

An Itinerant System

The United Methodist system of itinerant ministry is rooted in John Wesley's vision of spreading scriptural holiness across the land and utilizing both clergy and laity in the fulfillment of this mission. Itinerant ministry in the earliest days required pastors to travel continually on horseback around defined circuits, and then after a year or two be assigned to a different circuit.

The itinerant system has undergone many changes in the last 200 years, but several things remain the same:

- ✚ The resident Bishop decides when and where preachers are appointed.
- ✚ The "circuit rider's" task is to spread the Word of God, administer the Sacraments, and give oversight to the life and mission of the faith community.
- ✚ Strong resident (lay) leadership plays a vital role in maintaining continuity and the health of the church.
- ✚ Pastors are members of the connectional body (conference), not a local church.
- ✚ Pastors, while paid by the local church, are accountable to the Discipline of The United Methodist Church and to those who have been elected or appointed to oversee their ministry.

Some denominations acquire their pastors through a "call system." In this system, the congregation conducts a search for a pastor, calls the pastor, and decides when the pastor's tenure ends.

No system of placing pastors is perfect. We eagerly await God's perfect reign on earth,

but in the meantime, United Methodists choose itinerant ministry.

How Itineracy Works

COVENANT

Early in the process of candidacy for pastoral ministry, United Methodist pastors are asked to reflect on the implications of itinerant ministry for their lives and families. No pastor is licensed for ministry without an agreement to serve where the resident Bishop appoints.

Those who choose ordination agree to keep the General Rules of The United Methodist Church and support and maintain the government and polity of the church (¶ 321). In the ordination service they are asked if they will be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accept its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline, and accept the authority of those who are appointed to supervise their ministry. Each ordinand answers, "I will, with the help of God."

The United Methodist Church has chosen to care for these itinerating pastors and their families through a system of parsonages (held to certain standards), health insurance coverage, and retirement benefits, all of which release the clergy to give full attention to their spiritual leadership responsibilities. Superintendents, who counsel the Bishop in relation to appointment-making, attempt to stay current with the needs and concerns of parsonage families and share relevant information with the Bishop as a new appointment is discerned.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND GRACES

Every licensed and ordained pastor has been examined in relation to their fitness for ministry and their call, and may be expected to have:

- ✚ a vital relationship with Christ,
- ✚ an ability to relate to people,
- ✚ an ability to communicate their faith in preaching and teaching,
- ✚ an ability to lead and give oversight to the local church and its connectional relationships,
- ✚ a willingness to model a Christian lifestyle, and
- ✚ a dedication to lifelong learning and growth.

God has given to each pastor differing measures of these gifts, and other gifts, as well. Some pastors are gifted to bring healing to hurting congregations; some are specialists in "spiritual CPR"; some have gifts in youth or older adult ministries; some are top-notch administrators. Some pastors like to start new churches and others to transform existing ones. There are as many different gifts as there are pastors! We are blessed to be diverse!

The needs of churches and the gifts of the pastors lie at the very heart of appointment-making in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference.

CONSULTATION

While the Bishop is ultimately responsible for appointing pastors to churches, the episcopal decision relies heavily on 1) counsel from conference superintendents who are in regular communication with both churches and pastors about the missional fit of the church and pastor and 2) a process of conversation and prayer involving the Bishop and all superintendents.

The Book of Discipline says that consultation is the process whereby the Bishop and/or district superintendent confer with the pastor and the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, taking into consideration 1) the unique needs of a charge, the community context, and also the gifts and evidence of God's grace of a particular pastor, 2) an annual pastor and church assessment, and 3) the mission of the whole Church. (see ¶ 431-3)

PROFILES

Ongoing consultation enables the superintendent to create profiles on both pastors and churches, which are shared with the Bishop and other superintendents. Church profiles include data about location, demographics, local history, membership, convictional stances, ministries, strengths, growing edges, and needs in future pastoral leadership. Clergy profiles include data about the pastor's service history, family, spiritual gifts and passions, growing edges, and special needs or interests.

