

The Myths and Ministry of United Methodism A Church in Search of a Mission

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Myth

The mythology of Methodism has a profound influence on how the church views itself, what it says, and what it does. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* has as one of its definitions of myth, “An unproven or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution.”¹ This is a useful definition for this paper because the collective beliefs of United Methodists at times seem to fit this definition. They are not only used to justify the status quo, but they also determine to a large extent how the church functions in its mission and ministry. Over a period of time, collective beliefs shift, and as they shift, the practices of the church change as well. In this paper we will examine a number of beliefs that have mythological power over the way in which we order ministry. For instance, the belief that the mission of the church is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ” has had a profound affect on the way in which the church is doing its business. The appointment of a high percentage of pastors without ordination is the sign of a myth that says ordination is not required for sacramental authority. The call to abolish the guaranteed appointment reveals a myth that it is possible to maintain the itinerant structure of Methodism without any assurance of appointment. The belief that the local church is the basic unit of the church is yet another example of the mythology that has mystical power over the practice of mission within the church. In this

¹ The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, Unabridged, 1987, Random House, Inc., NY, NY

paper we will explore the development of these myths and examine their affect on the mission of The United Methodist Church.

The Mission is to Make Disciples of Jesus Christ

Taken at face value, the statement that “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ” is undeniable, at least for The United Methodist Church. It is a statement that first appeared in the 1996 *Discipline* as a preface to the local church.² This seemed like the logical place to put this statement since it is followed by the companion statement that “Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”³ By 2000, however, this statement was shifted from the preface to the local church to a much broader statement on “The Mission and Ministry of the Church.”⁴ It was then separated from the legislation on the local church and put in a place where it actually provides a definition for mission and ministry under “Part III, The Ministry of All Christians.” Not only has this statement supplanted a broader understanding of the nature of the church and its ministry, but it has moved from being a prefatory statement introducing a section of the *Discipline* on the local church, to a legislative statement on mission. This, of course, begs the question of how this statement came to be placed in the *Discipline*, and why it was shifted from one part of the *Discipline* to another. It also begs the question, “Why should we claim this statement on the mission of the Church to be a myth?”

² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 1996, Part V, Organization and Administration, Chapter One, The Local Church, Section I. The Church and Pastoral Charge

³ 1996 *Discipline*, p. 114

⁴ 2000 *Discipline*, p. 87

The belief that the mission of the Church is to make disciples has caught the imagination of The United Methodist Church, and whether one agrees with the statement or finds it offensive, one cannot deny its power and its influence on the mission and ministry of United Methodism. The Council of Bishops has affirmed it as a vision for mission and is acting to implement strategies that would make this vision more than a slogan in the annual conferences and the general boards and agencies. Indeed, the entire church is being called to accountability through this mission statement. The General Board of Discipleship has used this definition of mission as the touchstone of its work in the local church. Articles have been written, conflicting opinions have been voiced, and the idea is being incorporated into the evaluation systems of annual conferences to determine standards for ministry and measurements of effectiveness. This is a powerful myth that is justifying the development of strategies for ministry at every level of the church. Why? Is it because there is a sense that the church must do something, anything, to address the church's steady membership decline? Is it because of the constant struggle for power exhibited at General Conference that has left the church weary of argumentation? Or is it because there is enough truth in this statement of mission to engage both liberal and conservative United Methodists in an effort to define what it means to make disciples of Jesus Christ that makes sense in the world we are experiencing today.

But why is this statement from Matthew 28:19 challenging us, and how did it get to be such a dominant definition of mission? One could say it took a miracle, but the story of how this came to dominate the thinking of the church is even more interesting than simply declaring it to be the will of God. The proposal was written by a group of

clergy who were interested in focusing the church's attention on evangelism with a clear definition of the mission of the church that identified the task of evangelism as the primary goal. Their strategy was to include the statement from Matthew 28 in a petition to General Conference and to have that petition sponsored by a variety of conferences from each of the jurisdictions.⁵ Their petition was accepted unanimously by the legislative committee and put on the consent calendar for approval without debate by the 1996 General Conference.

