

The Ministry of the Ordained

The fact of the great influence of the clergy far beyond what their numbers would suggest in our structure can be understood from Methodist history. The first and primary structures were the annual conferences of the preachers. The “ministers only” annual conference existed in episcopal Methodism until 1939. The laity are becoming more effective as time goes by but the clergy still do most of the talking and exert the greater leadership.

Major Changes

The 1996 General Conference changed the structure of our ministry. No longer do we have the “diaconal ministry” although those who were diaconal ministers before 1996 may choose to retain that status. Diaconal ministers were (are) lay positions. We now have the Order of Deacon, those called to ministry of Service and Word. The other ordained position is that of elder, those called to ministry of Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order. Deacons are non-itinerant but still subject to episcopal appointments or confirmation. Elders are itinerant, subject to episcopal appointment. Elders are no longer ordained as deacons first.

Deacon and elder candidates become probationary members of annual conference after completing certain educational and other requirements. They are commissioned and serve three years under supervision before being ordained and becoming members in full connection in the annual conference. Before they are ordained they must be duly processed by the board of ordained ministry and be voted upon by the members in full connection in the annual conference.

The Order of Deacon

Roman Catholic and Anglican tradition required persons on their way to becoming an elder or priest to be first ordained a deacon. No longer the case in United Methodism after 1996. Deacons are responsible for their own employment and have a different sort of episcopal appointment than elders. Deacons in full connection are “ordained by a bishop to a lifetime ministry of Word and Service to both the community and the congregation in a ministry that connect the two.” They proclaim, witness to, and do the work of compassion, justice, and reconciliation. They proclaim the Word and assist elders in the administration of the sacraments. They can marry and bury.

The Order of Elder

Ordained to a lifetime ministry of Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order. Ministry of Service: practice deacon-like qualities of love, help, and care to those around them. Ministry of Word: teaching and preaching the Word of God. “Word of God” not necessarily synonymous with the Bible—someone using a passage in the Bible to preach hatred is not preaching the Word of God. Ministry of Sacrament: authorized to administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Ministry of Order: equip the laity for ministry, exercise pastoral oversight (minister to the people under their care), and administer the discipline of the Church (keeping the local church in tune with policies of the UMC that have been created by delegates elected by the local churches).

While the elders usually welcome laity to preach and to do administrative tasks (Word & Order), they jealously guard the administering of the sacraments. The mystique of the priesthood explains why. There seems to be a need for some special acts to be performed by the priest, the “man of God” or the “woman of God”. It’s the case in Roman Catholic and practically all Protestant denominations. Is the pastor just another guy or gal who happens to be doing a particular job, or is he or she a person under special orders from God? Our heads may agree with the former, but our hearts agree with the latter. Although this conviction is more a matter of the heart than the head; “this in no way detracts from the conviction, for the fact is that often our finest and most important convictions are the very ones that cold logic is least able to back up.” Even John Wesley refused to ordain his helpers, lay people who preached. The UM theologian Albert Outler noted that “the sacraments are uniquely representative acts of the *whole* body of Christ’s body (as preaching is not) and, hence, their administrators must be duly and fully *representative* of the whole church. Thus, ordination is an act of the whole church by which a person is designated as an authorized representative of the whole church, especially for those acts in which the whole church is symbolically represented.”

Qualifications and Training

Three traditional professions each requiring a high level of personal qualifications, physical stamina, and extensive academic preparation: law, medicine, and the ordained ministry. Ordained ministry: four (or more) years of college, three years of seminary, and three years in the field serving under the supervision of a district superintendent.

Ascending two ladders: ladder of ordination (establishing certain status in the church of God) and the ladder of annual conference relationship (relationships specifically within the UMC). The two ladders are interrelated in many ways.

Candidate must be a high-school graduate who has been a member or affiliate member of the local recommending UMC congregation for at least two years., in one of which the candidate must have been involved in congregational leadership. Must receive charge conference recommendation by 2/3rds written ballot and pastor-parish committee recommendation. After completing certain studies, the candidate must appear before the district committee on ordained ministry to be examined carefully concerning attitudes and abilities, faith, and commitment. The candidate is required to “agree to exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to bodily health, mental and emotional maturity, integrity in all personal relationships, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, social responsibility, and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love God” (*Discipline* Par 311.3f). Traditional concern of Church over the use of alcohol and tobacco by its clergy. Currently, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church by the *Discipline*.

After being granted certification as a candidate for ordained ministry by the district committee on ordained ministry, the candidate must continue to pursue educational requirements from year to year in college, seminary, or with the Division of Ordained Ministry all under the direction of the district committee. When they qualify as a probationary member of an annual conference, care of them switches to the annual

conference board of ordained ministry. Candidates may serve as a “local pastor” of a church.