These profiles enable superintendents to prepare in an informed way for the discernment process which ultimately determines who will be appointed.

WHY PASTORS MOVE

The most common reasons pastors move include:

- ✚ Church, pastor, and/or superintendent articulate missional need for new leadership
- ✚ Retirement
- ✚ Disability or death
- ✚ Church closing or change in alignment of churches in a charge

DISCERNMENT

Discernment begins as the Bishop and superintendents prayerfully explore possible missional matches between open churches and pastors. This exploration includes:

- ✚ Nominations for open churches
- ✚ "Challenging off" those who do not fit the church profile or who are missionally needed in their present appointment
- ✚ Detailed discussion about the missional appropriateness of those remaining on the list
- ✚ Prayer and consensus-building among all 12 district superintendents.
- ✚ Recommendation of the name to the Bishop and Bishop's discernment
- ✚ Appointment by the Bishop

The Change

INTRODUCTIONS

The pastor is the first one to hear about the new appointment, usually in a meeting with his/her present ("sending") and future ("receiving") superintendent. In that conversation the superintendents explain the missional match and share other details. The pastor is urged to ask questions and to give feedback. If the pastor has concerns about match, he/she may ask for reconsideration of the appointment.

The Pastor Parish Relations Committee (PPRC) of the *receiving* church is the next to learn about the appointment. At a PPRC meeting scheduled by the superintendent, the new pastor is introduced. Discussion focuses on the missional needs articulated by the church and the ways the incoming pastor meets those needs. While the meeting is not an interview,

there is time for sharing, for questions, and for working out the "nuts and bolts" of the move. If the PPRC or pastor at that point has reservations about the missional appropriateness of the move, either party or the superintendent may request reconsideration of the appointment.

The entire process-- from consultation to the day of public disclosure-- is a confidential process, involving *only* the Bishop, superintendents, pastor, and the *receiving* PPRC. Confidentiality protects congregations and pastors from damage which may result if information is shared prematurely or inaccurately.

ANNOUNCING THE CHANGE

Protocol for announcing the change simultaneously involves:

1. Announcement of the change to the pastor's *present* congregation. This may be done through a letter or through an announcement from the pulpit. (A courtesy call to the pastor's present PPRC chair is in order before the appointment change is announced to the whole church.)
2. Announcement of the change to the pastor's *future* congregation. This is usually done by the PPRC chair or through a letter.

The appointment may be announced to those outside the involved congregations any time thereafter.

GRIEF AND HOSPITALITY

Pastoral changes are difficult even in the best of circumstances, requiring churches and pastors to name and address the difficult

mix of sadness, joy, and fear that accompany a change of pastoral leadership.

A farewell party or recognition for the departing pastor helps bring closure, as do sermons or newsletter articles on the nature of grief. The departing pastor helps support the incoming pastor by clearly defining the boundaries of the changed relationship.

The incoming pastor feels most welcomed when:

- ✚ The parsonage is clean and in good repair when he/she arrives
- ✚ The new parsonage family is invited to make decisions about paint, wallpaper, floor coverings, and other accoutrements
- ✚ A member of the PPRC is personally *on site* when the pastor's family arrives
- ✚ Meals are offered and/or provided for the first week or two
- ✚ The congregation is able to view change as positive and as an adventure and extend a warm welcome.

Open Itineracy

"Open itineracy means appointments are made without regard to race, ethnic origin, gender, color, disability, marital status, or age, except for the provisions of mandatory retirement. The concept of itineracy is important, and sensitive attention should be given in appointing clergy with physical challenges to responsibilities and duties that meet their gifts and graces." (¶ 430).

PPRCs are responsible for helping interpret open itineracy and to help prepare their congregations to welcome all pastors who are appointed.

Understanding Pastoral Changes

