

Spiritual Purposes of Appointment-Making in
The United Methodist Church
By Bishop Scott J. Jones

How should we, as a body of Christian disciples, recruit, credential and send forth ordained clergy? Every Church faces this question and different denominations have different ways of performing these crucial tasks. Those differences tend to represent fundamental assumptions about the nature and mission of the church.

United Methodists are a missionary and connectional church. Those two adjectives define the deep realities about who we are and how we go about the task of serving Christ. The first one—missionary—says that we believe God has raised us up for a particular task. The modern version of that mission statement after recent action at General Conference reads “The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.” Making disciples is a multi-stage process including evangelism, spiritual formation, worship, education and ministries of social action. Their goal is to participate in God’s saving activity to transform the world. Local churches are the most significant place where this missionary activity takes place. Each local church needs a pastor to preach the word of God, to administer the sacraments and to lead the activities of the congregation. He or she always does this in partnership with the lay leaders of the congregation.

We are also a connectional church. While each local church makes many decisions on its own about how best to fulfill its mission, many of our decisions are made together. Our doctrine and our core disciplines are determined by the General Conference. Our bishops are elected and deployed at Jurisdictional Conference. Our basic unit is the annual conference. It is there that the strategy for how best to serve Christ is worked out through committees, apportionments, and missional activities. The elders, deacons and associate members belong to the annual conference as a covenant community. It is their primary home. United Methodist clergy live in their annual conference. They make a sacred promise to serve wherever they are sent within the bounds of their conference. They are accountable to each other for their conduct. They are called to pray for each other and to support each other’s ministry. At the same time, the churches of the annual conference support the conference’s mission with payment of their apportioned share of the conference’s missionary budget. They receive as pastor whoever the conference sends them.

The way in which we deploy persons to carry out our mission is two-fold. The elders and deacons who are in full connection with the annual conference are responsible for credentialing the persons who will serve as pastors of local churches and members of the conference. District Committees on Ordained Ministry and the conference Board of Ordained Ministry play crucial roles in these matters, but the final decisions are left to the members of the conference in full connection who vote during the clergy session each year.

Once someone is licensed to preach or is a member of the conference, she or he is appointed by the bishop to serve in a certain place. The Bishop’s authority in these matters is final. That is an awesome responsibility! For this reason, our *Book of Discipline* mandates that the Bishop consult with the cabinet, with the clergy, and with the local churches before appointments are made. District Superintendents consult with the clergy and local churches in various ways, sometimes in writing and at other times in face-to-face meetings.

Here is the process. I meet with each superintendent in January and discuss each local church in her or his district. We talk about strengths and weaknesses of the congregation,

missional opportunities and challenges. We talk about the pastor's performance and her or his strengths and growing edges. Then this information is shared in summary form in late January with the whole cabinet. We call this inventory. At the end of inventory we have talked about all of the United Methodist churches in Kansas and for each pastor the district superintendent has recommended for each pastor that she or he remain or move. Retirements or other changes in conference relationship are noted as well. Each District Superintendent is then invited to name two strategic churches in the district and we begin the appointment process with those congregations.

I have continued the practice of making appointments on an area basis. This is to ensure the largest possible pool of persons for consideration at each local church. The guiding question in each appointment is "what appointment will maximize the missional effectiveness of all the local churches in Kansas?" Secondly, but still importantly, we consider the personal needs of the clergy and their families.

For each church the process goes something like this. The District Superintendent discusses the church and its ministry including its context. The basis behind the recommendation is shared. Opportunities for new or growing ministries are noted. Then the DS leads all of us in prayer for wisdom in discerning the right pastor to be appointed there. After the prayer, DS's are invited to nominate as many persons as they wish. We then talk about each of the persons on the list. Sometimes, when we know there are several churches involved in a decision, we look at many appointments at the same time. We pray again and then each DS submits the name of one pastor they feel will be best to serve there. While each DS gets one vote, I get 12 votes. Each appointment is one for which I am ultimately responsible.

There are times when the cabinet and I get it wrong. We have made mistakes and will certainly make more in the future. However, I decided when I entered the United Methodist ministry that God works through the appointment process. Now that I am the bishop, that is pretty scary. After experiencing it from this position, I believe even more strongly that it is true. I also believe that this process serves women clergy better than congregational systems, and that it gives greater opportunity for cross-racial appointments as well.

When I was a pastor in Texas, three different Southern Baptist laypersons from three different congregations told me they wished they had a bishop. In one church they needed to fire the pastor for incompetence, but dared not do so because they liked his wife and worried he might not get another job. In another church the congregation was fighting with each other over whether to fire the preacher or not. (In that case, they wanted to blame someone outside of their church family!) In the third church, they had spent 18 months search for a pastor and could not find one.

We United Methodists sometimes complain about the appointment process. Sometimes clergy and laity are upset with me and I cannot tell them all of the confidential reasons which led to my decision. But in general, I believe that the process of bishops appointing clergy to their places of service has helped United Methodism be successful in its mission for over 200 years, and will continue to be the best way for a missional, connectional church to work in the future.

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