely ignored today).

Or does the itineracy belong in the same category with the Articles of Religion (also often ignored today), the episcopal system of governance, and the limited role of the laity that constitute the belief system of this denomination?

Typically it is easier to change practices than it is to change belief systems.

TWO BIG QUESTIONS

Back in 1906 the six predecessor denominations reported a combined total of 57,087 congregations. By the end of 1970, thanks in part to four denominational mergers, that number had been reduced to 40,653. At the end of 2002 there were 35,102 organized churches in the UM conferences in the United States. Back in 1972 a total of 9,631 of the 37,641 congregations (25.6 percent) reporting their average worship attendance reported they averaged fewer than 35 at worship. Twenty years later 10,703 of the 34,414 reporting congregations (31.1 percent) reported they averaged fewer than 35 at worship. Are those three outcomes—(a) a decrease in the total number of congregations, (b) an increase in the number and proportion averaging fewer than 35 at worship, and (c) a decrease in the number and proportion averaging 35 or more at worship—among the desired outcomes to be produced by the UM system?

If yes, that raises the first of these final two questions. Who has the authority and responsibility to define those desired outcomes? Another example is that back in 1956 congregations affiliated with the two former denominations reported a combined total of 320,000 members received by intradenominational letters of transfer. The equivalent number in 2002 was slightly over 109,000. Does that also represent a desired outcome of the UM system?

If no, that raises the second of these two questions. Who or where in the UM system is the person or agency or voice who has both the authority and the responsibility to initiate the process required to change the system so it can and will produce the desired outcomes in an era when the number of people worshiping God in Protestant congregations in America continues at a record high year after year?

Lyle Schaller's two most recent books are *The Ice Cube Is Melting and Mainline Turnaround* (Abingdon Press).

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Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: "Full experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. They are spontaneous moments of grace, almost accidental."

Lozoff: "Rabbi, if God-realization is just accidental, why do we work so hard doing all these spiritual practices?"

Rabbi Carlebach: "To be as accident-prone as possible."

—from *It's a Meaningful Life—It Just Takes Practice* by Bo Lozoff



Loneliness is needy—it wants.
Solitude is fulfillment—it has.
— Sister Wendy (in conversation with Bill Moyers)



Sometimes I wonder whether the world is being run by smart people who are putting us on or by imbeciles who really mean it.

—Mark Twain



We read to know we're not alone.
— C.S. Lewis, *Shadowlands*



Subtle is the Lord,
but malicious he is not.
— Albert Einstein



A writer with Christian loyalties can never make faith suffice for art. Thomas Merton ruefully confessed that a bad book about the love of God is still a bad book.

—Ralph C. Wood
(*Theology Today*, Jan. 2003)



I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day. —E. B. White



Seen or unseen, God is present.
—Carl Jung



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