

OPEN FORUM

*Editor's Note: We received several letters about the spelling of "itineracy" in the May/June issue. We struggled with the decision about the spelling because the primary entry in most dictionaries differs from the spelling in *The Book of Discipline*. As we noted on the contents page of the issue, we opted for the spelling in *The Book of Discipline* in order to achieve consistency throughout the issue.*

The features on itineracy were helpful, instructive, and revealing but one-sided. I anticipate similar coverage from the non-clergy perspective in a future issue of *Circuit Rider*. Also, I commend William T. Robinson for raising the issue of collegiality—pastors returning to and being involved in former appointments. To cover that issue from the nonclergy perspective would be just as helpful, instructive and revealing.

Bryan Palmer-Smith
West Ohio Conference

Reading this issue I am struck by how slowly change comes to the UM church. The need for interim ministers was evident throughout my own ministry. Two of the four churches I pastored were conflicted over very different issues. Neither I nor my district superintendents were equipped to deal with the situations. Too often pastors become de facto interims because we do not provide specialists for an interim of congregational soul-searching and conflict resolution. Ron Holland states the *Discipline* neither prohibits nor mandates interim ministers. My question: How long 'til this issue is faced, any necessary legislation is passed, action taken, the need met?

Nancy Richards
Missouri Conference

Thank you for the many insightful articles concerning itineracy. I am a former UMC pastor who got tired of being abused by the system and those who administered it, so I left and am now serving a United Church of Christ congregation. While every system has its problems, the United Methodist system is hurtful and uncaring of clergy and their family. In a world where pastors were all men and their families followed them, the itineracy worked. My wife is a physician in private practice; she could not pick up and move every few years. I will continue to pray for the United Methodist Church and hope that the Holy Spirit will step in and be followed intentionally rather than accidentally.

Stephen Ohnsman
Reading, PA

In Bishop Pennel's article, "The Itineracy," one of the reasons he gives supporting the itineracy is the support of the rural church. My experience is that we have not supported the rural church. I have served my present rural church for 6 years, the longest tenure in its history of over 70 years. There was little lay leadership when I arrived, practically no young families, and no vision for the future. This is not uncommon, in my experience as a lay person. The small rural churches are the last to receive appointments and receive only the most inexperienced ordained clergy, but today many receive part time local pastors. Our salary structures and health care costs are killing to the small church. Short appointments prevent the building of lay leadership in the church. I am a lifelong United Methodist (60 yrs) and believe in the itineracy, but not when it is skewed by "the career ladder" approach.

Ed Denham
Coolidge, Az

I was surprised that your issue on the Itineracy had no articles on the relationship between our practice of itineracy and the 37-year membership decline of the UMC. Most church consultants recognize that congregations grow when they are given competent long-term pastoral leadership, but our system of itineracy means that most congregations will have a pastor for only three to five years at the most and this does not enable congregations to grow significantly. The formula for church growth is competence over time but our itinerant system frequently gives competent pastoral leadership for a brief period or incompetent leadership for a long time, and neither enables local congregations to grow. Our itinerant system as currently practiced is producing overall negative results in terms of strengthening and growing congregations and if we continue doing what we have always done we will continue to get what we have always got!

Kent Millard
Indianapolis, Indiana

I thank you for taking on a difficult topic. In Erik Alsgaard's article "Does It Still Work? Three Views on Itineracy," Rev. Bill Ritter suggests that seminaries need to focus more on the current specializations in ministry, such as youth ministry, spiritual formation, children's ministry etc. May I suggest that perhaps the seminary is not the best place to locate the education for these specialized forms of ministry. The church-related college can fill that role in a way that seminaries cannot. At Pfeiffer University, a United Methodist-related college in North Carolina, we offer specialized degrees in Christian education, church music, youth ministry, Christian mission, and even a concentration in camping and retreat ministries as well as the "traditional" religion degree. When we made church vocational ministry specializations a focus of the School of Religion and gathered the appropriate faculty, our student body in undergraduate majors in the School of Religion went from under five to almost seventy-five in just six years. The "old paradigm" that everyone needs a Master of Divinity to be in "ministry" is a dying paradigm. The church-related college can fill the void in the educational preparation of people "called" into ministry but not called to be "elders" that seminaries cannot.

Ed Trimmer
West Virginia Conference

As a "bootleg deacon" (ordained from the diaconal minister status in 1997 and not subject to the itineracy) I respect the holy burdens laid on bishops and cabinets. Your issue on Itineracy raised the usual questions: "How would an outsider (traditionally a Martian) identify God's will in the itinerant appointment process—maintaining a sent ministry, respecting family and situational needs of ministers, supporting congregations in discernment and relational health, and realizing that larger churches may need pastoral specialization beyond the generalist roles taught at seminary? And how could local and Conference budgets reflect the economic realities of different churches, the feasible expectations of long-time ministers, and a compensation system that fits unique gifts and graces of ministers as well as the needs of congregations?" What if...?

United Methodists understood more clearly that being called by God does not necessarily mean being called mainly to preach and lead a local church?

Ordained Elders would join Annual Conferences without being guaranteed appointments?

A Conference Committee (bishop and cabinet?) could review and make recommendations about maintaining a feasible number of local churches and charges—not just by size, but in light of location, history, outreach opportunities, specialized community needs and relationships?

Similarly, decisions would be made about viable and appropriate Conference service and witness agencies that should be maintained or established—and about their staffing needs?

Respect for the priesthood of all believers would be sustained, and representative ministers would all carry one designation (probably Elder, to avoid confusion with deacons in other denominations)?

Providing ministers for the appropriate number of positions would be the responsibility of the Conference, and only the necessary number of appointments (to local churches and Conference ministries) would be available?

