

Will Hoyle



A thirty-five-year-old Pastor speaks out

Window of Opportunity

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Is the twenty-first century the time for United Methodists to rethink the itinerant system? A change of pastors is a defining moment in the life of every congregation. It is a time for God’s people to come to terms with the grief of a well-loved pastor departing or relief that new leadership is coming to steer the congregation into the wind of the Spirit to set sail for God’s vision of making disciples.

I am thirty-five-years-old. Jesus Christ was in his thirties when he turned the world upside down! Yet many in the church equate chronological age with spiritual maturity and leadership ability. The innovation and new thinking the next generation will bring to Methodism should excite us! Their disciple-making potential is immeasurable, if they are allowed to be leaders.

Bishop Al Gwinn recently preached, “The hinges on the doors of our churches need to be turned out instead of in,” as he told the story of Noah, a former great trombone player, accompanying his organist weekly. The humorous part of the bishop’s story was that Mrs. Gwinn told her husband to fix Noah’s microphone as she could not hear him blow. The bishop said, “You mean you don’t know? Noah doesn’t blow! He only slides!” Bishop Gwinn concluded, “Lots of churches have stopped blowing. Now they only slide.”

A new generation of leaders is blowing! They are blowing the winds of the Holy Spirit in praise and worship bands, in outwardly bound mission activities, and spiritual formation. At the Lay Rally

where Bishop Gwinn spoke, a youth drama team won the Lay Ministry of the Year award for their evangelistic drama, an outreach effort they have traveled as far as the streets of Mexico to present—winning 150 first-time professions to Christ in one trip!

The theological formation and training of this new generation of pastors has changed. But the itinerant system has not changed to support them. Many young, innovative, Spirit-led leaders are appointed to churches that block innovation, stymie creative leadership, and stonewall change aimed at turning the hinges of the church outward as Christ and John Wesley taught us to do. Pastors who refuse to be manipulated into adopting maintenance over mission are burning out faster and are leaving the ministry for secular careers that welcome innovation.

There is a key window of opportunity, a “threshold moment” for the congregation to move in new directions with the arrival of a new leader. Presently, moves occur in relatively quick succession (3.6 years). The majority of young visionary leaders are appointed to churches that are grieving the loss of the one-room, traditional farm community church where ten families knew everything about each other, worked side by side, and depended on a closed family system of shared farming for their very survival. These areas are quickly becoming bedroom communities for jobs in metropolitan cities with subdivisions full of new people. If churches do not act, this window of opportunity will be gone, perhaps forever, as other innovative, missionary-minded, non-United Methodist churches take the lead in making the world beyond the doors their parish.

The laity in churches needing to transition from family chapels to “purpose-driven” churches are afraid to let go of their tight control of the committees, boards, and monies to allow new, young lay and clergy innovators into leadership. Letting go of control is difficult for them, not because of inflated egos, but because the church has been their fortress and place of safety against a rapidly changing world. It is their last stronghold against technology, changing worship styles, even racial integration that will naturally occur if the church is missional. Many are ready to fight to the death of the pastor, themselves, or the church.

A serious gap exists in seminary training to prepare our most innovative and visionary United Methodist leaders for the harsh realities of fortress ministry. United

Methodist churches on the cutting edge of opportunity to make new disciples in transitioning communities are not being given adequate time to grieve the departure of pastors trained in the old model in order to welcome leaders who are full of God’s vision.

According to businesswoman Claire Raines, one of the nation’s most sought-after advisors on generational diversity in the workplace, “Millennial leaders are: confident, don’t believe in ‘paying your dues,’ have a can-do attitude, optimistic, goal/achievement oriented, civic/mission minded, inclusive, want a workplace that is challenging, collaborative, creative, fun and financially rewarding. They learn by teamwork, technology, structure, entertainment, excitement and experiential activities. They communicate best positively, respectfully, motivationally, and electronically. They are most discouraged and leave jobs when no one tries to get to know them as individuals, learn what motivates them, their ideas are discounted for lack of experience, negativity is tolerated and people feel threatened by their education and technical know-how.”¹¹

It is time to recognize that the itinerant system needs to employ the use of intentionally trained interim pastors or specially trained outside consultants immediately following the departure of the old model so congregations can have adequate time to move through denial, grief, anger, bargaining, depression (the stages of grief) and come to a place of acceptance before a new, younger, cutting-edge visionary leader is appointed to lead them into the future that is clearly God’s biblical will for the church.

The people injured most by the present itinerant system are spouses and children of pastors who do not have the theological framework through which to process the often vitriolic anger of the congregation as they grieve the loss of the old but are not ready to accept the new. “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved” (Matthew 9:16-17).

In the current model, churches have no required time and facilitator to help them discern their current reality and work through the stages of grief. The newly appointed pastor and his or her family often feel the pain of rejection, being treated as outsiders and suffering emotionally, physically, and spiritually—often to the point where the spouse demands to move after a short stay or the pastor leaves the ministry to preserve their marriage. Either way, parsonage children suffer emotional scars that keep some from ever being active in a church or ever responding to a call to ministry.

