

Excellence in (Methodist) Ministry

Some Historical Perspectives on Present Concerns

I. The Interwoven (or “Connectional”) Dimensions of Ministry

- A. Ministry as God’s reconciling mission (outreach / healing / service) in our world

This is the religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth, not only in all innocence ... but likewise in every kind of beneficence, in spreading virtue and happiness all around it (*Earnest Appeal*, §4).

- B. Ministry as our participation, by divine invitation, in God’s mission

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17–18).

- C. Ministry as the activity of the *whole* church, the ongoing body of Christ, in the world

- D. Ministry as *servant leadership* of the church, in its ministry in the world

God raised up the preachers called Methodists “to reform the continent, and to spread scriptural holiness over these lands” (1785 *Minutes*, Q. 4.)

- E. Ministry as *servant leadership* in the church, nurturing growth as the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12)

What a mystery is this! That Christianity should have done so little good in the world! Can any account of this be given? (Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity”)

What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends: and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth (JW, Letter to John Smith, 6/25/1746, §10).

1 Let us join (’tis God commands) / Let us join our hearts and hands;
Help to gain our calling’s hope, / Build we each the other up.
God his blessing shall dispense, / God shall crown his ordinance,
Meet in his appointed ways, / Nourish us with social grace.
CW, “Love Feast,” Part 3, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), 183–84

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered, according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same (Article of Religion #XIII).

Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world (Confession of Faith, Article 5).

II. John Wesley on the Desired Qualities for Servant Leadership of/in the Church

Samuel Wesley Sr., *Advice to a Young Clergyman* (London: Charles Rivington, 1735).
John Wesley, *Address to the Clergy* (1756), in *Works* (Jackson) 10:480–500.

- A. **Grace:** First and foremost, they should evidence responsive appropriation of God’s gracious work in their own lives.
- B. **Gifts:** Both natural endowments and *acquired* talents.
- C. **Fruit:** Evidences of God blessing their efforts in ministry.

III. John Wesley’s Implicit *Theology* of Ordination to Servant Leadership of/in the Church

- A. Appropriateness and need of “setting apart” some for leadership in the church, particularly in preaching/teaching, order (discipline/mentoring), service, and provision of sacrament.
- B. Ordination as responsive empowering of the Holy Spirit for servant leadership in ministry.
[neither an ontological change; nor purely functional; but pneumatological]

III. John Wesley’s Precedent of Contextual Prudence in Embodying the Ideal for Leadership

- A. Initial hope was to convince Anglican priests to attend to full range of leadership in ministry.
- B. Increasingly turned to gifted laypersons for leadership in preaching, discipling, and service.
- C. Appealed to distinction between “prophets” and “priests” (See Sermon 121).
- D. Contributed to recovered emphasis on spiritual gifts given to *all* disciples.
- E. Eventually embraced prudential tension in expectations of an “educated ministry.”
(resistance to class consequences of “professionalization” – example of medicine)
- F. “Providential” necessity of sacraments leads to ordinations in 1784.
- G. Sought prudential tension of honoring tradition/theology *and* situation in these moves.
(presbyter/bishop – has two other elders participate in ordination)

IV. Contextual Dynamics of Transition of Early Methodism in North America

- A. Initial transition from “society/movement in the church” to “society as church.”
defined by elder/*preachers* as connectional leadership in ministry
 (“What was God’s design in raising up the *preachers* called Methodists?”)
but characterized by very active local lay ministries
our strengths as “church” were as fellowship and mission
- B. “Clergy” status defined more by membership/itinerancy than by ordination per se.
- C. Flexible educational expectations and itinerancy fit mission to an expanding frontier.

V. Gradual Move from “society as church” to “church with social ministries”

- A. Clergy “settle,” displacing some forms of lay leadership in ministry *in* church.
- B. Laity move into leadership in ministry *of* church in the world (volunteer societies).

- C. Brings increasing educational expectations for clergy (see Richey).

In the 1956 *Discipline* of the Methodist Church (sec. 332ff) the default “standard” for ordination shifted from course of study (with college and or seminary as alternatives) to making a Divinity degree the standard for admission on trial and eventual ordination as a Traveling elder, with the course of study now a restricted alternative.

- D. This growing professionalization was linked to escalated class status, and fit prudential realities of majority of Methodist congregations at the time.

VI. Trends in Changing Understanding and Practice of Ordained Ministry, 1950–2012

- A. Methodists take leadership in affirming (reclaiming) women in ordained ministry (1956ff).
- B. Methodists at forefront of movement to reclaim “ministry of all Christians.”
(add section in 1976, move to front in 2000; cf. *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, 1982).
- C. Subsequent concern to affirm continuing role of “servant leadership” in ministry (2004).
- D. United Methodists pioneer affirming (reclaiming?) “deacons” as a permanent distinct *ordained* order (1996).

VII. Ecumenical Reflections

- A. United Methodists have played a prominent role in ecumenical convergence in ministries.
- B. This has included willingness to offer some of our distinctive commitments to the larger church.
- C. The point where we stand at greatest odds (and discomfort! see last two studies) with the broader church is that in nearly a third of our local settings non-ordained persons preside at sacraments.
- D. This reflects in part our Wesleyan heritage of valuing *both* word and table!
- E. But it is also a result of increased educational standards for ordination and the elimination of the formal category of local elders in 1968 (i.e., prudential, not just theological factors).
- F. Our closest pan-Methodist partners (AME, AMEZ, etc.) all retain local elders (with differential educational expectations).

VIII. Missional Reflections

- A. The United Methodist Church faces an increasing diversity of mission settings in the United States and beyond (shrinking rural settings; growing cities; broadening economic gap, etc.).
- B. In many of these settings, it is not economically or culturally prudential to rely on or require leadership in ministry that carries the expenses involved in Master’s-level education.
- C. Moreover, it is increasingly difficult in some settings to cover full-time salary and benefits for clergy leadership (even using multiple charges).
- D. But our mission remains to offer the full ministry of the church (to “spread holiness” – or “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”) as broadly as we can.

These factors suggest the need for continuing reflection on the possibility of:

- 1) broadening the range of persons that we *ordain* for ministry (e.g., local pastors);
- 2) which goes hand in hand with greater flexibility in educational expectations for ordination;
- 3) and likely separating ordination from conference membership;
- 4) and perhaps greater openness to bi-vocational and other models of clergy leadership.

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