The American Methodist Church’s deployment of itinerant pastors has been and continues to be one of the most definitive aspects of the denomination’s identity and ecclesial praxis. Dennis Campbell defines itinerancy as “the practice of moving pastors, through appointment, to specific places where their services are needed and can be best used.”1 The roots of the itinerant system can be traced to nearly 250 years ago when prominent Methodist leaders such as John Wesley and Francis Asbury advocated strongly for the pastor’s role as an evangelistic and missional nomad. Under Wesley’s leadership, the budding Methodist movement saw tremendous, rapid growth due to the mobility and fervor of the circuit riding preachers. Today, the United Methodist Church (UMC) and many other Wesleyan denominations still operate under a system that is referred to as “itinerant.” Although the contemporary model of itineracy looks substantially unlike Wesley’s original model, the UMC continues to view this system as a defining and unique characteristic of its identity. The usefulness and effectiveness of the itineracy has always been questioned throughout its short existence. Today, questioning this practice is perhaps even more appropriate and necessary as the historical and cultural context of 21st century is radically different than that of Wesley’s time.

In this paper, I will explore the viability of an itinerant system in the 21st century, as well as assess what such a practice says about the UMC’s ecclesiology and missiology. It is my contention that while this practice was of great usefulness in spreading the gospel and contributing to the Methodist Church’s rapid growth in the 18th and 19th centuries, it began losing its potency in the 20th century and continues to become a rather obsolete praxis. The itinerant pastorate, which contributed significantly to the growth of the denomination early in its history, in many ways is now contributing to the decline of the denomination in today’s context. Instead of finding its identity in ecclesial pragmatism, the United Methodist Church desperately needs to discover anew its identity as a part of the body of Christ. A necessary step for the UMC in re-envisioning its identity is to initiate a reassessment of how the beautiful theology of the Wesleyan tradition might inform our 21st century praxis, including valuing connectionalism, relationship, social holiness, and outreach to the marginalized within and outside of the Church “boundaries.”

Before any estimations about the value of the contemporary itinerant system can be made, it is important to consider the historical roots of itinerancy in the Church of England and American colonial Methodist movements. John Wesley is afforded the honor of being the founder of Methodism and a profound theologian. Wesley was ordained in the Anglican Church in 18th century England and saw both incredibly hopeful and deeply grievous sides of the Church. The Methodist movement was meant to be part of Wesley’s reform movement within the Anglican Church, not a newly emerging denomination. But because of Wesley’s radical understanding of praxis, he and those he led were persecuted and marginalized within the Anglican Church.
Wesley’s itinerant preaching and disregard for parish boundaries was one of the most significant factors in the marginalization of Methodists. Wesley sought to preach and reach all the people on the fringe of the Church; those in rural areas, and in the new settlements in the American colonies. Wesley also faced a lot of opposition because of his view on various social issues of the time, particularly with regard to advocacy for slaves’ rights and allowance for women’s roles in ministry.

The mobility of the itinerant (circuit riders) preachers, especially in the colonies, was key to the growth of the Methodist movement in America. The circuit riders were robust, fervent young men who travelled many, many miles on horseback to various geographical areas in order to help establish chapels, organize Methodist societies, and preach to as many people as possible. Other denominations at the time established churches in one particular location and ministered to the people within reach of the church. Methodists, on the other hand, ebbed and flowed with the ever-expanding American Frontier. Methodists had little concern for parish boundaries and as a result preached in open air revivals and often in settlements that had not yet been reached by other denominations. This commitment to versatility helped the Methodist movement grow rapidly with the also rapidly growing America. Richter provides statistical support for this growth, noting that within 30 years, Methodist saw a jump in membership “from 4921 members in 1776 to 130,570 in 1806.”2 This, as Richter points out, is mostly due to the itinerant nature of the Methodist ministry at this time.

Wesley’s use of itinerant pastors in his evangelistic and missional efforts was a pragmatic expression of some of his underlying theological concerns. He spoke often of

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the mission of the twelve disciples and how their ministry was one of sending and journeying, “bringing good news and curing disease everywhere.” Marquardt notes, “Their extraordinary mobility enabled them to keep up with the fluctuation, to make connections with people of all kinds of origin, status, or religious orientation and to minister to their ecclesial needs.” It is this reality that has led to a heroism of itinerancy that pervades the Methodist denomination. Methodists were not the first people in history to use itinerant preachers and leaders, but they were surely the first to organize and advocate for its indispensability.

