

OPEN FORUM

I have enjoyed all of the issues of *Circuit Rider* that I've read so far, but the Nov/Dec/Jan 2008 issue has inspired me to write. I am a part-time local pastor in Kentucky. This is only my second year in this role, and I have questioned whether this was a "call" or a choice. Willimon says very clearly in his article that to be in any kind of ministry is a call. Perhaps the reality is we co-create with God. I am called, but I also chose. The call came through my lasting interest in spirituality and Christian apologetics in which I have degrees. The opportunity to be a United Methodist pastor was a choice, one that is challenging me personally in many of my growing edges, but is also something I enjoy.

I have struggled with the issue of ordination versus licensing. At my age, 58, I do not want to go to a seminary for an M.Div. I have much respect for those who complete such a demanding curriculum, but personally am happy to be completing an MA in pastoral ministry and have the opportunity to participate in the course of study at Appalachian Local Pastors School in Kentucky.

However, I want to be ordained. In fact, I feel a little hurt to be relegated to a "second class" status. Perhaps this should humble me, and to some extent, it does. Yet I want the right to give communion and would like that right to be extended outside of the local church where I pastor.

I was born and raised in England. While recently back "home," my husband and I visited Wesley's Chapel in London. Our guide told us that John Wesley's final break with Anglicanism came when he gave ordinary people the right to administer communion. Hmmm.

As I read through the articles about United Methodist ecclesiology, I found myself thinking about the social elitism that still exists within British culture. I was a victim of an educational system, back in the 60s, that did not honor or recognize ability, but based educational opportunity on social status. I found myself wondering why United Methodists are subscribing to a similar kind of elitism. How wonderful to have the opportunity and will to study at a seminary for a three-year degree, but

life-experience teaches much wisdom, perhaps more. God fine-tunes us for the roles we are to take in the church, and it seems to me this should be unifying rather than divisive.

Finally, on the question of United Methodist Ecclesiology and the search for identity, I would like to make a point. I joined the United Methodist Church from the Disciples of Christ. The Disciples of Christ are struggling with their identity too. There were many factors that impelled my change in denomination, but of importance to me was that United Methodism is more mature. I like the connectional system much better than a congregational system. I resonate with the four Wesleyan tenets of Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason. I believe that accountability, through a financially supported central governance, is essential. *The Book of Discipline*, *The Book of Resolutions*, and *The Book of Worship* are all excellent resources that clarify the mission of the United Methodist Church.

It seems to me that United Methodists do not need to worry about identity. Perhaps this identity crisis is like the dark night of the soul. When we are very close to God, we can no longer see His light. United Methodists have a strong identity. God grows us to wholeness both individually and corporately. **Perhaps, those of you who have been a part of the United Methodist Church for years and years just can't see how your vision is shining into the world.** I am very glad to be a United Methodist minister and participate in this diverse and inclusive Christian worldview.

Christina St. Clair
Kentucky Annual Conference

For the future of the United Methodist Church, the last two *Circuit Rider* issues are worth digesting. In particular, I resonate with statements by Rebekah Miles (and hinted at by Hans Växby) about the need to streamline both the path into ministry and the over-stuffed *Book of Discipline*. We also seem to agree that we can aspire to lofty

standards and ideals, and yet, in healthy tension, be pragmatic and accommodating as we address the needs of our people.

Our bureaucratic "methodism" and pontificating is killing us. As a writer, I love words. But in this post-MTV age, our audience has no patience for verbosity. Having served 8 years on a Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, I've not seen a single leader who is a master of the minutia of the *Discipline*, with its redundancies, contradictions, and ambiguities, and I pity the potential pastors who come before us, eager to do ministry but often facing a decade or more dealing with the dictates of our verbiage. The older I get, the more I see how short life is and the great truth Jesus offered about getting straight to the "one thing needful." By all means, Dr. Miles, lead the way in streamlining our rules, with an eye to pragmatism! Call it "mission-centered ecclesiology" or simply adopt the old Nike mantra: "Just do it."

Lance Moore
Alabama-West Florida Conference

As a full time local pastor with over 100 graduate hours in theology and an M.Div from a major American seminary, I have thought the ordering of ministry within the UMC odd since my entrance into the denomination 4 years ago. Thomas Frank wrote eloquently in his article about the sacraments constituting the church, and that the right interest of ordination is who presides over these sacraments. In his bullet points on this he states: "we give non-ordained persons sacramental authority without providing any theological rationale." Though there is a certain logic to that, I have found very few actual UMC pastors in my conference who believe that the sacraments constitute the church, or that a new rationale is needed to allow non-ordained people to preside over the church's sacraments.

Methodism has always existed between the two worlds of high church Anglicanism with its view of the sacraments and the democratizing evangelical tendencies of the Reformation that see the church as constituted by the Word of God, in all its diverse manifestations—including preaching and church discipline. Therefore in practice, I'm not sure pastors like myself are so much advocating for putting the sacraments in the hands of lay

people without a theological rationale, so much as we are exegetically deconstructing the established rationale on the basis of the Pastoral Epistles (for example), and by means of some good old fashion 16th century chanting of Sola Scriptura. I'm not exactly sure this would make Wesley roll over in his grave so much as would the protracted bureaucratic journey we presently call UMC Ordination.

In the last four years I have overseen all of our local church's ministry internships. And we have seen no less than 6 very good ministry candidates rise from among our youth and college students. Yet of these 6 young, bright students, I am only confident that one of them will actually become an elder and perhaps only 3 will stay in the UMC, and they only if in our local church. The two main reasons for our loss of these people is not the length of time to be ordained. It is two things: the University Senate's rejection of the seminary they prefer and the obsolescence of the itinerancy in a movement without real frontiers.

