

A Conversation on Ministry

THE 2004 GENERAL CONFERENCE ASKED FOR A STUDY of Ministry that would “provoke a conversation within the whole church” to “explore and articulate scriptural, theological, ecclesial and practical groundings that define our distinct ministries within our common Christian relationship through baptism.” Welcome to this issue of *Circuit Rider*, part of that church-wide provocation of conversation.

We have asked a number of people, most of whom are members of the Ministry Commission, to discuss some of the issues that have emerged in the Commission. Over the past three years we have led the most extensive process ever of listening to our church’s concerns about the ordering of our ministry. We have published “Minutes of Several Conversations,” a teaching resource on ministry and a principal means of provoking and continuing a church-wide conversation on ministry. (See Study of Ministry Report to 2008 General Conference online at www.gbhem.org and click "Final Study of Ministry Report")

It is our collective judgment that we do not yet have a consensus on how to fix our identified problems related to leadership in our church. Issues connected to baptism, ecclesiology, the relationship of the various orders, and the function of ordained leadership require further reflection. Our need is not for General Conference legislation related to ministry (poorly conceived, disjointed legislation helped cause our current confusion). What is needed is John Wesley’s “holy conferencing,” an informed conversation that builds upon our unique Wesleyan past and gives the church the leadership it needs for our future as a church.

To some observers, our United Methodist ministry is a mess, a *mélange* of sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping forms of Christian leadership that confuse and deter our mission, that puts too much stress on rules and process and too little stress on productivity and fruitfulness. We hope to bring some order out of this confusion. At the same time, we also want to affirm our Wesleyan penchant for inspired, innovative pragmatism in organizing the work of the church, a willingness to adapt and modify in order to stay in mission with the Risen Christ while honoring historic, ecumenical forms of Christian leadership.

We pray that the present conversation is part of that historic Wesleyan determination to organize ourselves in ways that keep up with the movements of the Risen Christ.

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