Local Pastor

Involves securing a license and being recommended annually by a vote of the district committee on ordained ministry, the board of ordained ministry, and being approved as a local pastor by the clergy members in full connection. Either full-time, part-time, or student category as long as they make regular progress in their studies.

They may perform all ministerial functions within a particular pastoral charge to which they have been appointed; subject to annual review.

Associate Membership

Abolished by the 1996 General Conference and put back in by 2004 General Conference to offer a way in which local pastors who are at least 40 and have served four years as a full-time local pastor can have permanent conference membership.

Probationary Membership

A time of testing before final commitments to full membership are made. All formal education requirements are completed. Must have been a certified candidate for ordained ministry for at least two years. Questioned by the district committee on ordained ministry and board of ordained ministry about willingness to deal with all people in ministry without regard to race or national origin. Present to the committee and board a written theological statement of their basic beliefs.

Limit of six years of probationary membership with possible three-year extension. During candidacy, the board of ordained ministry assigns a mentor who assists the candidate in formulating vocational goals, develop a covenant for professional growth and guidance, and annually reports to the board.

Full Membership

Election to full membership qualifies the candidate to be ordained a deacon or elder. They have full voting rights in the annual conference, and responsibility for all matters of ordination, character, and conference relations of clergy. They can be elected to be a delegate to General or jurisdictional or central conference. The full member has completed seminary, was a probationary member, and served full-time under episcopal appointment under the supervision of a district superintendent for three years following seminary.

The candidate for full membership must satisfy the board of ordained ministry as to his/her physical, mental, and emotional health. Many boards use psychological testing to aid in making their decisions. The candidate for elder must also take a doctrinal examination to see how well the candidate wrestles with the question and graphs essentials of the issues. The candidate must appear before the annual conference to answer questions asked by the bishop from John Wesley (e.g., “Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?”) Every full member must continue in their formation according to provisions in the *Discipline* throughout their career.

Relationship to the Annual Conference: A Distinctive Feature of the United Methodist Ministry

Among Protestant denominations the kind of relationship that a UM clergyperson bears to the annual conference is a distinctive one. The deacons are in covenant with other deacons. Elders are bound in special covenant with all the ordained elders of the annual conference, offering themselves without reserve to be appointed and serve as the bishop determines, performing ministerial duties and maintaining the ministerial standards established by those in covenant. The final responsibility for each person's ministerial status rests solely with one's colleagues of the conference.

Part of the strength of the covenant results from the commonly shared willingness to go where appointed. Also, the annual conference is the only home that clergy of our Church have. In the early days of the horse-back preacher riding his circuit, that was literally true. Where does the clergyperson have his/her church membership? The Methodist pastors did not have local church membership (their spouses & children did) but the Evangelical United Brethren pastors did. Methodist pastors had membership in the annual conference while EUB pastors' membership was automatically transferred to the charge they were appointed to and to the annual conference. Issue still not resolved after the 1968 Union.

The Pastor's Job Description

The job description is spelled out in Paragraph 340 of the 2004 *Discipline* (takes several pages). Some of the responsibilities include (by no means a complete list!):

- Giving an account to the charge and annual conference of their ministry according to prescribed forms. Statistical report.
- Participating in denominational and conference programs and training opportunities.
- Performing marriage ceremonies. The deacon or elder can decide to or to not perform the ceremony in any given case. Also counseling persons under threat of marriage breakdown and bereaved persons and to call in the homes of the parish and community.
- Instructing candidates for church membership and receiving them into the church.
- Seeking out persons who may make decisions for Christian service and counseling them.
- Participating in community, ecumenical, and interreligious concerns and to lead the congregation to become so involved. Give of themselves beyond the church walls.

Other Tasks of Ordained Elders

About 600 district superintendents and 50 bishops and several thousand in "Appointments Extending the Ministry of The United Methodist Church" (AEM).

Several categories of AEM:

- Elders appointed within the connectional structures of United Methodism: district superintendents, conference council on ministries staff, others clearly within denominational structures, ecumenical agencies (including something like Heifer Project)

- Those under endorsement by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the General Board of Global Ministries. Includes military, institutional, and other chaplains, and missionaries. University presidents, faculty, administrators in Church-related colleges and universities.
- Appointments beyond the ministry usually extended through the local UMC and other institutions. Require approval by the bishop and board of ordained ministry. Farthest removed from the appointive power of the bishop and the effective discipline of the annual conference. Still very broad and vague category. Persons must meet at least annually with the bishop.