While this legislation was being considered by one legislative committee at General Conference, the Commission on the Study of Ministry was reporting its recommendations to another legislative committee, and its recommendation was to make no substantial change in the statement on the mission and ministry of the church. Their petitions⁶ asked that General Conference retain the existing paragraph on mission and ministry and simply add Phillip Otterbein and Jacob Albright to the list of spiritual forebears of The United Methodist Church. These recommended changes were not put on the consent calendar at General Conference in 1996. Instead they were included in the Study of Ministry legislation that was debated on the floor. As a consequence, the definition of the mission of the church proposed by the Commission to Study Ministry took precedence over the alternative proposal which appeared on the consent calendar.

Because General Conference had passed two statements on the mission of the church, one on the consent calendar and one on the floor of the conference, the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision was in a quandary over what to do with the statement "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." Their

⁵ Petition Number: 20244, 1996 *Daily Christian Advocate, Advance Edition, Vol. 1*, p. 941

⁶ Petition Numbers: 21733 and 21734, 1996 DCA, Advance Edition, Vol. 1, p. 982

solution in 1996 was not to include the statement under the heading of the mission and ministry of the church, but instead to include it as a preface to the legislation on the local church.⁷ Though the wisdom of this decision can be debated, the statement was included in the *Discipline* and had its mythical power strengthened through another decision of the Committee on Correlation and Editorial Revision four years later when it met after the 2000 General Conference. In a decision that disregarded legislation recommended by the General Board of Discipleship and passed by General Conference,⁸ the committee shifted this statement on the mission of the church from its place as a prefatory statement on the mission of the local church to a place where it was clearly identified as the United Methodist understanding of mission and ministry.⁹ The effect of this action by the committee was dramatic. From that time on The United Methodist Church has debated the meaning of the mission of the church and has struggled to implement its mandate. The Council of Bishops has responded to the debate with a modification of the statement on mission which affirms that “making disciples” is not for the purpose of church growth or self preservation but for the “transformation of the world.” Although this amendment made the statement on the mission of the church more comprehensive, it also had the power to commit The United Methodist Church to a definition of mission that has mythological power.

Licensing is Sufficient for Sacramental Authority

Of the Church – 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

⁷ 1996 *Discipline*, p. 114

⁸ Petition Number 30320; Calendar Item 327, 2000 DCA, Vol. 4, No. 5, p. 1909

⁹ 2000 *Discipline*, ¶120, p. 87

are requisite to the same.¹⁰

The Church – We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. 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.¹¹

It is undeniable that The United Methodist Church is a church when measured by these definitions found in the Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church and the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. It is a religious body in which the true Word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered. Of course there are increasing questions about the due administration of the sacraments since the Methodist Church dropped ordination for “local preachers” 40 years ago, and the ministry of the church has changed to the point where more than 50% of pastors serving local churches in some annual conferences do so without ordination, having only a “license for pastoral ministry.” The myth is, of course, that ordination is not required and licensing is sufficient for sacramental authority.

It is interesting to note how far we have come from the time and thought of John Wesley. Wesley never asked for sacramental privileges for his preachers. He asked them to be itinerant evangelists, not parish priests. He defended their work by stating they had an “extraordinary” call to ministry, not the “ordinary” call of a priest in the Church of

¹⁰ The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church, Article XIII, 2004 *Discipline*, ¶103, p. 62.

¹¹ The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Article 5, 2004 *Discipline*, ¶103, pp. 67-68.

England.¹² It was not that the call to orders was defective and that ordination was not required for the due administration of Word and Sacrament, it was simply that Wesley and the people called Methodists depended upon those with an ordinary call to preside at the sacraments of the church, and Wesley expected his itinerant preachers to preach the word, awaken the people to their state of sinfulness, and point them in the direction of a holy life. He did not ask them to be the priests but the evangelists of the Methodist movement.

The desire for preachers to become priests in the Methodist movement often became an issue in Wesley's conferences with his preachers. Some wanted to be licensed as dissenters so they could be ministers in a church rather than preachers in societies.¹³ Some assumed sacramental authority without ordination or the blessing of Wesley. Some societies would have preferred to have their own ordained minister rather than being obedient to the parish priests of the Church of England. John Wesley resisted all such action and in his sermon "On Obedience to Pastors" published in 1785¹⁴ He tried to make it clear that Methodists would be faithful members of the Church of England and would rely on the priests as spiritual guides. Till the end of his life, he resisted the temptation to break away from the Church of England and to allow English Methodism to become an independent church. He insisted that it remain as a reform movement within the church and within society.¹⁵

In 1773 at a conference of Methodist preachers meeting in Philadelphia, American Methodism attempted to follow Wesley's plan for a relationship with the

¹² Wesley, John. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, Thomas Jackson, editor. Vol. VIII (London: John Mason, 1829), 309.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁴ Wesley, John. *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, Vol. 3, Abingdon Press, 1986, 373-383.

