



The Itineracy and Its Discontents (Notes from the Underground)

“What most unites all spiritual leaders is not a set of beliefs or practices but the factors that contribute to our stress.”¹

—Edwin Friedman

“What’s the rub? Looks to me like ministry is a good job, mostly inside work and not much heavy lifting.”

—Iowa farmer and SPRC member

The assignment was to reflect on the itineracy, raising matters that are talked about in private but rarely in public forum. As a retired pastor there was the assumption that I might be freer to raise such questions than younger colleagues. Despite forty-seven years within the itinerant system, I had not really looked at how the word was used in Wesley’s time. *The Oxford English Dictionary* provides a sample:

“Itinerant gospellers that travel up and down.”

“To stroll and teach from town to town.”

“One who itinerates or travels from place to place in the pursuit of a calling.”

The word fit a movement that needed persons free to move from place to place; a people on fire and filled with passion about a life-or-death mission, a lean outfit with leaders who were willing to go where they were most needed in answer to an irresistible call.

I did a bit of research and asked colleagues the question, “What’s wrong with itinerant ministry?” The responses indicated that most everyone has an opinion, and *words* are fairly close to the surface.

William Cotton

Following are samples from conversations with colleagues.

We Are a Tethered Itineracy

Go where you are needed runs up against the pastor who is divorced and needs to be near his or her children, or the pastor’s spouse whose profession is specialized and there are only two or three places where he or she can find work. To be considered: the ages and stages of family members, changing schools at crucial times in a child’s education, special needs for health and housing, and on it goes.

The mission and the needs of the church and the very human needs of the pastor’s family are in tension. The cabinet must see the mission of the local church as primary and family considerations as secondary. Some clergy admit that we need to rethink what we understand our “tethers” to be, but this remains a huge issue. One pastor did note that most of the issues fall away if the salary package and appointment seem attractive.

Itineracy and the Ladder

When you go to your next appointment, plant asparagus as a sign. It will take at least four years to harvest the first crop.

How do we keep pastors in a place long enough to do some solid work? How do we give the same value to pas-

tors serving in small places that we give to those in tall-steeple pulpits? How do we kill the notion that the reward for ministry is moving on up?

Many seminarians are led to believe they will serve in urban congregations. Most United Methodist churches are town-and-country appointments. Somehow the impression is given that you will not be in this appointment very long. There are better things in store for you. This creates the notion that where we are is not our real work. Our real ministry seems always in the future. This stepping-stone mentality is deeply ingrained in parishes. Laity will often say, “Well, you won’t be here long,” as if to say, “We don’t deserve a minister with your obvious talent.”

One pastor reflected on an appointment this way: “I could say: Look at this rotten place where I, with my many skills and abilities, have been placed by the system. I am not appreciated. I can do nothing here but try to leave. This would be the power of death. So I choose to say: The bishop must have confidence in me. The cabinet has placed me here at this juncture of history because there is a need and a vital ministry to be done. They perceive that I have the talents for the task. I’m going to do it. This kind of attitude is the power of resurrection.”

This pastor believes that such an attitude could develop within the clergy if the bishop and cabinet actually do go about their work in ways to let the pastors know of their concern and interest in their work. According to this pastor the key is that leadership actually does value what the pastors are doing and care that they do it well and finds ways to let them

know that the years they are investing are crucial to the mission.

Itineracy grows out of an assumption: The bishop and cabinet should know what is best for the local congregation (as opposed to each congregation searching for their own clergy person). This works if the district superintendent knows the situation of the local church and the gifts and graces of each clergy person in his or her district. Many believe this is not working because the D.S. does not spend enough time with pastors. Like Martha, “these leaders are distracted with many things.”

Too often in appointment-making the D.S. acts like a salesperson trying to close the deal and will leave out some of the realities of the challenges the congregation faces. Congregations sometimes are not told things they most need to know about a particular pastor’s style. This kind of blindness leads to unhappy appointments and lack of trust.

Clergy Effectiveness

Some think the itinerant ministry shelters and protects ineffective pastors. It tends to breed mediocrity. Once you are a full member there is no real accountability for growth and development. One pastor said: “The guaranteed appointment is the issue. Failing ministers are shuffled around from place to place making all of us look bad. These days when congregations are asked what they would like in a minister, they universally say someone who can preach. (code word for ‘our preacher hasn’t had a new thought in years’).”

This pastor believes our continuing education program is seldom enforced and evaluations are woefully inadequate. In social work, law, and medicine, keeping up is mandated if one wishes to practice. Challenging continuing education in areas where we are least prepared is needed. Another pastor said, “If you left me on my own I would probably choose the ‘how to do’ courses when I should be pushed to go deeper into theology and faith development. We could all do better.”

Them Versus Us

The large influx of second-career persons into ministry poses a threat to full members. Does the Course of Study mean the end of seminary education? they ask. Isn’t this the dumbing down of

ministry? Wesley’s notion of having an educated ministry among us was crucial to his time and to ours.

Local pastors and associate members feel second-class and snubbed. One pastor said, “We have an Order of Elders and Deacons, and as an afterthought the fellowship of local pastors. No matter how hard we try, we get no respect.” An associate member who is well trained said, “I never really feel like part of the family. I feel more like hired help or a temp employee. Despite my success as a pastor there is the implication that my education is not good enough.”

A growing number of full members realize that the influx of second-career persons into the ministry is taking us back to our historical beginnings and could be a gift. They will admit that we need to avoid the growing elitism. Set apart does not mean separate from the laity, nor should the expression mean set above associate members and local pastors.

Teachers within the COS know that candidates entering the schools these days have degrees, life experience, curiosity, energy, and a sense of passion. District superintendents tell us that these persons do good work usually in places that most have given up on. The larger issue is the cost of seminary education and the failure of the church to provide scholarships that make seminary more accessible to everyone.

Connected Versus Bowling Alone

“If you don’t go to other people’s funerals they won’t come to yours.”
—Yogi Berra

Pastors speak of isolation and loneliness and also of their need for a collective identity that has been lost. We mimic the culture of disconnection. We are tossed about like tumbleweeds, with each pastor/congregation doing its own thing. We have forgotten paragraph 303 in the *Discipline* (2004), which calls us to “live in covenant of mutual care and accountability.” One pastor said, “I got over the feeling of isolation by finally deciding to join the church I was serving. Guess what, there are real people sitting out there in those pews and we have become friends. I wish we clergy could become friends rather than competitive rivals.”

The connection that was so real to Wesley has lost its theological meaning. It has come to mean bureaucratic connections. It ought to mean more than a financial system to support conference work. Annual conference must be more than a business meeting. At one time in our history it was an opportunity for making real connections. The sense of pastors and churches great and small bonded together in a great cause has slipped away. Colleagues don’t show up for funerals anymore.

Theological Points for Leaders

In conversation with pastors, the role of the bishop and cabinet comes up again and again. From a host of voices I gleaned the following points:

- Ministry is still found more in mystery than in management. Our spirituality is foundational and should be modeled by leaders.
- Passion that is modeled by leaders is contagious, a signal and sign of hope.
- Leaders are to be servants. The purpose of leadership is to lead. This means building strong relationships.
- A sense of humor (that does not reflect cynicism) wouldn’t hurt the old church these days.

Should the church begin to see its mission as making new signs of resurrection in a sick, blind, and valueless culture, pastors will rise to the occasion, and much of the discontent will simply go away. □

1 Edwin Friedman, *Generations to Generations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 1.

2 Robert Kohler at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry has done wonderful work over the last four years to overcome this attitude in his work with the Gathering of the Orders and Fellowship of Local Pastors.

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