

A Complicated Journey Where Are the Elders?



Robert F. Kohler

The United Methodist Church today, at least in North America, is viewed as a church in decline, and for good reason. It has lost nearly three million members since its inception in 1968, and there does not seem to be any end in sight. Even the rapid growth of the church in the central conferences with a membership that adds more than two million more to the rolls does not change the perception that American Methodism is experiencing a slow and somewhat painful period of dissolution. Although the number of charges has remained relatively constant throughout the forty-year history of The United Methodist Church (approximately 26,000), there has been a significant decline in the number of churches (-5,750) and the ability of the church to generate funding that exceeds the rate of inflation has fallen significantly short of its goals.

The decline of the church and its ability to fund its mission has inevitably had its effect on the ministry of the church. While the number of deacons and local pastors has increased, the number of elders, particularly elders

serving as pastors of local churches, has continued to decline. At the same time, the number of deacons increased from 964 to 1,237 between 2000 and 2005 and the number of local pastors increased from 5088 to 6660, the number of elders declined by 754.

Although the numerical decline in elders is well documented and parallels the decline in the number of church members, these statistics do not tell the whole story. It is not the decline in numbers but the erosion of leadership and a sense of purpose that is at the heart of the decline.

When I was ordained an elder in 1967, I was welcomed into conference membership by the assistant to the bishop who said to me, "You are now a part of the greatest community of church leaders you will ever know." He didn't call it an "order" but what he was describing could be called an order in which every elder found identity and meaning and purpose for ministry. I must confess that his description of the community of faith as represented by the elders was significantly different than my experience of the elders I had known through my early years of ministry,

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tudes changed, and by the time I entered the ranks of clergy in full connection, the role of the elder had changed as well.

The abolition of the Central Jurisdiction in 1964 and the merger with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968 contributed to yet additional changes in the self-perception of elders. While the elders in the conference of which I was a part still struggled with questions of equality and institutional integration after merging with the Delaware Conference of the Central Jurisdiction, it found itself struggling with even more questions of identity through the integration of EUB pastors into a culture where neither Methodists nor EUBs were dominant. This search for a common identity in an annual conference of The United Methodist Church was made even more complex by changes in the polity of ministry that followed.

As part of the Plan and Basis for Union, full-time local pastors could apply for associate membership in the annual conference and have the authority of elders in itinerant ministry, be ordained as deacons, and have limited voting rights in the conference. In the process, elders began to ask why it was necessary for them to qualify for ordination through college and seminary rather than through the Course of Study. By 1984 full-time local pastors were added to the clergy membership roles of the annual conference with the same voting rights as associate members, and in 1996, part-time local pastors were added as well. If there was anything unique about the role and place of the elder in the annual conference, by this time in our history it was questioned by the elders themselves.

If these changes in the clergy membership of the annual conference were not enough, the time-honored practice of reserving decisions on matters of character and conference relations of clergy for the clergy members in full connection became a thing of the past in 1996 with a constitutional amendment that put laity on conference boards and district committees on ordained ministry and gave them a vote in the clergy session of the annual conference as well. If there was anything unique about being an elder, it was totally removed by this action of General Conference.

All this was background to the work of the Study of Ministry Commission. Although it has not attempted to change the role of the elder as the one who has primary responsibility for ordering the life of the church through the offices of pastor, superintendent and bishop, the commission's vision of the future will have a significant impact on the self-perception of elders. The most radical shift in focus for the commission is from ordination as an elder being the destination of a journey requiring many stages of conference relationships from candidacy to licensing, licensing to commissioning, and commissioning to ordination and full conference membership to a vision in which ordination is moved from the end of the journey to the middle of the process. If General Conference accepts the vision of the commission, probationers could be ordained elders upon election, halfway through their educational process, and local pastors would be ordained as elders halfway through the Course of Study, after completion

working as a student pastor with a license to preach. Although I found community through my friends who hung together in seminary and in the ministry of the local churches we served, that community was not inclusive of the conference leaders who now wished to welcome us into what they considered as the greatest fellowship of all.

I now recognize that my view of what it meant to be an elder in full connection and the view of the bishop's assistant were two different views growing out of two different sets of experiences of the church. His view was seen through the lens of a history of the church where itinerant elders constituted the annual conference without input from laity or those licensed for pastoral ministry. The annual conference was the conference of elders, and with the bishop, they determined the mission and ministry of the church. Although laity began to share in the governance of the conference after the Union of 1939, that change in polity did not alter the fact that the bishop, superintendents, and elders of the annual conference still viewed their leadership role as predominant. While the attitude and self-perception of some clergy may not have changed much after the Union of 1939, it is clear that over time perceptions changed, atti-

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of twelve courses. In creating such a vision, the Commission is taking us back to a time when Methodism ordained local pastors as deacons and elders without voting them into the clergy membership of the annual conference, a practice that existed for nearly two hundred years of our history. The difference is, of course, that the commission proposes that local pastors be ordained as elders and continue as clergy members of the annual conference.

It would be easy to say that this proposed change would not change what it means to be an elder in full connection, but I think that is not the case. Elders do sense a loss of uniqueness, if not authority, within the annual conference. Local pastors outnumber elders in an increasing number of annual conferences. Deacons increasingly are assuming the sacramental roles of elders and licensed local pastors in the local church and in extension ministry. Increasingly elders are asking why.

Why go through the educational rigors of four years of college and three years of seminary when one can be ordained as an elder after two years in the Course of Study?

Why be ordained as an elder if deacons and local pastors are given the same sacramental authority as the elder?

Why allow laypersons on a board of ordained ministry and district committee when the covenant for ministry is to an order in which laity do not participate?

Why bother to be an elder when everything an elder does can be done by someone else in the church?

The chairs of the orders took up these questions when they met in Atlanta in 1995 and 1997, and their answer to these questions was both interesting and instructive. The leaders of the orders of elders as a whole said that the reason for ordination as

an elder as we know it is not for sacramental authority, but for ordering the life of the church as pastor in charge, ordering the life of the district as a superintendent, and ordering the life of the annual conference and general church as a bishop, and providing support for the fulfillment of ministry through the ministry of laity, deacons, and local pastors. This is the distinctive role of the elder. Deacons may be licensed for pastoral ministry, local pastors may be ordained as elders in a provisional relationship with the annual conference, but the elder in full connection is the one on whom the church will depend for leadership, vision, and ordering the life of the community. If elders are able to embrace this vision for the future, the work of the commission will not lead to further decline in the self understanding of the elders of The United Methodist Church, but to a new understanding of who they are and what they can contribute to building up the Body of Christ. In the end the issue is not decline but leadership, and the elders of the church are called upon to show the way. May they find in the vision of the commission, not further dissipation of their call to provide the necessary leadership but an affirmation that their leadership is essential for the mission and ministry of the church.

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