¹⁵ Wesley, Jackson Edition, Vol. VIII, 299.

Church of England, and they established a rule that “Every preacher who acts in connexion with Mr. Wesley and the brethren who labour in America, is strictly to avoid administering the ordinance of baptism and the Lord’s supper.”¹⁶ This was Methodism in America attempting to deal with strong personalities like Robert Strawbridge, who resisted the authority of Wesley and Asbury and took on the mantle of sacramental authority without ordination or accountability to anyone but himself. Though the minutes clearly state that preachers are not to administer baptism or communion, even Asbury was not able to enforce this rule on Strawbridge.

The rule forbidding Methodist preachers to administer the sacraments, of course, required serious amendment when the American colonies declared independence from England in 1776. The War for Independence forced many of the priests of the Church of England to return to their homeland, leaving the colonies without the priests needed to be a church. Methodists, already strained by the expansion of the colonies and the extension of circuits far beyond the parish boundaries of the church were in need of sacramental ministry. In 1779 the southern preachers met at Broken Back Church in Flouanna County, Virginia and decided to take the matter of ordinances into their own hands. While the northern preachers continued to remain faithful to the rule that forbid them to administer the sacraments, the southern preachers organized themselves into a body that “ordained” each other and “as many other preachers who wished to have sacramental authority.”¹⁷ Asbury and the northern preachers rejected the action of the Flouanna Conference and schism seemed inevitable. In an effort to bring unity to Methodism in America, Asbury met with the preachers of the south, succeeded in postponing actions

¹⁶ Minutes of some conversations between the preachers in connexion with the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, Philadelphia, June, 1773.

¹⁷ Norwood, Frederick A. *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) 91-92.

that would create schism over the issue of administration of the sacraments and leadership of Methodism in America, wrote a letter of appeal for ordained pastors to Wesley, and itinerated through the south in order to quell the flames of rebellion. By 1781 the worst was over.

American Methodism could no longer continue to function as a reform movement within the Church of England. It had to become a church and not depend upon the Church of England for rites and sacraments. This created a dilemma for Wesley who tried to address the issue by asking Bishop Lowth of London to ordain a Methodist preacher for mission service in America. When the bishop refused to honor the request, Wesley was forced to consider the unthinkable, breaking with Anglican tradition, assuming the authority of a bishop, and ordaining preachers as priests to provide American Methodists with sacramental ministry. So with the assistance of Thomas Coke, John Wesley ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey in 1784 to be priests to American Methodists with the authority to baptize, preside at the Lord's Supper, and ordain others for ministry and superintendency in America.¹⁸ All of this was reviewed in his letter to the "Brethren in America." The result of this action, of course, led to the creation of Methodism in America as an independent church while Methodism in England continued under the old plan as a religious movement within the Church of England. While the church in America grew with an itinerant ordained ministry, British Methodism continued its existence with preaching houses and societies, but no ordained clergy separate for the Church of England.

So committed was American Methodism to ordination and sacramental authority that it resisted the efforts of Strawbridge and the southern preachers to abandon their

¹⁸ Lawson, A.B. *John Wesley and the Christian Ministry* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963) 132-135.

mission as an evangelical reform movement, to oppose the will of Father Wesley, and to allow unordained persons sacramental authority in the mission setting. So committed were they to ordination as a requirement for sacramental authority that they ordained Asbury as a deacon, elder, and superintendent on successive days at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore in 1784 to make sure that the itinerant preachers of American Methodism had priestly authority as they traveled. So committed was American Methodism to ordination for sacramental authority that for nearly 200 years of its history, the Methodist Church of North America was willing to ordain non-itinerant local preachers as deacons and elders without welcoming them into the fellowship of clergy in the annual conference. It was not only preaching the “pure Word of God” but their insistence on the due administration of the sacraments by preachers ordained for that responsibility that enabled American Methodism to become a church and not simply a reform movement within the Church of England.

