

Willingness to Move

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Itineracy has remained one of the most profound characteristics of Methodist polity since John Wesley's eighteenth-century revival movement. Despite the changing context of Methodism over the last almost three centuries, when one is called to full-time ministry in The United Methodist Church one's 'willingness to move' remains a crucial component. This article offers a brief historical survey of the significance and main characteristics of this peculiar aspect of our polity.

John Wesley and Itineracy

For Wesley, itineracy carried the momentum of the movement's mission to spread scriptural holiness over the land. Itineracy, beginning with John Wesley himself, emerged from a desire to meet the greatest needs and a willingness to travel to address those needs.¹ In more pragmatic terms, in the 1740s the Methodist movement had established more societies than it possessed preachers. Thus, the itineracy enabled the movement's full-time preachers to provide the most effective leadership by sharing responsibilities.

Itinerating preachers manifested "the connexion" that Wesley worked so diligently to establish and sustain. In early Methodism under Wesley's leadership, the connection was sustained by his

authority to appoint itinerating preachers (after his death the conference would inherit this authority). Through a clause included in the deed of every preaching house within the Methodist connection, Wesley maintained this authority. The clause stipulated the obligation of the trustees of the preaching house to accept preachers approved and appointed by Wesley. This clause helped ensure that trustees could not refuse these preachers. Alternatively, the trustees were entrusted with holding their preachers accountable to acceptable doctrine, namely "no other doctrine than that contained in Mr. Wesley's Notes upon the New Testament and four volumes of Sermons."² This shared practice and preservation of doctrinal faithfulness continues in the use of the trust clause in the deeds of United Methodist facilities.

Preachers itinerated frequently in early Methodism. Initially, preachers itinerated to a new circuit at least every three months; at most one might stay as long as two years.³ According to Wesley,

"We have found by long and constant experience that a frequent change of preachers is best. This preacher has one talent, that another. No one whom I ever yet knew has all the talents which are needful for beginning, continuing, and

perfecting the work of grace in an whole congregation."⁴

The basic issue concerning the itineracy of full-time preachers was not that the preachers needed to move at particular intervals, but rather their sincerity of commitment to Methodism's mission. For Wesley this was demonstrated by their willingness to move.⁵ Although local preachers (those who did not travel or itinerate but worked with a single circuit or society) assisted, they were not granted the same authority as full-time traveling preachers.⁶ Historically, recognition as a traveling preacher and admission to membership in the annual conference was not linked to ordination, as early preachers were not ordained until Wesley's subversive actions of 1784.⁷ Membership in annual conference continues to be the prominent defining factor, not necessarily ordination, as contemporary local preachers are licensed and given a local ordination but lack full membership and subsequent voting privileges in the annual conference.

Methodist Itineracy in the United States

Francis Asbury continued Wesley's emphasis upon frequent itineracy of full-time preachers, though he experienced

some dissent from other early American Methodist leaders, such as Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman. Thomas Coke and Asbury explained itineracy: “Every thing is kept moving as far as possible.”⁸ They cited biblical foundations and described itineracy as “the primitive and apostolic plan” after Wesley’s example.⁹ This peculiar Methodist polity, namely itineracy, with the complementing role of local preachers, was key to planting Methodism across the frontier. Itineracy provided an incredibly effective method of expansion and fulfillment of Wesley’s missional vision.¹⁰

In the United States, itineracy continued in the spirit of Wesley, Coke, and Asbury until the middle of the nineteenth century. Thus, itineracy was perceived not as divinely prescribed, but rather as immensely effective and therefore worth preserving. Like Wesley, Methodists in the United States understood the itineracy as a practice intimately related to the mission of the church in the world.¹¹

