

Joe E. Pennel Jr.

The Itineracy

I am writing this article as one who knows what it is like to be appointed and as one who has had the responsibility for making appointments. For thirty-eight years I was appointed to serve various congregations, and for eight years, while serving as the bishop of the Richmond Area of The United Methodist Church, I came to know what it is like to appoint other clergy to their stations.

Near the end of every session of the annual conference there came a time when I would fix the appointments for the coming year. It did not take me long to understand that it was through the stationing of the clergy that the unique connectional nature of The United Methodist Church was made visible.

The Book of Discipline is very clear in stating that “clergy shall be appointed by the bishop who is empowered to make and fix all appointments in the Episcopal area of which the Annual Conference is a part.” Every bishop must take this responsibility seriously if the itineracy is to benefit the connection and the local congregations. Likewise, clergy must understand and believe in the crucial importance of itineracy if both the connection in general and the local churches are to advance the cause of Christ. This is the way we are as United Methodists. There are some within our ranks who believe in this way, and there are some who

do not hold it to be so very important. **I hold to some basic convictions about our itinerant system.**

First, I believe that clergy are intended to be in a covenant relationship with one another. We are not to be like Lone Rangers who are busy doing our own thing. Clergy, in a very unique and often misunderstood way, belong to each other. Clergy are to be a covenant community within the church to mutually support, care for, and hold each other accountable for the sake of the life and

mission of the church. Joining the spirit of the itineracy is one of the ways that we honor and live out our covenant with God and with one another. If we use the system to benefit ourselves, we work against the spirit of our

covenant understanding. The itineracy calls upon us to be concerned about more than self-consciousness and self-interest. This way of understanding vocation is countercultural, and it requires great dedication and strong commitment.

In the **second** place, I believe in a sent ministry. This is one of the reasons that The United Methodist Church can be in almost every county in the United States. A sent clergy allows us to be in rural, urban, and suburban areas. In many of our rural communities, The United Methodist Church is the last remaining institution. The school has been moved to a more central location, the small factory has closed, and the mill is no longer in operation,

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but we continue to be in ministry. A call system does not have the ability to deploy its clergy in such a vast and comprehensive way. A willingness to be sent is fundamental to our understanding of ministry.

My **third** operating conviction is that elders should honor the commitments that were made when they were applying for admission to full connection and ordination. Those applying were required to answer the following question: "Do you offer yourself without reserve to be appointed and to serve as the appointive authority may determine?" Obligation to our itinerant system should be clearly understood from the very beginning.

This does not mean that appointments should be made in an arbitrary or heavy-handed way. There are many issues that need to be taken into consideration. However, if itineracy is to benefit the entire church, clergy cannot ignore this basic commitment to the covenantal relationships that have been established through conference membership.

Consider some of the needs that must not be overlooked.

First, the spiritual and temporal needs of the charge must be brought to the front burner. District superintendents must be willing and able to share those needs with the bishop and other members of the cabinet. Full consideration needs to be given to such things as: the history of the congregation, the spiritual maturity of lay leadership, the convictional stance of the congregation, forms of community witness, evangelical outreach, concern for the poor, and programs for theological education. This task will be difficult for superintendents who have responsibility for sixty to one hundred churches, but a way must be found if the spiritual gifts of pastors are matched to the spiritual needs of congregations. Failure to understand the missional needs of congregations will result in poor appointment-making.

In the **second** place, district superintendents must develop community profiles with the pastor and pastor/parish relations committee. It is easy to forget that clergy are appointed to serve communities as well as individuals who happen to belong to the congregation. Engaging the charge in ministry to the community is a primary task of the pastor. Congregations need to be organized around the pain of the community because it is in experiencing such pain that we meet Christ. If the bishop and the superintendent do not

understand the community context, it will be difficult for the itinerant system to provide adequate clergy leadership.

Finally, but of no less importance, the gifts of the pastors must be clearly understood. Such understanding will include spiritual and personal sensibility, academic background, skills and abilities, and evidence of God's grace. We need to know about pastors' gifts in leadership, worship and liturgy, preaching, evangelism, teaching, and ability to provide nurture. It is also very important to assess pastors' capacity for spiritual self-evaluation and their desire to move forward toward being made perfect in love. If these spiritual gifts are not clearly understood, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to send the pastor where he or she could be the most effective.

We should also consider the needs and concerns of the pastor's spouse and family. Spousal employment, the educational needs of children, care of aging parents, certain disabilities, and geographical issues must also be factored into the equation. If the needs of the family are not met it will be difficult for the pastor to meet the needs of the congregation and the community. Understanding the difference between the superficial and the real needs of families is not an easy task, but it must be done in a good and healthy way.

Even when all of the above considerations are taken into account, it is still difficult to make the itinerant system work to the benefit of the connection. It is made difficult by pastors' unwillingness to go where they are needed. Many will not iterate because of home ownership, salary demands, feeling threatened by new settings for ministry, not feeling at home outside of certain geographical areas, family refusal to move, theological convictions, or disagreement with the assessment of the pastor/parish relations committee and cabinet. Many of our clergy will not move because they see themselves as representing a franchise instead of being part of a conference where the covenantal relationship is foundational.

I have discovered that many of our clergy will not willingly participate in the itinerant system because they do not hold strong positive convictions about this aspect of our polity. I have talked to more than a few pastors who sincerely do not believe that this is the best strategy for meeting the spiritual and religious needs of those who are both inside and outside the church. If clergy are committed to a congregational polity, the itinerant system

will be a barrier rather than a help.

Let no one deny that our itinerant system is a hard and difficult way. It places great demands on the bishop, the cabinet, the clergy and their families as well as pastor/parish relations committees. Not everyone is suited for this way of doing ministry, but for those who are prepared to make this commitment there is the possibility that God can use this system as a method for reaching the secular multitudes who are now serving other gods.

I believe we are at a time when the General Conference needs to review the itinerant system to see if it can be adaptable and flexible enough to meet the present day need to spread the gospel. Such a review should consider at least four questions.

- Is this the best methods for placing clergy as a way of fulfilling the missionary and evangelistic objective of the church?
- Does the guaranteed appointment control help or hinder the itinerant system?
- Does it provide freedom from congregational control that makes possible prophetic preaching and living?
- Can it be flexible and mobile enough to follow a moving and growing population?

If Methodism is still considered a missionary movement, these questions must be dealt with at every level of the church. Let us not forget that Methodism began as a missionary movement, and the itinerant ministry was a tool for empowering that movement. Should we continue to use this tool or should we find another? That, it seems to me, is the fundamental question.

In the meantime, bishops, cabinets, clergy, and congregations must be willing to participate in the system with a sense of justice, great sensitivity, and thoughtful collegiality. Until a better way is found, the system must be adaptable and flexible while not neglecting the concept of a sent ministry. □



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