Itinerancy in its original form continued on well through the 19th century. It was not until the close of the 19th century that the system really began to shift towards something different. Feinman writes,

Circuit riders continued to ride in the post-Civil War era, now sometimes by train. Even in rural America, times had changed. Many preachers were located now and there was a shift in emphasis to the construction of churches and parsonages, and the financial responsibilities and obligations of maintaining fixed assets in a settled town. The local church was becoming the center of Methodist life.

This shift in itinerancy marks the beginning of movement toward a settled pastorate. In the early years of circuit riding and the itinerate pastorate, preachers moved from place to place fairly frequently, often staying only for a month or a few months at most. At the turn of the 19th century, the length of the pastoral term was limited at the Methodist General Conference to 2 years. By the end of that century, the maximum term was

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3 Luke 9:1-6, NRSV.


lengthened to four years.⁶ As society around them became more and more settled, so did Methodist pastors and their congregations. Methodism at this point began to look very similar to the settled parish ministries of the Anglican Church that Wesley had originally protested against.

The movement toward settled pastorates continued at full speed well into the 20th and 21st centuries. Pastors got married and had families, something which was not true of the early single, young, independent circuit riders. Methodist congregations continued building churches and parsonages. Eventually education for pastors became a pressing issue. Methodist minister were surely not known throughout history for their profound theology and well reasoned apologetics. Wesley had little interest in having his preachers trained in the same way other denominations did. But by the mid twentieth century, it became apparent that education was necessary for pastor in an increasingly industrialized era which saw much economic, social, and technological change.

In the current context of 21st Century America, Methodists find themselves in a sea of competing cultural, social, and religious values. Pluralism is probably the term that best describes the landscape in which we live. The UMC is not the only denomination that is experiencing decline. Surely the decline of the denomination is not due solely to the unstable environments produced by the constant changing of pastors. Many mainline denominations are experiencing the same decline, and part of that decline is the result of so many complex realities about our situation. Yet Methodists have an inheritance of a rich theological tradition that, if lived out more faithfully, would

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be transformative in this context. There is no longer the same need for geographic mobility and expansion that once was. Phillip Richter asserts, “Given that Methodism is a child of modernity...it is not surprising that when Methodists discuss itinerancy, they sometimes couch their discussion in terms of costs and benefits.”

Methodists still lay claim to the idea that itinerancy and the willingness of the pastor to be subject to the authority of the bishop in receiving appointments is necessary, and in some cases “thought [to be] providential.” In the present climate there is not the same official limit of term that there once was; the average in some conferences is 5-7 years, but the length of stay for pastors can even exceed 10 or 20 years in some cases. McEllhenney argues for a distinction to be made between itinerancy and appointment:

Even though Wesley’s itinerancy has been dead for a century, instead of burying it, United Methodism continues to affirm it. The most recent Book of Discipline announces that ‘the itinerant system is the accepted method of the United Methodist Church by which ordained elders are appointed by the bishop to fields of labor. What those words mean is that United Methodism has an appointment system, not an itinerant one.

McEllhenney’s argument points to one of the most impacting difficulties with the so-called “itinerant system” in contemporary Methodism. The reason pastors are moved today has less to do with geographical mobility and accessibility; nor does it have much to do with reaching people on the margins. Appointment is mostly involuntary on the part of the pastor and is primarily about matching the gifts of a pastor with the needs of

a congregation. This is not a disingenuous motive for moving a pastor, but often times it
necessitates arbitrary moves elsewhere in order to fill pulpits. This practice of
appointing pastors is purely pragmatic. There is not the same theological undergirding
that Wesley had, for example. Appointing pastors involuntarily does not serve the same
purpose that Jesus' sending of the disciples did. The appointment system does not
have a healthy ecclesiology to support it, and so conversely communicates much about
the UMC’s poor ecclesiology. With that said, there is perhaps a way in which the
appointment system could continue to function effectively, but much reform is essential.

If Methodists are to take seriously their ecclesiology and theological inheritance
which values connectionalism, relationship, social holiness, and reaching people at the
margins, they will probably find that longer term pastorates, encouragement toward
deeper pastoral relationships with congregations and communities, and a reform of the
appointment system is desperately needed. This will require entering more fully into the
postmodern context of this point in history; it will require letting go of the pragmatism of
the past and instead embrace a ministry that is centered on relationship with Christ and
with our neighbors. If the latter of the two is focused upon, new forms of pragmatism
may emerge, but they do not have to be so tightly held onto.