The granting of sacramental authority through ordination and not through licensing continued to be the norm of American Methodism through the middle of the 20th Century. Over the last 40 years, however, a new view of the church has emerged in which a new understanding of the relationship between ordination and the due administration of the sacraments has come to be. The shift from ordination to licensing as the norm began innocently enough with the desire to bring local preachers into the clergy membership of an annual conference and combine this office with that of “approved supply” pastors. This action, coming out of the Methodist-EUB Union in 1968, had the effect of overcoming the Methodist Church anomaly of ordaining “laity” as “local deacons” and “local elders” who had sacramental authority but were not clergy

members of the annual conference. The first step was to create the office of associate member for those approved supply pastors and local pastors who completed the Course of Study and had 60 semester hours of undergraduate education. Associate members functioned as elders in the performance of pastoral responsibility in the local church, were ordained as deacons, and were a part of the itinerant ministry of the church with a permanent relationship with the annual conference. They were granted the same security of appointment as elders but had limited voting rights in the annual conference.¹⁹

Although associate members were not ordained as elders unless they moved on to probationary and full conference membership, at least they were ordained and were given the sacramental authority of elders.

At the same time that ordination as a deacon became a possibility for local pastors who were received as associate members of the annual conference, the licensing of local pastors carried with it sacramental authority in a local church without significant training or experience in pastoral ministry.²⁰ This action alone, coming out of the Plan and Basis for Union of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Church has done more to create the myth that ordination is not a requirement for sacramental authority than anything else that has been done in the church. Because of this practice, the percentage of pastors who have sacramental authority without ordination has increased to the point where some annual conferences are entering a period of time when the majority of local church pastors perform their duties with sacramental authority but no ordination.

The movement away from ordination as the norm for those having sacramental authority has been further accelerated by two additional decisions of the church. In 1996

¹⁹ 1968 *Discipline*, ¶322.

²⁰ 1968 *Discipline*, ¶¶318-321.

General Conference decided not to ordain probationary members of the annual conference, but instead to grant them a “license as a local pastor” as their credential for ministry.²¹ Although this was later changed to a “license for pastoral ministry,” the effect was the same. The reason for this shift was the decision of General Conference not to accept the recommendation of the Council of Bishops, which would have continued the practice of ordaining persons as deacons at probationary membership, but instead to reserve ordination as a deacon for non-itinerant clergy entering full conference membership in specialized ministries.

The second decision that further marginalized the belief that sacramental authority is granted through ordination was the decision to reinstitute associate membership in the annual conference without ordaining those local pastors who qualified.²² When associate membership was removed from the *Discipline* of the church as a category of conference membership in 1996, its removal allowed for the creation of the office of deacon in full connection without further confusion over the nature of the diaconate. When associate membership was reinstated in 2004, its reinstatement occurred without ordination, thus expanding further the myth that ordination is not required for sacramental authority in The United Methodist Church.

The consequence of these decisions is an embarrassment to The United Methodist Church which increasingly finds it difficult to demonstrate that the sacraments are “duly administered.” In the movement from ordaining local deacons and local elders who had sacramental authority but were not clergy members of the annual conference to a system where licensed local pastors, associate, and probationary members are clergy without

²¹ 1996 *Discipline*, ¶341.1.

²² 2004 *Discipline*, ¶322.

ordination, we have clearly demonstrated that the myth that ordination is not required for the due administration of the sacraments is a powerful force influencing both our ecclesiology and practice of ministry. This is not only seen in the increasing number of clergy who function without ordination in The United Methodist Church but in the resistance to change of those who would be required to meet the ordination requirements of the church in order to have sacramental authority. It is time for this myth to be exorcised from our thinking. It is a myth that is destroying the integrity of ministry in The United Methodist Church, destroying our credibility in the ecumenical community, and destroying our effectiveness in mission as well.

Itineracy and Guaranteed Appointment

A third myth that is governing the thinking of United Methodists in America is the myth that itineracy and the guaranteed appointment are obsolete conventions in Methodism and that the time has come to face the fact that we are no longer a movement that requires itinerants to preach the word, preside at Holy Communion, marry, bury, and baptize as they once did. Once we acknowledge that itineracy is no longer needed to provide word and sacrament to a church, the need for a guaranteed appointment diminishes and disappears as well.

