

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

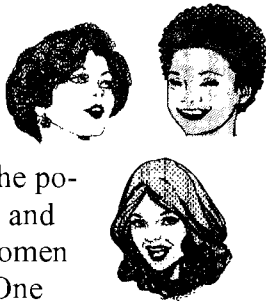
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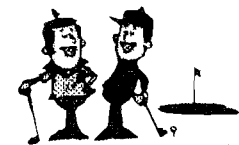
BY BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504 817-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

“We really have two systems”

Recently I was in a conversation in which some United Methodist women, clergy and lay, were discussing how rarely clergywomen are appointed to the positions that have the highest pay and responsibility, even when the women have a record of effectiveness. One woman said, “We really have two different systems, don’t we. One has a lot of pious-sounding words, and the other one is what really happens.”



I’m afraid she’s right. Too often the United Methodist system of appointing clergy is used to keep favored clergy comfortable, rather than to meet congregations’ and communities’ real needs and to let all our clergy make full use of their gifts.



Many people suffer

Clergywomen are especially vulnerable to unfair treatment by the “what really happens” system. They aren’t part of the good-old-boy network that heavily influences church politics, and their priorities and pastoring styles often differ from those of their male supervisors, so their accomplishments often go unrewarded. However, many clergymen also suffer. (Of course, some clergy claim they aren’t properly appreciated when the real problem is that they’re ineffective.)

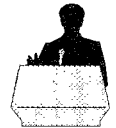
Congregations suffer from the “what really happens” system, too, when they’re assigned pastors to fit clergy’s preferences instead of the congregation’s or the community’s needs. Bishops and DSs who don’t give preferential treatment to their friends also suffer by being lumped with those who do.



Let’s look at these two different systems. (If you’re not United Methodist, you may want to tune out here and tune back in next month.)

UMC Annual Conference sessions— mainly for clergy, or for the whole church?

If you attend a United Methodist Annual Conference session this month or next, I urge you to notice how much of the time is devoted to issues that relate mainly to clergy and other church employees rather than to the whole church.



Ordinations, retirements, memorials

This time may include discussion of clergy pensions, housing, and insurance. It will probably include presentation of each candidate for ordination as clergy or for consecration as a Diaconal Minister. It may include a lengthy report on the current status of every Diaconal Minister. Rules may require these things, but can’t we find less-tiresome ways of following those rules?



The conference session is also likely to include long speeches by the clergy who are retiring, and by their spouses. One worship service may be a memorial for clergy and clergy spouses who have died during the year.

Annual Conference will probably include a worship service devoted mainly to the ordination and consecration of candidates. I realize that doing this in a full-conference session rather than a private service represents the candidates’ being affirmed by the whole church, but the prospect of sitting through the repetition of a long ritual for each of a large number of candidates keeps many lay and clergy conference members away.

Inspiration? Challenge? Lay concerns?

Notice whether much of your conference session is devoted to inspiring, challenging presentations stressing what God is calling the whole church to do. How much aims at giving new insight on the Bible? Does the session provide ways for lay members to get to know each other, to talk about their real concerns for the church and about what the church’s true purpose is and how we might accomplish it better? How much of the conference session interests the many first-time lay attenders who, unlike lay old-timers and clergy, don’t know many participants?



Clergy tend to deny that clericalism prevails in the UMC, but there’s plenty of evidence that it does. A lot of that evidence is visible at Annual Conferences, to whoever has eyes to see.

Here's the system we say we use

In the U.S., the UMC is divided into geographical regions called Annual Conferences, each of which has a bishop in charge of it. Each Annual Conference is divided into smaller regions called districts, with a District Superintendent (referred to as the "DS") in charge of each. All bishops and DSs are clergy. Each bishop appoints the pastors of all the individual congregations in her or his Annual Conference, in consultation with the DSs of the Conference, who are called the Bishop's Cabinet. The bishop's decisions are usually communicated to pastors and congregations by the DS of their district.



