



# IS UNITED METHODISM A CHURCH?

Thomas Edward Frank

**I**S UNITED METHODISM A CHURCH? The Ministry Study Commission did not set out to address this question directly, but rather to provoke a conversation about ministries in the UMC—a conversation that would bring greater clarity about the relationship of our varieties of ministries with each other. The commission's own conversations returned continually, though, to questions of ecclesiology. What is the church? What are the offices of ministry in the church? In what ways is United Methodism Catholic and in what ways is it Protestant? How does the polity and order of the church advance our ministry and mission in Christ's name?

These questions have been explored by every generation of American Methodists, as Methodism has found its way over nearly 250 years in a new society with many Christian traditions and other faiths. But the questions are stirred up especially now by the contemporary situation of ordained ministry in the UMC. The denomination in the United States is deeply affected by contextual factors of a changing society and economy. Church membership and attendance in a consumer economy is far less

than in periods of national solidarity in the past. Rising education and income has correlated consistently with falling birthrates, such that the typical constituent population groups of United Methodists and other Protestant denominations in the social mainstream have among the lowest birthrates in our society. Thus the average age of United Methodists continues to climb, while the pool of younger United Methodists from which candidates for ordained ministry could be drawn continues to shrink. Ordained ministry or priesthood does not enjoy broad appeal among rising generations in any case, with many of the top students choosing medicine, law, or business over ministry and other forms of social service.

Such factors have put older denominations like United Methodism in a bind. The UMC enjoys the fruit of a fantastically successful nineteenth-century mission. We have 34,000 local churches spread over 95 percent of the counties in the United States. Yet at least 10,000 of those churches have fewer than thirty-five people on a typical Sunday morning. These and many more cannot afford the financial package to

support an elder in full connection with housing, travel, insurance, and pension benefits.

Thus from one direction the denomination is squeezed by having fewer candidates for elder, particularly persons under age thirty-five who might consider a lifetime of ordained ministry. From another direction the denomination is squeezed by having fewer churches that can support an elder.

In response, the UMC has practiced avoidance. Instead of facing these realities, the denomination has appointed increasing numbers of local pastors, most not ordained at all and most not itinerant. With over 6500 full- and part-time local pastors and 2,000 associate members, joined by over 2,000 commissioned ministers intending to become elders (some of whom are in school or appointed as student or associate pastors), **the UMC has at least a third of its 26,000 pastoral charges being served by pastors who are not ordained as elders.**

**Yet every one of these persons has the authority to celebrate the sacraments in the charge to which he or she is appointed.** Moreover an assertive twenty-year drive for voting rights by local pastors and associate members, none ordained as elder, has resulted in local pastors being named "clergy" members of annual conferences. Most recently, the UMC Constitution has been amended to make local pastors "clergy" members as a matter of constitutional church law. What other Christian tradition terms nonordained persons "clergy" or makes persons not ordained as deacons or elders "clergy" of the church constitutionally—that is, an element that constitutes, makes, creates, or brings into being this church as a church?

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This question has nothing to do with the abilities, integrity, or faithfulness of local pastors, nor the witness and mission of the local churches they serve. Many nonordained pastors do a terrific job and are much-loved by their people. But our practices make no sense ecclesologically; even the thousands of independent congregations scattered across the American countryside ordain their pastors. What do we think we are doing?

I believe that United Methodism in the United States, at least, is rapidly returning to its roots as an evangelical movement of laity. Increasingly we are saying that ordination does not matter. The sacraments constitute the church by bringing people

into the family of God through baptism and sustaining them through Christ's presence in Holy Communion. Increasingly we are saying that these constitutive practices, the sacraments, can be administered by people who are not ordained to the office that by tradition and Discipline has sacramental authority.

As a consequence, the historic core function of annual conference as a meeting of elders who share the covenant of itinerant ministry, once called the "executive session," is less and less central to what annual conferences do. Far more laity than ordained deacons and elders are present at every annual conference, by a ratio of at least 2:1, due to the equalization rule that includes in its formula the many retired clergy who normally do not attend. Annual conference is becoming less a covenant community than an association of congregations who look to the conference for the resources to support local ministry and mission. Increasingly we are saying that ministry is local, that what matters is the "leadership" of congregations—and such "leadership" can be provided by nonordained local pastors in a third of our charges. While bishops and cabinets still make the appointments, a substantial number of pastors do not itinerate (or at least are not in the connectional covenant of itinerancy of ordained elders—Methodism's signature ecclesiological tradition).

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One of the most formidable challenges that faces us is the tendency in Methodism—lately more than ever—to make stuff up ecclesologically. We have taken to inventing terms and practices foreign to the church ecumenical and deeply confusing even to ourselves. Arguably in its American history, at least, Methodism has always done its share of improvising. But in recent decades we have invented even more:

- we have ended the centuries-long practice of ordaining elders first as deacons;
- we made up out of whole cloth something we call "commissioning" that no one can really explain;
- we replaced the ecumenical language of "representative" ministry as a way of describing ordination with corporate lingo of "servant leadership" that lacks any substantive definition in our Discipline;

- we have arbitrarily decided that the term "clergy" is not related to ordination or priesthood;
- we give nonordained persons sacramental authority without providing any theological rationale.