Methodism has always been characterized by its itinerant evangelists and preachers taking the gospel to the people, wherever they may be. The annual conference, until recently in our history, has been the annual conference of itinerant elders. Though changes in itineracy have taken place since American Methodism became a church in 1784, and laments have been heard over the sad state of itineracy since the time of

Wesley and Asbury, American Methodism has persisted in maintaining a commitment to itineracy throughout its history in spite of the significant pressures and changes that have taken place through the years. E. Dale Dunlap, in his studies of itineracy in Methodism, noted these changes and concluded that,

The system of connectionalism and its strategy of itinerant ministry has worked well throughout Methodist history, and in light of past crises calling for change and adaptive responsiveness of the systems, there is hardly warrant for anticipating or predicting its demise at this time. It has always been a pragmatic and flexible system in its functioning – and still is. The working of the system obviously requires a very high level of commitment and willing cooperation of churches and preachers. In the last analysis, however, the effectiveness of the system is going to lie in great measure with bishops and cabinet – prepared to work the system with equity, sensitivity, and as much skilled consultative collegiality as possible, but ultimately clearly on the basis of missional strategy and thrust.²³

Even though itineracy continues to be defended as a useful strategy for mission that has weathered the storms of change over a period of 200 years of American Methodist history, a significant shift in our view of itineracy occurred in 1956 when General Conference added a statement to the *Discipline* that limited the power of the bishop not to appoint clergy members who were reluctant to accept an appointment, who may have been ineffective in their ministry, or who in some other way were not viewed as suitable for itinerant ministry. The reasons bishops declared these itinerants “unappointable” were many, and those who experienced the abuse of this system were many as well. Pastors experienced punishment for actions they had taken without due process, women were being excluded from full conference membership, ordination and appointments to local churches simply because they were women, and persons of color could be denied an opportunities for ministry at the will or whim of a bishop. Bishops

²³ E. Dale Dunlap, “The United Methodist System of Itinerant Ministry,” *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, Jean Miller Schmidt, Eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 430.

had in their hands the power to decide who would be ordained and who would continue in a relationship with the annual conference. The abuse of pastors through the appointment authority of bishops had to change if the annual conference was going to continue to be the basic unit of American Methodism with the power and authority to determine who would be in clergy membership. This is why General Conference in 1965 said, “Every traveling preacher, unless retired, supernumerary, on sabbatical leave, or under arrest of character, *must* receive an appointment.”²⁴

The question of itineracy and guaranteed appointment took another turn in 1968 when the Plan and Basis of Union between the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church moved this statement on the limitation on the power of the episcopacy from the duties of the bishop to a statement on the rights of clergy members of the annual conference – associate, probationary and full conference members.²⁵ Although the language of the *Discipline* did not change significantly, the message changed from a statement about the abuse of episcopal power to a statement on the rights of clergy membership in the conference. No longer was itineracy viewed as a calling to ordained ministry and a commitment to the authority of the bishop, but it became a right protected by the clergy members themselves.

The steady decline in the membership of The United Methodist Church and the inability of bishops and cabinets to address the issue of ineffectiveness in ministry has increased the frustration of bishops and superintendents looking for ways to strengthen the itinerant ministry of Methodism. As a consequence, the Council of Bishops is working to clarify the fact that any right to an appointment is contingent upon two

²⁴ 1956 *Discipline*, ¶432.9.

²⁵ 1968 *Discipline*, ¶316.

factors: the willingness of an elder to accept the authority of the bishop to make an appointment, and the ability of the clergy member of the conference to demonstrate effectiveness in ministry.²⁶ If these legislative proposals are accepted by General Conference in 2008, even though the bishops will not be given the authority to leave itinerant clergy without an appointment, the clergy themselves will be put on notice that the fundamental responsibility for affirming a willingness to itinerate and demonstrating effective ministry is on the shoulders of the clergy members themselves and not on the bishops or the board of ordained ministry. The bishops will no longer need to prove ineffectiveness in order for the conference to consider action that would remove a person from the appointment process. Instead, it would be incumbent upon the clergy member to demonstrate effectiveness when being considered for appointment or a change in conference relationship.