Before too much more is said about theology, it must be noted that there are
some real blessings that have come from the appointment system as it now exists. The
Methodist tradition has often been ahead of the game, so to speak, in advocacy for the
traditionally marginalized in the United States. Richey recounts that “women did preach
and did itinerate, in both Wesley’s England and Asbury’s America but were not accorded
until well into the twentieth century full standing in the ‘traveling’ ministry.”

Wesleyans have been affirming women in ministry for hundreds of years now, where other denominations today still cannot come to do the same. Women were not afforded the same benefits or respect that men have been given, and women were not accepted into full ordination until the mid-20th century. But, the fact that women were allowed in any way to participate in leadership over the last 250 years suggests that Methodists have progressed much more sensibly than many other denominations.

Similarly, Methodists have been affirming and advocating for persons of color in pastoral ministry since the early 19th century. The appointment system has contributed to the widespread acceptance of women and racial minorities as pastors. Oden remarks, "While progress has been slow, there has been progress! If left to the vote (or veto power) of local churches, the diversity of color, culture, and gender in our pulpits would be severely limited. Because of the appointive system, barriers have fallen and the church is more inclusive.”

This is truly a remarkable feat for the Methodist Church that hopefully will continue to grow and give life to conversations about diversity and pluralism.

With that being said, it seems that abolishment of the appointment system is not the best option. My proposal is not that the system be done away with, but be revised. As it stands, pastors have very little voice, if any voice at all, in when, where, and how the appointments are made. Understanding that filling pulpits each year is a tremendous burden for district superintendents and bishops, I still want to claim that


increased consultation with pastors and mutuality in the distribution of power honors the Wesleyan emphasis on connectionalism and relationship more so than the current system does. Focusing more on relational aspects of ministry is so messy and difficult. The methods of gauging a pastor’s effectiveness or a congregation’s growth in this respect are not easily measured. But, more careful attention to relational ministry is more faithful to Wesley’s push for connection with the larger body of the Church.

Methodism has very rich theological inheritance, beautiful worship liturgies, support for ecumenical efforts, and passion for social justice. These are all aspects of faith which many in the postmodern generation value and are seeking. Often these compelling parts of Methodism are overridden by the denomination’s attention to the modern cost/benefit discussions. Community building and relational ministry are left by the wayside as pastors are pulled from place to place without having the chance to establish trust with their congregations and communities. Additionally, the appointment system can offer pastors and congregations a way out of fully dealing with conflict and/or seeking reconciliation.

The Wesleyan concept of social holiness implies that our holiness, our ability to fully love God and neighbor, calls for relationship. To live this out means that our denominational structures must give account for and assist in empowering the minister for modeling and facilitating relational ministry. And, in order to avoid localism in individual congregations, this also means that the denomination must more intensely advocate for ministry to those who are marginalized in different communities. Marquardt remarks,

Methodist itinerancy must receive a new identity by seeking out those who are becoming lost in an economized society with no respect for the
uncompetitive. ‘Methodists on the road’ has always entailed moving mentally, spiritually, and physically in the direction that the love of God, which encompasses both neighbours and enemies, is leading. Being Methodist has always necessitated creating and being a caring community beyond borders.\textsuperscript{12}

Itinerancy or appointment need not be so focused on geographic and/or intra-parish sending anymore; instead, the sending could be more focused on pastors and congregations together going into the community and reaching out to the marginalized. And the decision to send a pastor on to a new ministry context would be more beneficial if the congregation and pastor are more mutually involved, in addition to the district superintendent.

The problems that arise from the itinerant system are not new, but the effects are perhaps more profoundly felt in this day and age. Oden suggests that the question at hand is not whether or not to do away with the system, but that the vitality of the system needs to be “redeemed and renewed.”\textsuperscript{13} This is a tremendously complex situation. Itinerancy and appointment have contributed to the growth of the denomination at different times in history. It is not all bad. But there is certainly alot to be said about areas where improvement and reform are desperately needed. In an essay about the abolition of the appointment system within the Korean Methodist Church, Rev. Joon Kwan Un acknowledged that the future of the Methodist Church depends first and foremost on “the formation and upbuilding of a ‘communitas’ of faith and service where a ‘quality of relatedness’ may be experienced between God and people, people and

\footnote{Marquardt, “Methodism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” 102.}

\footnote{Oden, “Without Reserve,” 56.}
people, and the people and the world." In this way, Methodists find themselves in a moment in history in which they can discover anew the particularities of their identity differentiated from the wider Church, while preserving the unity of the Church through a commitment to relationship and authentic witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Bibliography


