

The Ministry of Licensed Local Pastors

By Charles Hicks

Throughout the history of Methodism there have always been men and women who, while not ordained, faithfully served the church as pastors. This practice began with John Wesley, who utilized lay assistants in his work in England. The concept came to the colonies where lay men and lay women did the work of building the Methodist movement without the benefit of formal degrees or ordination. Local preachers remained in one location and served the local Methodist community, while traveling preachers bore responsibility for the entire circuit and eventually held conference membership.

Once Methodism became its own church, the question of the authority of local preachers to fill the role of pastor was addressed when the General Conference of 1796 regularized the office

by stipulating that a local preacher might be granted a license to preach if he or she had been (1) recommended by the society of which he or she was a member and (2) examined by the quarterly conference of the circuit.

In frontier times, local preachers brought a sense of continuity and stability to the circuits by remaining stationed in one location while the ordained traveling preachers oversaw the circuit. The effective combination of local preachers and traveling preachers was perfectly suited to the environment of the day. As the circuits were reduced to charges where a single pastor could preach weekly, the distinction between the traveling preacher and local preacher diminished.

The United Methodist Church truly has a long history of using local pastors to facilitate ministry especially in rural and small church settings. A shortage of ordained clergy, due to retirement and fewer seminary graduates going into

congregational ministry, has brought about the proliferation of persons who have chosen local ministry in answer to the call of the church for affordable clergy for these congregations. As a result, there are now more than 7,200 full and part time local pastors and over 2,000 associate members under appointment. In 2008, 29 percent of all our pastoral appointments were served by local pastors. This is an increase from 19 percent in 2000 and 18 percent through the 1980s and '90s. I believe that if The United Methodist Church were to be innovative in its deployment of these individuals who have responded to the church's call for more clergy, the denomination would find itself once again growing in places where sending Elders would not be cost effective.

Called to the pastoral ministry out of the midst of our churches, local pastors represent to the denomination the vast secular work experience of people in our congregations. A recent survey found local pastors bringing skills from many areas of life. There were accountants, barbers, businesspersons, doctors, designers, engineers, homemakers, lawyers, pharmacists, teachers, and truck drivers represented,

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among other professions. The denomination should capitalize on this reservoir of experience and use the local pastor's zeal to serve God in pastoral ministry.

Perhaps we need to develop new ideas for pastoral ministry that have already begun to bear fruit in many annual conferences. For example, many conferences are using local pastors with great success in new church starts as well as transformational appointments for marginal churches. Many of our conferences have these "transitional churches" that are on the brink of being closed. Some of these churches are in areas where the population is shrinking. Others are in need of "interim" clergy but cannot always afford them. In many of these situations, cooperative ministry efforts could be designed that could be served very well by local pastors. Furthermore, local pastors could serve in community and social service ministry, as well as in hospital and industrial chaplaincy, all while pastoring a local congregation.

The deployment opportunities for local pastors and associate members are limited only by the inability or reluctance of The United Methodist Church to be innova-

tive in the way it prepares them for their work. Do we need persons with financial, educational, or administrative skills who also feel called to pastor small churches? Let us give them specific training to serve as pastors in medium-size churches as well as in small churches. Is it too expensive to appoint a seminary graduate to a new church plant? Then perhaps we should appoint local pastors and associate members who have shown abilities in these areas to start the new churches that will keep The United Methodist Church alive and vitally active in making disciples for the transformation of the world. □



Charles Hicks is an ordained associate member in the West Virginia Conference. He has served the Calvary United Methodist Church in Ripley, WV for the past 11 years. And he is president of the National Fellowship

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