Clergy are itinerant

In theory, all UMC clergy are itinerant—they are moved every few years and they are obligated to go wherever their bishop sends them. Each clergy person agrees to this when he or she is ordained.



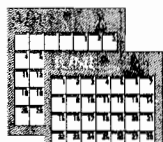
The itinerant system started when all clergy were male, few were married, few people lived in urban areas, and most travel was by horse—circumstances that don't exist in the U.S. today. Itinerancy apparently was intended to keep pastors from becoming too settled anywhere, in order to keep their focus on the ministries they were called to do rather than on comforts or personal attachments.



Abilities are matched to needs

Evidently this system was also meant to discourage church members from depending on the pastor for all of the church's needs. In addition, this system discourages members from identifying the church only with a favorite pastor or with that pastor's ways of functioning. Above all, this system is designed for keeping each congregation supplied with a pastor whose abilities match its needs.

Most UMC pastoral appointments take effect soon after the Annual Conference has its annual meeting in late May or June. ("Annual Conference" refers not only to a geographical area but also to an



annual meeting of lay representatives and all the clergy from that area.) In earlier years, until the bishop read the appointments at the end of the Annual Conference session, no pastor knew whether he was to be moved, even though moving time was only one or two weeks away. Now, however, to lessen disruption for clergy and their families, appointments usually are announced much earlier.

Congregations' views are heard

Each local UMC congregation (or group of congregations, when two or more small congregations share a pastor) has an elected committee called the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee—"PPR" in UMC jargon. (In churches with other employed staff besides the pastor, it's called the Staff-Parish Committee, but for convenience I'm ignoring that distinction here.) This committee is the channel through which congregation members are expected to communicate with the bishop or DS about any change in pastors.



The PPR committee, however, is nominated by a committee chaired by the pastor, so church members who seem likely to urge a change of pastor are rarely put on it. UMC rules require that one of the congregation's lay representatives to Annual Conference must be on this committee. However, it's to the pastor's advantage to be the only committee member who knows the system and the Conference members well, so this rule is sometimes ignored.

Consultation is available

Early in each calendar year, each PPR committee turns in a form that says whether they want their pastor to be reappointed or to be moved. Then, in theory, the bishop or DS consults with each PPR committee that asks for a change of pastors, about the congregation's needs and about the characteristics of whatever new pastor is being proposed.



Pastors also declare whether they want to move or not, and supposedly the bishop or DS consults with each pastor about any new appointment for which he or she is being considered. Every UMC clergy person is guaranteed an appointment for as long as he or she remains in good standing.

Here's what happens instead

Despite our claim to have an itinerant system, and our clergy's promises to go wherever they are sent, in practice itinerancy is a thing of the past. Despite our claims about consultation, in practice consultation often amounts merely to a bishop or DS telling pastors and PPR Committees what the bishop has decided. And despite bishops' and DSs' claims about choosing pastors to fit congregations' and local communities' needs, what lay members more often see are appointments chosen mainly to fit pastors' wishes.

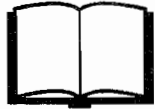


Real qualifications don't seem to matter



Here's an explanation that DSs often use, for why they aren't moving an ineffective pastor to a lower-salary or lower-prestige appointment: "I can't move him—he's my friend!" But what does being a good friend or kindred spirit of the DS or bishop have to do with a pastor's ability? Nothing! Claiming that friendship and likeability are appropriate standards for measuring a pastor's effectiveness is an insult to church members' intelligence.

(By the way, official UMC terminology uses the word "effective" to identify all clergy who are not retired, but I'm using it here to mean what it really means—"doing the job that needs doing.")

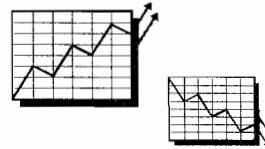


Clergy's wishes seem to come first

Here's another widely used explanation of why a pastor is not being moved from a job that he or she is doing poorly: "There's no place available to move him to." This really means, "No appointment is open in a place he wants to live." Or more likely, "No appointment that's currently open pays as high a salary as he now makes."