All of this begs the question of whether itineracy and guaranteed appointment is a myth or whether both should be redefined in light of the changing realities faced by the church in the 21st century. While in the past itineracy was defined in terms of frequency of appointments without location in any one place for a long period of time, the proposed legislation has the effect of defining it as a willingness to accept the appointment of a bishop for the sake of mission within the church or annual conference. It is not the length of the assignment or the frequency of change that defines itineracy, but the willingness to accept the authority and the vision of the bishop for a strategy of mission and ministry. If this is accepted as the definition, it may then be possible to apply this definition of itineracy to all clergy, not just to associate, probationary and full conference members. If

²⁶ Legislative changes to ¶334.3 are being proposed by the Council of Bishops to the 2008 General Conference that would have a significant impact on the notion of a guaranteed appointment.

this becomes the accepted definition, deacons and local pastors also will be committed to the authority of the bishop to appoint persons in order to fulfill a strategic vision for ministry.

Such action, of course, will require the selection of bishops with integrity, bishops who will not intentionally exclude women and people of color from being appointed where the mission and ministry of the church require their services. As Dale Dunlap indicated, “the effectiveness of the system is going to lie in great measure with bishops and cabinet – prepared to work the system with equity, sensitivity, and as much skilled consultative collegiality as possible.” Bishops will need to be held accountable for the strategies they develop to achieve these mission goals. It is not that the notion of itineracy is obsolete or dead, it has simply not been seen as a useful strategy for mission, in part because it has only been applied to a dwindling number of clergy in the church who are elders and associate members and not to the deacons and local pastors who also freely make themselves available for appointment by the bishop.

If itineracy emerges from the mythology of its past to live on in the form of a commitment on the part of all clergy to accept the authority of the bishop to make mission appointments, what happens to the guaranteed appointment? Is it simply relegated to the dust bins of the past, or does it have a new place in the polity of the church? Without the guarantee that bishops would not unilaterally and categorically deny women appointments to pastoral settings, we would not have the high percentage of women as superintendents and bishops that exist in the church today. Without the guarantee that bishops would not deny appointments to men and women of color, we would not have the cross-racial appointments that make it possible for The United

Methodist Church to lay claim on a multicultural mission and ministry. Though tenuous at best, the guarantee of an appointment for full members of the conference has opened up the doors for a variety of people in ministry who may have found the doors of Methodism closed to the ministries they had to offer.

The more serious question is, of course, how can we continue to perpetuate any guarantee of appointment in light of the ineffectiveness of many clergy today? How can we continue with the appointment of ineffective clergy at a time when greater effectiveness in ministry is needed? If itineracy is defined in terms of acceptance of the will of the bishop with regard to an appointment, the only guarantee is that the bishop will offer clergy members a place to be in ministry. If a clergy member refuses to accept an appointment, that clergy member forfeits the right to an appointment there or to any other ministry setting. Likewise a minister, who cannot demonstrate effectiveness in ministry in the settings to which appointed, may also forfeit the right to appointment in any other ministry setting. In the end, what is being proposed are appointments contingent upon obedience to the authority of the bishop and the effectiveness of clergy in the settings to which they are appointed. Although the proposed legislative change does not relegate guaranteed appointment to the status of myth, it does significantly strengthen the role of bishops in determining who should or should not receive an appointment, and the role of the board of ordained ministry in removing ineffective ministers from their areas of responsibility. It also goes a long way to addressing the myth that bishops must make appointments of itinerant clergy regardless of effectiveness or a willingness to accept episcopal authority.

The Local Church is the Basic Unit of Methodism

Yet another myth that justifies practices counter to the polity of The United Methodist Church is the myth that the local church is the basic unit of Methodism. This myth, in spite of the Constitutional statement that affirms that the “annual conference is the basic body in the Church,”²⁷ is pervasive and affects the life and ministry of the church in more ways than we recognize. This myth is at the heart of the disconnect between annual conferences and local churches which believe that all ministry is local ministry. It is underneath the resentment that is expressed toward an “apportionment” system that is viewed as taking money away from the ministry of the local church and not as the means by which the mission of the local church can be extended to the community, the nation, and to the world. It is behind the efforts of larger membership churches to control the “appointment” of pastors in their setting and the complaints of smaller membership churches that they have no say in the process. Local churches have been so disenfranchised from the mission of the conference that they do not see themselves as members of the conference, but as independent agents who send delegates to the annual conference, as though they are sending representatives to some subsidiary agency that they may choose to support or not. Even clergy members of the annual conference fail to understand the meaning of such membership, counting themselves as delegates from their congregations rather than understanding that their home is the conference and not the parsonage of the local church. Such attitudes among laity and clergy alike not only distort what it means for clergy and laity to share membership in the annual conference,

²⁷ 2004 *Discipline*, ¶133.

but miss the mark altogether and perpetuate the myth that the local church is the basic body of the Church.

