

It's Like Déjà Vu All Over Again

Do We Need a 15th Ministry Study?

Rebekah Miles

Managing Editor's Note: Rebekah Miles, a member of the Ministry Study Commission, asked *Circuit Rider* to include an article by her about the work of the Commission. In the interest of encouraging as complete and robust a conversation as possible, we have included her article in this issue. Since this article was written, several members of the Commission (Rebekah Miles, Charles Hicks, Delia Estrada, Grant Hagiya, David Dodge, Aslam Barket, and Barrie Tritle) have submitted to General Conference a minority report encouraging General Conference to consider legislation consistent with the Commission's Report. In addition, petitions have been submitted that are in keeping with some of the recommendations of the Commission on the Study of Ministry. They address such issues as length of candidacy and probation, guaranteed appointment, and the relationship of ordination to conference membership. — JSR

I'm having amnesia and déjà vu at the same time—I think I've forgotten this before." In the spring of 1948, Methodists at General Conference authorized a study of ministry. This seemingly innocent step proved to be habit forming. Fifty-six years later, I was on the 2004 General Conference Legislative Committee that called for the fourteenth

ministry study. And now the members of the fourteenth study, of which I am one, are calling for yet another study — the fifteenth quadrennial study in seventeen quadrennia!

As if it were not enough to have spent the last three years thinking about ministry study #14 and then, more recently, pondering the prospect of ministry study #15, I have now taken on a new assignment - reviewing ministry studies #1 through #13.¹ This disheartening but instructive review has given me new appreciation for the old comic line—"I'm having amnesia and déjà vu at the same time—I think I've forgotten this before."

Across these past sixteen quadrennia and fourteen studies, we have been running through the same questions—sometimes repeating ourselves, sometimes contradicting ourselves, sometimes asserting one thing and then doing the opposite. The players and the code-phrases change, but the unresolved core issues and tensions keep reappearing in study after study. The Yogi Berra quote is appropriate: "It's like déjà vu all over again."

The current commission has produced a report with promising proposals for the ordering of ministry, but it offers only two formal recommendations to General Conference, both of which I oppose: 1) a moratorium on all petitions relating to the ordering of ministry and 2) the authoriza-

tion of ministry study #15 to which all the General Conference petitions relating to the ordering of ministry would be referred.

As General Conference delegates consider these two recommendations, I hope they will take to heart the following:

Let's remember the main thing

When it comes to establishing new church committees and commissions, I am of two minds. In my more cynical moments, I suspect that this quotation is right: "A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured, and then quietly strangled."

Yet in my better moments, I also see that in the political life of the church our ideas and best intentions are given flesh. Explaining the value of politics, Bill Moyers wrote, "Ideas are great arrows, but there has to be a bow. And politics is the bow of idealism."²

The trick is trying to discern which parts of our structure and political life help our ideas take flight and which parts lure our ideas (and us) into cul-de-sacs.

John Wesley offered criteria for discernment

"What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them

up in his fear and love? Order, then is so far valuable as it answers these ends: and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.”³

United Methodists today might not use Wesley’s eighteenth-century language, but they share the underlying impulse. Today our church has another way of putting it: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”

When Methodists have talked about the structure of the church and its ministry, we have always kept at the forefront the belief that the goal or “end of all ecclesiastical order” is mission. As General Conference considers the recommendations of the commission as well as other petitions, I hope delegates will ask themselves, “Will this petition help us to ‘make disciples of Jesus Christ?’” “Is this legislation likely to foster greater love of God and neighbor?” “Is this the best use of our limited time, energy, and money in the service of Christ and his people?”

Let’s support General Conference delegates as they do their job

The commission’s report makes this puzzling claim, “United Methodism has no executive or hierarchical body authorized to make decisions about the orders of ministry.”

On the contrary, we do have such a body. The General Conference is the duly elected body charged with making “decisions about the orders of ministry.” Some people have suggested that General Conference legislative committees and plenary sessions are not the best place for making decisions about the ordering of ministry. We need to have another study, the argument sometimes goes, because the General Conference will not be able to do its work properly in such a short time period, and it should, therefore, pass the job on to a commission.

To that claim I have two responses. First, after fourteen quadrennial studies over the last sixteen quadrennia, we can fairly wonder if quadrennial commissions are the ideal way to resolve these questions. Second, whether or not we like the democratic, political elements of our United Methodist system, this is our system. We elect delegates to General Conference who are given the job of considering petitions. Let’s let them do their job.

And for those of us who have been assigned to the 2008 General Conference Legislative Committee on Higher Education and Ministry, let’s pledge to do the best job we possibly can. Let’s prepare ourselves well and even begin informal conversations in the coming months so that when we arrive at General Conference, we will be ready for the task ahead.