In the earliest itinerant practice, experienced by Pilmore and Boardman, preachers itinerated each quarter. In 1804, a two-year limit was established but with the normal appointment lasting one year. In 1864, the Methodist Episcopal Church set the limit at three years. In 1866, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South set the limit at four years. In 1888, the Methodist Episcopal Church set an experimental limit at five years. By 1900 the experimental status was dropped. With the settling of ministry and growth of the denomination, exceptions to these latter limits were not unusual and in 1939 at the creation of The Methodist Church no specific limits existed.¹²

Asbury, though he held local preachers in high regard, could be critical of traveling ministers who located.¹³ A nagging problem for Asbury was the large number of traveling ministers who located, giving up their annual conference membership often for a wife, family, and farming. However, most itinerant preachers maintained celibacy—and though it was not required, Asbury preferred it. As scholars

have noted, the tendency of some preachers to locate is most likely related not only to a desire to marry and settle, but also to the harsh conditions suffered by the itinerating preachers. Constantly traveling and exposed to extreme weather conditions, vulnerable to illness, and paid less than one hundred dollars annually, most of these men died young, many leaving the itinerant ministry before reaching the age of forty. This trend continued and increased throughout the middle and end of the nineteenth century. With the dismantling of class meetings for local churches with impressive edifices, the itineracy of the circuit rider also waned.¹⁴

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Asbury, Coke, and their nineteenth-century episcopal descendants exercised substantial authority in the appointment of itinerant preachers. In the twentieth century, episcopal leadership, though still authoritative, shared the more complex responsibility of appointment-making with district superintendents. The practice of consultation in appointment making emerged as the most significant revision to the itinerant ministry in the twentieth century. Consultation first occurred with the preacher beginning in 1940 in The Methodist Church. Eventually the Pastor Relations Committee was also consulted, which The United Methodist Church finally approved in 1972.¹⁵

In John Wesley’s eighteenth-century British Methodism, itineracy emerged as a pragmatic embodiment of the movement’s missional and connectional character that helped maintain doctrinal integrity. Flexible and mainly resilient in diverse geographies over the centuries, itineracy effectively established Methodism in the United States and persists as one of the most prominent characteristics of our polity. Itineracy—namely the willingness to move—of the elder in full connection and its implications remain at the heart of Methodism’s pivotal questions of polity and even doctrine as it has over the centuries.

Thus, itineracy has often served as a lens to focus and direct our most important conversations about the church’s

ministry. However, one issue intimately related to itineracy seems still blurred in the periphery—clergy compensation. This issue has remained noticeably absent in most historical and critical analyses of itineracy. Itineracy served Wesley’s early Methodist movement as the central mechanism for fulfilling its mission to spread scriptural holiness. Could it be that itineracy is no longer merely a faithful practice emerging from the pursuit of God’s mission for the church in the world? Instead, is it possible that itineracy has become captive to questions of clergy compensation such that its effectiveness in fulfilling the church’s primary mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ is obscured? □

Notes

1. See Richard Heitzenrater, “Connectionalism and Itineracy: Wesleyan Principles and Practice,” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology Mission and Identity*, vol. 1, United Methodism and American Culture (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 31.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 33.
4. Quoted in *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 34-35.
6. *Ibid.*, 32. These were known as preachers “in full connection.”
7. In Bristol, England, on September 1, 1784, John Wesley, an Anglican priest or clergyman, ordained two Methodist traveling preachers, Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat, deacons. Shortly after, Wesley ordained these presbyters and another Anglican priest, Thomas Coke, essentially giving him an episcopal ordination, the authority to ordain. See Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 287.
8. Frederick Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 137.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 146.
11. E. Dale Dunlap, “The United Methodist System of Itinerant Ministry,” in Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives on American Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1993), 419.
12. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 10, 364. District superintendents (six-year limits) and bishops (appointed each quadrennium, with a limit of two, though an exceptional third may occur) also itinerated throughout the history of Methodism in the United States.
13. *Ibid.*, 135. See Francis Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, vol. III, 311.
14. *Ibid.*, 132.
15. Dunlap, “The United Methodist System of Itinerant Ministry,” 426-27.



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