To these candidates, itinerancy looks predominantly like a disillusioning and overtly political career ladder that unnecessarily taxes families by moving them in a time where so much leadership literature tells us longer pastorates are more fruitful. And this is compounded by our not-so-ecumenical rejection of most American seminaries—seminaries like Gordon Conwell, Regent, or Trinity, that turn out very fruitful graduates who can easily receive an education in keeping with our doctrine. So long as we keep a fox-watching-the-hen-house formula for the members of the University Senate, the church will continue to exist for the seminaries instead of the seminaries for the churches, and we will continue to deny ourselves young, talented, well-trained ministers from other movements who could have fruitful lifelong ministries in our churches. I cannot help but wonder why we have to hold prejudice against our candidates because of their academic pedigree, when the more egalitarian Methodists of old would have examined them and determined their fitness by the judgment of elders through conferencing.

Nic Gibson

Lynn Haven, FL

Professor Miles is exactly correct with regard to postponing a decision on our ministry orders in favor

of yet another four-year study. In addition to the ecumenical and practical difficulties which the practice of "commissioning" has produced since its introduction, the prolongation of the ordination process runs counter to our clear need to recruit more young clergy into our ministerial ranks. And if, as was expressed at a recent meeting of delegates from the South Central Jurisdiction, our denomination is only 13 years or so away from numerical irrelevance in our society, why on earth would we want to delay any attempts to correct the problem for another quadrennium?

It is for that reason that the Texas Annual Conference has submitted legislation that would implement some of the study commission recommendations at the 2008 General Conference, including resolutions to discontinue the terms "commissioning" and "probationary" in favor of "ordination" and "residency" language, move ordination to the beginning rather than the end of the process, shorten the time for admittance to full membership from three years back to two, and return the church to the practice of allowing United Methodist students to attend any seminary which is accredited by the National Association of Theological Schools in order to broaden the educational opportunities for all. It is our hope that other delegations in Fort Worth will join our own in advancing these proposals to "serve the present age."

C. Chappell Temple

Texas Annual Conference

First, let me say "Thank You" for having the courage to try and address the issues facing our denomination in your last couple issues. God Bless you for that effort.

Second, if I may, I'd like to share some thoughts with other UM'ers concerning General Conference. It seems to me General Conference as we hold it is anachronistic and out-of-date. Every four years, we go to some big, crowded city where we spend millions of dollars to rent an over-priced and unsuitable convention center from people who really aren't thrilled that we are there in the first place (because UM's do not buy nor allow alcohol sales, which is where many convention centers make money), and we spend millions of dollars to stay in hotel rooms that sometimes are situated blocks

away from the convention center and we spend additional dollars for food, etc. that is mostly overpriced and not very good. All that money we spend goes to large, secular corporations, institutions and businesses and comes directly out of the coffers of annual conferences, local churches and United Methodists.

Why?

Why aren't we instead meeting at one of our own United Methodist-connected universities or institutions? Can't we find a university or college that would welcome with open arms the money and the people we bring to General Conference every four years? Isn't there an institution(s) with a large auditorium/gymnasium and adequate dormitory housing which could supply our basic needs? Can't we keep our already-strained financial resources "in house" by subsidizing our educational institution(s) instead of giving it away to secular interests?

I have been to the last two General Conferences. While I love the connection with other UM'ers from around the world, I will not attend another General Conference nor will I support going to another one until we bring some kind of sanity to this process of deciding where we go every four years. The current system simply doesn't make sense, either financial sense or logistical sense.

It's time for a change.

Tim Reeves

West Liberty, Ohio

In reading the September/October issue of CR "Naming the Present, Dreaming the Future" I was taken aback and disappointed at what I saw. If I counted correctly the photos of the contributors, there were 28 submissions by men and only 5 by women. Of those 5 women, only 1, Donna Strickland Smith, is a pastor working in the local church. There was no voice in the entire edition given to young clergywomen. (In my count I did not include Neil Alexander's article, the letter from Bishop Huie, or Bret Chandler's Sermon Starters).

I very much value the diverse nature of our denomination and recognize there are many voices to hear and even more needing to be heard. That being said, however, as a young clergywoman myself, I believe that women deserve more than 1/5 of the copy in CR. As well,

for a magazine that is designed for the applied practice of Christian ministry for UM clergy, I would hope to hear from a larger contingent of those who are not only dreaming the future of the church, but from those who are of a generation that will help make the future a reality.

Amanda Stein
Madison, WI

Concerning the current issue (Nov/Dec/Jan), it seemed as if your journal defines its concern and inspiration for "The Ministry Study" from one part, and only one part, of the United Methodist Church. Specifically, I wrote down the areas in/from which your writers/contributors work/represent (more or less in the order their articles appear): Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, Arkansas, West Virginia, Texas and North Carolina. Mercy! That's almost wholly coterminous with the Confederate States of America of a century and a half ago (or even the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, now 68 years deceased)! Have you got a good reason to account for such a thing?

Kermit Krueger
Evergreen Park, Illinois

All General Conference petitions are expected to be posted no later than March 31 at www.umc.org.

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by D. Stephen Long



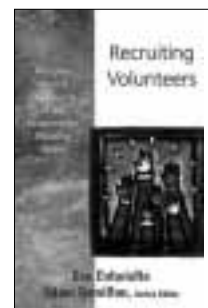
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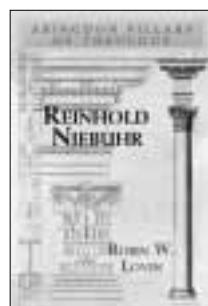
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