

Sacramental Authority of Local Pastors

A certified candidate who has completed licensing school and has received an appointment may apply to become a licensed local pastor in provisional membership in the annual conference. Upon completion of one-half of the Course of Study (12 courses), the local pastor in provisional membership may be ordained elder. Upon completion of the Course of Study and a minimum of sixty semester hours toward the Bachelor of Arts or an equivalent degree, the elder provisional member may apply for and be elected to probationary membership in the annual conference.

**Q. 92, A (2B)
Study of Ministry Report to 2008 General Conference
www.gbhem.org (click "Final Study of Ministry Report")**

Donna Alberts

As an associate member of the Arkansas Conference and past-president of The National Fellowship of Associate Members and Local Pastors, I share my perspective on effect the Study of Ministry Commission report would have on the local church.

Prior to my ordination as deacon and associate member, I served the United Methodist Church as a local pastor, as all associate members do. During this time I served small membership churches.

Take for example a church I have previously served. It was the only United Methodist Church in the county, and the population of the county seat where the church was located was only 500. In addition, there were no Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic churches in the county. This meant that anyone moving into the area from those denominations would most likely attend the United Methodist Church. The average attendance never went over fifty. I can't help but wonder, what would happen to this church and others like it if local pastors no longer had the authority to baptize and serve Communion?

When the 2004 General Conference formed the Study of Ministry Commission to consider all the petitions regarding voting rights, the probationary process, and other issues around ordering the church, I was encouraged. However, only the probationary process was addressed in the report of the Study of Ministry Commission.

The church I currently serve is in the North Central District of the Arkansas

Conference, where twenty-two of the sixty-eight churches are served by local pastors. This ratio is true throughout the Arkansas Conference, with 36 percent of the churches being served by local pastors. Of these local pastors, 23 percent are part-time local pastors. Most of the part-time local pastors are bi-vocational, and it will take them a minimum of ten years to complete the Course of Study. The halfway point for them would be a least five years after being licensed.

What will happen to all these churches if the local pastors, part-time and full-time, no longer have sacramental authority? Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Yet, how can this be accomplished when we tie the hands of our local pastors.

In speaking with the elders in the Arkansas Conference, I find most of them are also wondering how we will be able to order the life of the church if this should happen. There just aren't enough elders to go around. Who will preside over the sacraments in these small membership churches until the local pastors take at least half of their Course of Study classes? How often will these faithful Christians be able to receive the sacraments? How will the members react when their pastor can no longer baptize their children? How does this help us make disciples of Jesus Christ?

I realize that I have asked many questions, but these are questions that must be answered before any legislation comes out of the commission's study.

Some of the comments I hear from the elders about local pastors relates to the education received. Granted, local pastors

do not usually attend seminary, but they do attend Course of Study.

Full-time local pastors attend Course of Study at a seminary. The professors teaching these courses also teach the classes leading to a Master of Divinity degree. The students may only be in class for four weeks a year, but their assignments require reading books and writing papers throughout the year. In addition, many of these local pastors come to the church as a second career with master degrees and doctorates, so they are certainly not undereducated.

In Arkansas, our part-time local pastors have a choice of attending a seminary setting or attending our extension Course of Study school held at Hendrix College. I sit on the advisory board of the extension school and know that they, too, are receiving great instruction from professors and practicing elders with advanced degrees. Many of them also come to the church with graduate degrees.

Granted, some of our local pastors do not have graduate degrees or in some cases any college work. Yet, they still must be able to pass the same classes. This means their level of education may not be a true measure of their ability as a pastor.

In looking at the broader implication of the affect of this study, I'd like to reflect on some of the comments heard at The Gathering of Chairs held in February 2007. To set the stage for this, the only topic of conversation during this gathering was the Ministry Study. We broke into small groups; with elders, deacons, and local pastors in each small group for the purpose of discussing the implications of the study.

With the fairly recent publication of *This Holy Mystery* and conversations about serving Communion every Sunday, why would we now reduce the number of pastors with the authority to serve Communion? Why would we take this mean of grace away from those who attend small membership churches?

With 8,500 local pastors, 4,500 full-time and 4,000 part-time, serving churches across the United States, what will happen to all these churches? With The United Methodist Church seeing decreases in membership year after year, what sense does it make to tie the hands of so many pastors? It was suggested that all local pastors currently serving would be grandparented in with sacramental authority. What has happened to this proposal? And even by grandparenting the current local pastors in with sacramental authority, what will happen to the churches as their pastors retire and new pastors are appointed without sacramental authority?

Other comments from The Gathering related to associate members who have been ordained as deacons under The 1992 Book of Discipline. As is often the case, we are considered as local pastors in broad discussions of ministry. In addition, the facts that we are itinerate, are ordained, and have the same guarantee of appointment as elders are ignored. The latest suggestion was to have all associate member deacons ordained as elders in full connection. This would be well received by those of us serving as associate members, but not well received by our brothers and sisters who are elders.

I'm still trying to figure out why we would make changes in the way we do ministry in The United Methodist Church to please our brothers and sisters in other denominations. We are United Methodists, not Anglican or Roman Catholic. Our ordering of ministry must first consider Jesus' command to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. □



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Another Voice

I write as a representative of associate members and local pastors across this great General Conference. Our call to pastoral ministry comes from God and is affirmed by the congregations we serve.

We are appreciated by many annual conferences as we serve on district and conference committees and commissions. However, in some annual conferences we are looked upon by our peers as "second class citizens" or as a "necessary evil" with little voice in annual conference matters.

The Discipline Amendment VII Article ¶ 32 states that we are clergy. The congregations that we serve see us as clergy. Some annual conferences recognize us as clergy. However, at

the General Conference level . . . on paper yes . . . in reality no.

It is our dream to have full participation in the mission and ministry of the church we love so dear—The United Methodist Church. □

Charles E. Hicks is Associate Member West Virginia Annual Conference, pastor of Calvary United Methodist Church, and President of National



Fellowship of Associate Members and Local Pastors. Hicks is a member of the Ministry Study Commission. In West Virginia 67 percent of those appointed to churches are local pastors.

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