United Methodism is more than playing its historic role today as ecclesiological gadfly, stirring up the larger ecumenical church either to ask us what we are up to or to swat us away. One comment I have heard several times recently (not from commission members) is the query, "Why should we care what other denominations think about what we do?" Is this bravado, ignorance, or a declaration of independence from the church ecumenical?

**We cannot go on like this, a movement that is "playing church."**

The Ministry Study Commission has struggled to face the changing shape of our denomination and to be honest about who we are and what we are doing. The document proposed for study across the church is a continuing effort to get the whole connection to face reality. We cannot go on like this, a movement that is "playing church."

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The study document explores many dimensions of this question in an effort to provoke a constructive conversation across the denomination. In the last section, the document lays out a "road map" of basic decisions that would greatly expand the number of persons who are ordained to sacramental authority. The expansion is a trade-off, though; ordination would come much earlier—halfway through the educa-

tional requirements for continuing relationship with an annual conference—and more paths toward ordination and conference relationship would be normalized. The category of associate member would no longer be necessary as most of those now termed "local pastors" would be elders.

This plan would work to the good of United Methodism only under certain conditions. The orders would need to become much more active in lifelong practices of formation, guided by a covenant and rule of life for those ordained to a particular order in an annual conference. Local churches would need to expect that their ordained deacons and elders gain the best education possible and continue that education across a lifetime of service. The UMC would have to commit itself to a denomination-wide campaign, backed by serious funding, to upgrade its ministry system. The denomination would need to improve its Course of Study program. The UMC would need to find more means to challenge especially younger people with a call to ordained ministry, to help them pay the costs of their education, and to encourage them in lifelong learning. The denomination would need to give more attention to evaluation and exit procedures so that ordained persons who are not really gifted for leadership could be moved out into more appropriate ministries.

After the road map description, the document lays out some of the objections to it. Among these is the fear that the road map will only take us farther down the road toward localized ministry, the end of itineracy, and a loss of connection. The UMC would become an association of local church congregations served by deacons and elders, many of whom have only a minimal theological education. The really courageous act, from this viewpoint, would be to close, merge, or yoke together local churches that cannot support an elder in full connection.

Are we really a denomination of 34,000 local churches and 30,000 active clergy, or are we more realistically a denomination of about 15,000 truly viable charges and about 21,000 active elders (3,300 of whom serve in appointments beyond the local church and 1,500 of whom are on leave at any given time)? If the latter, the UMC is still among the largest denominations in the United States and a dynamic presence in every region of the nation.

So what should our mission strategy be for the next decade? Ultimately this is what matters, of course. It will not do to practice avoidance by saying that every local church should be making disciples and that if we close a church or say that a nonordained pastor does not have authority to administer the sacraments in a small church, we are denying people a chance to become disciples. Instead we need to be realistic and honest. Where should our resources for ministry and mission be allocated? What will have the greatest impact on our witness and service as a denomination?

The document does not look backward and the road map does not lead us into the past. No effort is made here to recover the now-lost understanding that elders are first ordained as deacons. No proposal is forthcoming to go back to “representative ministry” language; instead, the document takes a stab at saying what United Methodism actually thinks “leadership” is—material that has never been elaborated in the *Discipline*.

So now, if General Conference approves the commission’s petition, the document will go out for study across the denomination. This, too, will be an enormous challenge. Ministry issues vary greatly in different

regions and societies around the world. The commission has found it almost impossible to incorporate the church situation outside the United States into the document in any thorough and responsible way. Matters are simply too complex and reliable information too hard to obtain or explain. Perhaps through the Internet the document can be distributed more widely and comment returned that can make this a more global conversation.

In every place, persons in ministry—laity, local pastors, deacons, elders—need to be in conversation face-to-face. That’s why the document is in the form of a conversation, modeled on the Large Minutes of early Methodism. Those Minutes set the tone for conversation with this plea: “It is desired, that all things be considered as in the immediate presence of God; that every person speak freely whatever is in his heart.”

We need to talk forthrightly with each other about what is in our hearts, what we understand, and how we should move forward. And like the Large Minutes attempted to do, we must ask good questions about ourselves. What is our unique charism as a denomination? What are the features of United Methodism, which, if

they were taken away, we just wouldn’t have United Methodism any more? What forms of ministry does the community of Christians called United Methodists need to authorize today, drawing on our tradition and practice?

### *Will United Methodism Be a Church?* □

**For more discussion of the issues here, see Tom Frank’s address to the chairs of the orders and fellowships of local pastors, posted under the Study of Ministry Report to 2008 General Conference, [www.gbhem.org](http://www.gbhem.org) (click “Final Study of Ministry Report”)**

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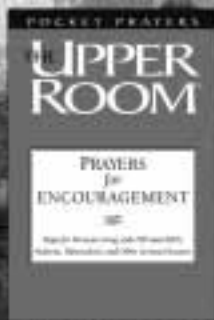


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