Other denominations requiring the use of interims have recognized these unhealthy dynamics. I am sure that many United Methodist pastors have been *de facto* interim pastors whether formally designated as such or not. Many pastors’ spouses are university educated and have career desires of their own. The present itinerant system is outmoded in a modern world in which often both spouses, especially those serving minimum salary charges, have to work to pay rising medical costs and educational debt and save to finance a home in retirement years. Moving often sacrifices the spouse’s career or a child’s final year at a school. Allowing pastors to invest fully in a local community by purchasing a home would be beneficial to church growth as it allows pastors to choose the type and size of home that fits their needs, gives a healthier psychological separation between work

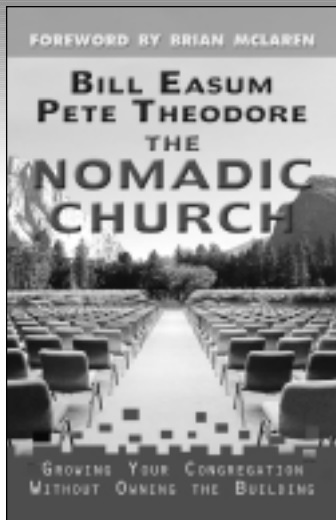
Many in the church equate chronological age with spiritual maturity and leadership ability.

and private family time, and moves churches toward dealing with their reality rather than shaming and blaming the pastor and requesting a pastoral change to avoid spiritual introspection.

The slow, deadly erosion in many churches is a failure of the people to accept the church is in trouble and immediate change is needed. Change is difficult and often wrought with conflict. Using itinerant moves to resolve conflict is enabled by a parsonage system, but it is a roadblock to evangelistic effectiveness.

Thom S. Rainer, founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism, says in *Breakout Churches*, “One of the keys to becoming an Acts 6:7 breakout church is for leaders to be willing and want to have long-term ministries (21.6 years) in one single

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church. . . . Many of the pastors of comparison churches left at the early signs of conflict. The breakout church leaders endured the pain and did not leave. They were tenacious. Their short-term pain brought long-term gains."²

According to Jackson Carroll, professor emeritus of Duke Divinity School, "The use of outside consultants to help congregations deal with transitional problems whether at the start of a new pastorate or for other conflicts is a growing practice in large churches." However, most of the young, visionary leaders who are tired of sliding and who want to blow the trombone of which Bishop Gwinn speaks are appointed to smaller, rural churches that have the same conflicts but not the finances or willingness to recognize their reality and ask for outside help until the conflict has escalated to unmanageable levels. The pastor and parsonage family become the lightning rod for people's anger, reduced giving becomes an expression of anger mixed with fear of growth, and apportionment payments decrease as a tool to punish visionary pastoral leaders. Failure to recognize this pattern causes pastors to be held accountable instead of the local church.

After such an experience, many pastors simply transition their leadership to maintenance instead of mission, giving up on God's vision to make disciples in order to avoid being labeled a troublemaker. This also avoids future emotional strain on the marriage and family. Others who stay true to God's personal call to be visionary leaders leave the denomination or leave the ministry for a secular vocation.

American pioneer thinking teaches us to fix things without outside help. Generally no one will call for an outside expert unless told they are held accountable by a higher authority. Congregations demanding a move, instead of addressing the root of the anger and fear among the members, miss the opportunity to be the true church. Pastors requesting a move often think getting to a bigger church with a larger salary is better. Many of us sacrifice the pain of being God's subversive countercultural agent only to buy into the falsehood of American entitlement culture. Has our itinerant system begun to mirror the secular corporate model of ladder climbing and competition where higher compensation is the motivation-reward for leadership in contrast to the biblical model of obedient discipleship motivated by love of God? Choosing mediocrity to avoid conflict leaves in its wake a battlefield of burned out

fortress churches with an army of impotent soldiers without transformational leaders.

If United Methodism wants my generation of young, innovative leaders to stay in ministry to lead us into the future, we need to formally recognize this problem and develop paid consultants in every annual conference to formally guide congregations in dealing with their fear and pain and train and deploy official interim pastors. Either solution would be better than putting families through the emotional pain of being a convenient target for laity grieving the loss of churches that have been fortresses against a changing world—a world full of seekers, Gen-Xers, Postmoderns, and Millennials hungering for spiritual sustenance and for us, the name brand church nationally advertised to have "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors", to feed them the bread of life in Jesus Christ.

We may think, to our detriment, this problem is going to go away on its own. However, the only solution for a vital future in The United Methodist Church is to rethink the itinerant system. If we do not fix the underlying problem, the church will cease to attract the best and brightest innovative leaders of the world; our fortress-minded church facilities will grow empty and begin to physically and spiritually decay; and worst of all, the spiritually hungry people living in the subdivisions less than a few miles from the church where farms full of food once thrived in the fields will go away hungry or make the Sunday commute back to the city to be fed in mission outposts where the hinges on the doors of the church are outwardly faced—or have been torn off all together. □

1. Claire Raines in *Connecting Generations: The Sourcebook for a New Workplace* (Menlo Park: Crisp Publications, 2003), 25.
2. Thom S. Rainer in *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 58.
3. Jackson W. Carroll in *Pastoral Change: A Defining Moment in Congregational Life* (Video Verite: www.videoverite.tv/congregation/revrend-day-3.html, 2004), 1.



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