Let’s pray

As we approach General Conference, let’s pray for the delegates and their work on legislation relating to ordained ministry and other issues. General Conference could be a crucial time of renewal for our church. Let’s pray that the delegates will be able to listen deeply and to be open to the movement of the Holy

Scholars note that Methodists inherited from Wesley a functional, mission-centered ecclesiology.⁴ Wesley and the Methodists who came after him honored their Anglican roots and church structure while willingly modifying this Anglican structure for the sake of the mission of the church. In combining our Anglican and evangelical traditions we created some enduring tensions. Mark Stamm describes these tensions by referring to our Methodist understanding of the church as “an ecclesiology characterized by the making of exceptions.”⁵

For example, John Wesley, made exceptions to the ordinary Anglican prohibition against the preaching of women and laymen. Because of their extraordinary call, the evident fruits of their ministry, and the urgent need for the gospel to be proclaimed, Wesley let them speak. Like Wesley, United Methodists have continued to honor their Anglican heritage while making exceptions for the purpose of mission.

Richard Heitzenrater, reflecting on Methodist ecclesiology, writes of “the tension, if not confusion, between a theological view of what the church is and a functional view of what the church does. One would assume that the theological view would have primacy, would be the grounding for action. . . . Contrary to appearances, however, I would suggest that in our

heritage, there actually is a theological rationale that lies behind the functional view of the Methodist movement . . .”

Heitzenrater is onto something here. We have good theological reasons for giving priority to functional questions as we make decisions about the ordering of ministry. We are willing to make exceptions to Anglican ecclesiology not because we are rejecting the theological for the functional, but precisely because our theology calls us to give priority to issues of function and mission. For good theological reasons we embrace a functional, mission-centered ecclesiology.

If we keep on authorizing new studies in the hope of working out these tensions in our ecclesiology, we’ll still be studying when Jesus comes—at which point, our studies and our ordering of ministry won’t likely matter all that much. No one commission or General Conference can work it all out. Because of our mission-centered theology, we will always need to

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Spirit. As we prepare for General Conference, we can remember the words of Augustine, “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.”

Let’s stop trying to resolve all the tensions in our ecclesiology. It’s an unnecessary and impossible task.

In its report, the commission notes “the lack of coherence in our church’s ecclesiology” and states that the “primary factor that has made the commission’s task so complex” is our eclectic Methodist ecclesiology. The call for another four years of study would allow us to have a church-wide discussion about our ecclesiology.

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do things in a piecemeal fashion so that we can respond to the unique missional needs of the time.

Let's be true to our mission-centered ecclesiology

Our functional, mission-centered ecclesiology allows us to be creative as we seek to make disciples. It invites us, when we dare, to function less like a large bureaucratic institution and more like the fluid and nimble movement that was early Methodism. It fosters an environment where we can respond quickly to the leading

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of the Holy Spirit and the needs of the time.

General Conference delegates may decide they are not able to resolve all of the issues related to the ordering of ministry. If so, I hope they will think creatively about how best to move forward. After fourteen ministry studies and the prospect of a fifteenth, it might be worthwhile to ask if there is a better way to get the job done. And if the General Conference does authorize another commission, it would be wise to include specific procedures for determining the membership of the commission so that we can get the best combination possible with good and balanced representation from various groups across the church—including young adults. (At age 47, I was one of the younger members of the commission.)

Let's try out the commission's road map

The commission has offered what it calls a "road map"—a series of proposals that were approved either unanimously or by super-majority within the commission. [See questions 91 to 93 in the Report.] There are some wonderful ideas and proposals that would help to further the mission of our church.

Although the commission is asking that these proposals be referred to the fifteenth ministry study, there is good reason to move ahead with some of them now. For example, the commission insists that "the process for entry into ordained ministry and full conference membership needs to be more timely and efficient." The current path to ordination is long and unnecessarily cumbersome and bureaucratic. It's discouraging to potential candidates for ministry—especially younger adults and people from some ethnic minority groups. This is the number one complaint I hear from young pastors and candidates for ministry. If the 2008 General Conference streamlines the process leading to ordination, it will be a great achievement with lasting impact for the church and its mission.

At General Conference, let's try out the commission's road map and see where it takes us. And as we set out on the road, may we be open to the movement of the one who "by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine." (Eph. 3:20). □

1. For an examination of these studies of ministry, see Richard Heitzenrater's "A Critical Analysis of Ministry Studies Since 1948," *Perspectives on American Methodism*, ed. by Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1993).
2. Quoted in *Time*, Oct. 29, 1965.
3. John Wesley, Letter of June 25th, 1746, "To 'John Smith'" in *The Letters of the Reverend John Wesley* (Vol. II) ed. John Telford, (London: Epworth, 1931), 77ff.
4. See Albert Outler, "Do Methodists have a Doctrine of the Church," *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 25; Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Kingswood, 1994), 241; and Richard Heitzenrater, "Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Methodism as a Means of Grace," unpublished manuscript, 2.
5. Mark Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest: A Theology of the Open Table* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.)

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