There is some concern in broadening the appointments beyond the local church so much that the concept of what it means to be an ordained elder will be so diluted to lose its significance. But the appointments to extension ministries are also a source of great strength for the Church. These appointments are one way the Church has ministered to the world, and not simply to the people within the walls of the church building.

Deacons in full connection may be appointed by the bishop to a ministerial field to work out their vocation of service to the church and the world, although they are not guaranteed a place of employment in the Church. When a deacon serves in an agency beyond the local church, they are also appointed to a local congregation and are accountable to the pastor in charge and the charge conference.

Other Ministerial Relationships and Termination Procedures

Sabbatical Leave: After a deacon or elder has served for six years in full connection or as an associate member, they are entitled to ask for a year off for purposes of an approved program of study or travel. Give six months advance notice to board of ordained ministry. The purpose of the sabbatical is to help them enrich their future ministry. Retain full standing in conference but receive no salary. Few clergy can afford to take a sabbatical. There is provision for “educational leaves” for formational and spiritual growth for up to six months, negotiated by pastor, DS, and PPR committee with the understanding that the pastor will return to the same appointment.

Leave of Absence: For those who are unable to or who choose to temporarily to cease to perform the duties of full-time itinerant ministry. Not disability leave. They are unable to perform *full* work. Continued standing in the conference but years on leave of absence are not counted toward their pension. Voluntary (pastor) or involuntary (cabinet). Clergy person has a right to a hearing before the bishop, cabinet, and executive committee of the board of ordained ministry if an involuntary leave of absence is initiated. Max length is five years except on recommendation of board of ordained ministry and 2/3 vote of the conference.

Family Leave: For those who need to care full-time for an immediate family member and are temporarily unwilling or unable to perform the duties of full-time itinerant ministry. Max length of five years.

Maternity/Paternity Leave: Up to three months leave with at least eight weeks salary guaranteed. Continued pastoral service during leave in the hands of the DS and PPR committee.

Incapacity Leave: For those who have been forced to give up work because of physical or mental disability. Granted by full clergy members of the annual conference, on joint recommendation of the conference board of pensions and the board of ordained ministry. Is renewed each year by the conference. Board of pensions provides for disability benefits. No time limit.

Retirement: No longer under obligation to accept appointment from the bishop. Continue as members of the annual conference with vote for life. Ways retirement can take place:

1. 2/3 vote of present clergy members in full connection with or without consent of the pastor and irrespective of age if recommended by the board of ordained ministry. For those who aren't sick enough to be disabled, old enough to retire in usual manner, isn't ineffective enough to be terminated, and for whom no proper appointment can be found. Infrequently used (thank God!)
2. If a clergyperson reaches the age of 70 on or before July 1, he/she shall be automatically retired at the annual conference session for that year.
3. If a clergyperson reaches age 65 on or before July 1 or has completed 40 years of service prior to the opening day of conference, he/she *may* be retired.
4. If a clergyperson has served 20 years, he/she may *request* retirement with the privilege of receiving a pension when he/she reaches age 62 based on years of service. Board of ordained ministry and the conference are under no obligation to grant the request.
5. Clergyperson in full connection who has served 35 years or has reached 62 on or before July in the year in which the session of the annual conference is held.

Retired elder still remains under discipline of the conference, the DS, and the pastor. Has a seat in the charge conference and must report all marriages and baptisms. Often asked to take a small appointment and often agree to continue the ministry in places where otherwise there might be none.

Termination of the Ministry: Either of their own will or involuntary. Ways:

1. *Honorable Location.* Clergyperson in good standing who desires to discontinue regular ministerial work. Gives up conference membership and standing, but not ordination rights, which he/she can exercise under supervision of the pastor in charge within the bounds of the charge.
2. *Involuntary Termination of Conference Membership.* Elaborate procedure is provided in the *Discipline* for handling complaints made about a clergyperson. Also, administrative location procedures in the *Discipline* provide a way for the bishops to deal with clergy incompetence.
3. *Discontinuance from Probationary Membership.* Membership can be terminated at any time without reflection on the character of the person involved.
4. *Withdrawal to Unite with Another Denomination.* If so desired and approved by the conference, his/her credentials may then be endorsed—indicating voluntary and honorable dismissal—and returned to the clergyperson.

5. *Leaving the Ordained Ministerial Office.* Voluntary action of the clergyperson to surrender his/her credentials, giving up of all ministerial and ordination rights and becoming a layperson.
6. *Withdrawal Under Complaints or Charges.* For those accused of certain offenses under the law of the Church may be permitted to withdraw under charges and to surrender his/her credentials.
7. *Judicial Procedure.* Clergyperson is deposed from the ministry or expelled from the Church after he/she has been tried and found guilty of one of the offenses listed in Paragraph 2702.