Changes in appointment would be expected to reflect needs of congregations and gifts of pastors—not being seen as career steps, dead-end locations, or maintenance of top-heavy salaries?

Elders who lacked the gifts of local church ministry would be counseled and guided, but would not be just shuffled?

Elders who found ministry sites outside local churches and the appointment process

would still be Conference members, but not supported financially by the Conference?

Large-staff churches would have role designations, and compensation would be spread equitably according to qualifications, experience, and church responsibilities—with the one who preached most often not necessarily being the most highly-paid?

Funds for ministerial compensation would be subject to Conference guidelines and distribution, so that wealthier churches would help maintain smaller or more specialized churches—rather than being seen as the top of the career ladder.

The paradoxical needs of ministers and congregations will not go away, and I can't answer any of these propositions, but isn't it always a good idea to be open to prayerful "What if..." questions?

Ellen Strawbridge Yarborough
Winston-Salem, NC

In his article Bishop Kenneth L. Carder expressed concern that the mission and community identity of the local church must take priority over the salary compensation of each local pastor. I sincerely believe it is a "both-and" reality...

We are told that extreme "jump" moves cannot always be avoided because of what is known as "the salary gap" in the chain of appointments to be filled. When this reality exists, then in the true Wesleyan ideal of the itinerant system.... pastors with reasonable tenures whose gross incomes place them in the "gap" should be asked to accept a change of appointments, in keeping with their acceptance of the itinerant system.

It's important that all Annual Conferences sustain a high, credible degree of morale in behalf of Christ's pastoral servants. They in turn are called to make the kinds of second-mile, self-giving sacrifices that go along with the Christian ministry.

A.J. Schrader
Richmond, VA

I am thoroughly looking forward to devouring your most recent Circuit Rider issue. As a 3rd year Probationary Elder, I am thrilled to have such timely and important coverage of a Methodist practice to help me in the questions for Elder's orders.

Thanks for what you do, and the great content you deliver to our church's leadership.

Scott Hagan
Albany, GA

An itineracy creates stress for children of clergy who have educational and emotional needs, complicated by frequent moving. All public school systems are not alike. If the clergy parent is appointed to a community where public schools are poor, there is a price paid by these children to make the itineracy work. The stress of being not only the "preacher's kid" but also the "new" kid can sometimes seem overwhelming.

It is presumed that the spouse's work is not as important as the "Reverend Spouse." A family dependent on two incomes suddenly has to, at least temporarily, figure out how to meet obligations with one income. The ability to pay the cost of sons and daughters higher education is likely put at risk in many situations. These family needs are as much of a covenant to honor as is one's ordination. Frequently, the two covenants compete and conflict with each other.

In the secular world, a change in one's job or a change in location entails finding a home and neighborhood that will best meet the needs of one's family. In the UMC itineracy, the needs of a pastor's family are in the last analysis [rarely] decisive. The church's needs will come first in the eyes of a bishop and cabinet. Whenever a clergy family's needs are allowed to be decisive in making an appointment, it can upset the entire appointment making process.

I was also intrigued that no one mentioned the failing "parsonage system." Many parsonages are not well maintained. And today's laity does not understand how the parsonage serves the needs of the church more than the needs of the clergy. ("Well, I wish I had someone put new carpet in my house and I didn't have to pay for it! I don't know why he is complaining. After all, he gets to live in the house for free.") Maybe Asbury was right. Itineracy may be designed for clergy without a spouse or children.

There may still be some good reasons for maintaining the itineracy today, but the church needs to consider shaping it to the realities of the modern world. The current system has made efforts to make itineracy less stressful. But these attempts in no way confront the inherent problems of moving clergy families in and out of situations that are frequently less than ideal—even in "promotion" kinds of appointments.

Roy P. White
Fishersville, VA

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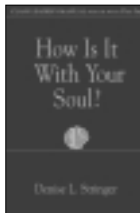
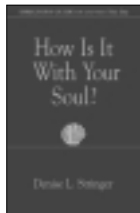
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OPEN FORUM *continued...*

Concerning: "A Thirty Five Year Old Pastor Speaks Out: Window of Opportunity" by Will Hoyle. I was the author's age when I finished seminary and was assigned to my first appointment. I find it ironic that Hoyle's article should appear in a periodical called "Circuit Rider." Part of ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church includes the concept of itineracy. Perhaps it would help Hoyle and other "young, visionary leaders" to hear from an older, and hopefully, still visionary leader.

Love your people. Change should not be inflicted on people. Love them for a year and let it sneak up on them through your leadership. Then when it is time for you to move the change will be seen as something they wanted to do, not something which you did to them. The change is also likely to last beyond your appointment.

Love your denomination. Part of your ordination is a commitment to itineracy. If you are a Congregationalist at heart find another denomination in which to serve.

Love your vocation. We are privileged to serve as clergy. We are paid for what we do. Even entry level appointments provide benefits including a place to live, health insurance, utility and expense allowances, and a salary. It beats digging ditches!

Love God. Trust God to change hearts through the Good News you have to bring.

Finally, if young, visionary leaders would spend less time complaining, and more time working, perhaps even young pastors would be treated with the respect that they desire.

Barry Hoekstra

Houma, LA

Bishop Pennel talks about being sent and I have been sent. Sent to places that no one else would agree to go to. They aren't any picnic and usually pay close to minimum. You work hard at one, they find another one just like it for you to go to next. I have yet to see the "other brothers and sisters" take pay cuts or no change to do more work....

The itineracy that is selectively applied

will continue to discourage those who came to work hard for the Kingdom of God. It seems as though our laity are saying so with their presence also, since our numbers are not even keeping pace with the population growth rate.

James W. Sainsbury

Millville, NJ

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