The perpetuation of the myth that the local church is the center of mission and ministry of Methodism is seen in the conflicts that occur around the nomenclature, formula, and payment of apportionments to the annual conference. Because of the disconnect between the conferences and the churches, the funds that leave the local church treasury for distribution through the annual, jurisdictional, and general conference agencies are seen as a tax structure unrelated to the need and mission of the local church. All this is viewed as a burden and a drag on the local church economy in the belief that the local church would be that much stronger in its mission if it was not required to support such a bureaucracy. Of course the myth hides the fact that without participation in the larger mission of the church through some form of income sharing, the effective participation of the local church in meaningful mission would be severely compromised.

Another consequence of this mythology is the distorted view conferences have of the nature of ministry. The only valid ministry now seems to be the ministry of the local church. Candidates for ordination as elders usually are required to serve full time in a local church for a minimum of two or three years, whether that is the ministry to which they are called or not. Although the *Discipline* allows for the appointment of probationary members to any form of extension ministry while seeking to fulfill the service requirements for ordination as an elder,²⁸ there is another myth that says elders should not serve in any form of extension ministry without first having years of service in the local church. This mythology is based on the fear that they might return from their appointment as an extension minister and prove to be ineffective as a pastor. A variation

²⁸ 2004 *Discipline*, ¶326.3

of this fear is the notion that the appointment process of an annual conference would never be able to accommodate all the persons in extension ministries if they would simultaneously demand their right to a local church appointment. The fact that such a demand has never occurred in the history of the church does not seem to diminish the myth. Even evidence to the contrary, that there have been times when those in extension ministries have been recalled in order to care for local churches, has not assuaged the fear or the mythology.

One of the results of this myth is that our presence in military chaplaincy has been devastated. The number of United Methodist chaplains has declined to the point where United Methodists in the armed services may not be able to find United Methodist chaplains to hear their confession and care for their spiritual needs because UM chaplains are in serious decline. While some of this decline has occurred because of the local church residency requirements, the aging of those entering ministry is a contributing factor as well. Likewise, it is increasingly difficult to find elders who are qualified to teach in United Methodist seminaries or serve as federal prison chaplains because the requirements for residency in the local church prevent them from meeting the requirements for these forms of extension ministry. For the church of John Wesley, who never himself served full-time as a parish priest in the Church of England, but spent his entire life in one form of extension ministry or another, to focus so much on the ministry of the local church that all other forms of extension ministry are excluded is a tragedy that betrays the basic purpose of the Wesleyan movement as a force for the reformation of the church and the transformation of the world. While Wesley fulfilled his ordination vows by serving as a fellow at Oxford, a chaplain to the Governor of Georgia, a street

preacher, and an organizer of the Methodist movement, American Methodism focuses on being a church where the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are duly administered without due consideration of how the church will extend these ministries into the military, industrial, and educational institutions of the world today.

Unless the local church can recover a sense of its identity with the annual conference as the basic body of the church and see that it is only as we covenant together with other United Methodists that the purpose and goals of the church as a missional and transforming agent in the world will be realized. Local churches may survive for a season as independent entities, but it is only as they work in concert with other Methodists through annual, jurisdictional, and general conferences that the potential of the Methodist movement will be realized.

Conclusion

The basic mission of the Church is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ.” Ordination is not needed for sacramental authority. Itineracy and guaranteed appointment are obsolete relics of Methodist history. The local church is the basic body of the Church. These are four of the myths that are driving the polity of The United Methodist Church today, but they certainly are not the only ones that have caught our imagination. All we need to do is to unpack some of the mythology around the global nature of The United Methodist Church to see that there is much more here than we can discuss in this brief essay. Each of these myths has enormous power to affect the ministry of the church as we enter the 21st century, and each of these myths provide us with an opportunity to examine our collective beliefs, decide which assumptions are true

and which assumptions are leading us in directions we should not choose to go, if we had given it due consideration. In the end, let our prayer to God be a call for insight into what it is that God would have us do in ministry and mission as we seek to be faithful to the call of Jesus Christ to “Follow!” Let us be guided by our understanding of the will of God and not by the myths that so easily control our mission and ministry.