Most clergy apparently expect to keep progressing up the institutional ladder as their years of service increase. They want to move only to successively larger churches or to more powerful church jobs with more salary and prestige. Bishops and DSs some-



times help their friends to accomplish this when the friends' effectiveness doesn't seem to justify it.

This results in outrageous claims like one that a bishop made when someone suggested that a conference's DS salaries might be unreasonably high. "Without being able to offer this much salary," the bishop said, "I couldn't persuade the best people to be DSs." Excuse me? Didn't they all agree to go wherever they were sent? And isn't the bishop authorized to send them wherever they are needed? Something's wrong here.



Families' needs must be considered

For married clergy, not just the clergy person's wishes but also his or her spouse's job needs play a big role. The spouse's work may be available only in metropolitan locations. He or she may not be willing or able to risk losing salary, pension, and other benefits by moving, even if a similar job could be found elsewhere. And if the spouse is also clergy, a nearby appointment must be found.



In addition, bishops often won't move clergy whose children are at a crucial point in important school activities. Also, health needs can rule out an appointment to a rural area that lacks needed medical facilities.



Such factors may need to be given a lot of weight. Lay people expect them to be considered in their jobs. Besides, we now know that frequent moves tend to lessen pastors' effectiveness. The problem is in claiming to use one system but actually using a different one.

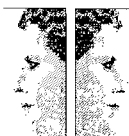
The rules aren't the same for everyone



Some large UMC congregations get around the rules. They search for the pastor they want, then the bishop appoints him. (At this level it's rarely a "her.") Also, clergy who are friendly with the people in power often manage to get only appointments that they like, not those that actually match their abilities, congregations' needs, or communities' needs for ministry.

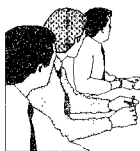
It's time to make actions match words

If we believe that real itinerancy would harm congregations and clergy, we need to admit that, and to stop claiming to have an itinerant system. If on the other hand we still consider itinerancy important, we need to apply it uniformly to all clergy and all congregations. If we want to increase pastors' effectiveness, we need to stop rewarding mere length of service or having an inside track with the bishop or DS. If we want congregations to be the real church in their communities, we need to send them pastors who aren't just chosen for the pastors' convenience.



Our present two-faced system is wrecking the UMC's credibility with both laity and clergy. Until we make our actions match our words, lay and clergy morale will keep suffering, anger and suspicion will keep building, and ministries that God wants done will needlessly go undone.

Barbara



Next month . . .

Making what's important interesting



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Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504-3629

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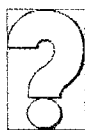
Two different systems

Who are we hurting?

Every now and then I hear someone say, about an ineffective pastor, "Of course he's not really doing the job that needs doing, but being asked to move would be so painful for him. Besides, it could ruin his career. We don't want to do that."



I'm afraid this effort to be kind is badly misguided. Someone is going to be hurt whether or not we ask for the pastor to be moved. By refusing to let it be the ineffective pastor, we hurt a large number of people instead of just one. We hurt the congregation members who are no longer attending. And we hurt new people who need the church but are turned off when they visit.



Which is worse, to hurt one person or to hurt many? We often make the wrong choice.

Attention, music lovers!

I've gotten several interesting comments lately from *Connections* readers who are concerned about keeping the great Christian music and liturgy of past centuries available, for the Christians who value the depth and beauty that these traditional features provide. I'm considering this subject for a future issue of *Connections*, but I need to know more about how musicians see it.

If you're a professional church musician who uses classical music effectively in worship, or a lay member who considers it vital for your worship, I'd like to get your views on the subject. When you write, let me know if you're willing to be quoted by name or if you prefer to remain anonymous. I'll greatly appreciate your help.

