

The Itinerant System: The Method(ists) Behind the Madness
Methodist Itinerancy as Missional Theology

I. Introduction:

I have chosen this particular topic in the hopes that it will expand the interdenominational conversation on missiology. I have learned much from my Lutheran brethren and hope that this brief examination of the Methodist itinerancy system may offer insights into other ways mission is being done.

I believe that the itinerant system is ultimately a strategy for participating in the Missio Dei. Though it is often narrowly seen as a way to place pastors in congregations, at its core it is more concerned with God's mission. Let's begin with a brief definition from the United Methodist Book of Worship:

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. All ordained elders shall accept and abide by these appointments...Appointments are to be made with consideration of the gifts and evidence of God's grace of those appointed, to the needs, characteristics, and opportunities of congregations and institutions, and with faithfulness to the commitment to an open itinerancy. Open itinerancy means appointments are made without regard to race, ethnic origin, gender, color, disability, marital status, or age. ¶¶ 431.¹

II.A History of Itinerancy: Circuit Riders

The idea behind the itinerant system is found in the father of Methodism, John Wesley. Because of John Wesley's fervor and his religious views he suffered a great deal of antagonism and rejection. He was disallowed from speaking in many venues and began the practice of traveling with his message. This was the sprout which would grow into itinerancy. He soon realized his own limitations and enlisted the help of assistants. He used lay preachers to help in his mission. Great Britain was geographically divided into "circuits"

¹ Harriett Jane Olson(Editor), *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2000: The Churches Grow, 1817–1843, Historical Statement*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000. 290

which his lay preachers would be responsible for. These circuits were often so large that a preacher returned to a specific place about once every four weeks. In addition, the preachers would be rotated out of one circuit and into another annually. This gave rise to the name by which Methodist Pastors are still know, "circuit riders."²

Itinerancy was adopted in America in the late 1760's and was made the cornerstone of it's organizational system by the first American Methodist Episcopal bishop Francis Asbury. In it's early years circuits could cover up to 800 miles and the pastor might only return every 6-8 weeks.³ "Itinerancy was the mission strategy for the early Methodists...The early circuit riders succeeded in taking the Gospel to the furthest reaches of the frontiers of this country."⁴

Itinerancy was seen by Wesley as a way to most effectively and comprehensively carry out the mission of God and the transmission of the gospel. His intent was not to create an appointment system but was driven by his practical desire to "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." Wesley's missiology was key to his employment of the method.

III. The Itinerant System Today

"Being part of the itinerancy means that a clergyperson is willing to go where sent. This system assures every pastor a church and every church a pastor. It also matches the gifts and graces of an individual with the needs of a particular church or area of service."⁵

² Nolan B. Harmon, *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism: Vol. I.* Nashville, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974. 1242-1243

³ Harriett Jane Olson(Editor), *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2000: The Churches Grow, 1817-1843, Historical Statement.* Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000. 10

⁴ Robert Kohler & Mary Ann Moman. 2001. Commentary: Itinerancy a strategy for church's mission. http://archives.umc.org/umns/commentary_archive.asp?ptid=&story={50ECA20 (Accessed January 17th, 2011)

⁵ Thomas S. MacAnally, *Questions & Answers About the United Methodist Church.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995

The appearance and practice of the itinerant system has changed as the world has changed. The world is “smaller” in many ways. Large circuits have been exchanged for much smaller charges where a pastor will most often only be appointed to a few churches, at most, that are a reasonable distance from one another. In most cases the pastor is able to be at each of his or her churches every week. The length of the appointment has also increased to an average of 4 years among Methodist Clergy. The appointment is still reviewed annually and occasionally appointments are as short as one year.

My concern is that, to a certain degree, we have lost the missional nature of itinerancy. We have allowed the strategy to overshadow the purpose behind it. It is now the itinerant system itself that has become a distinguishing feature of the Methodist church, rather than the missiology it is founded on. We have become known as the church whose pastors get moved around a lot rather than the church whose pastors are missionally sent. While it looks similar to what John Wesley practiced I believe we need to reclaim Wesley’s missional intent.

IV.A scriptural Foundation for an Itinerant Missiology

There are many precedents in scripture that can be looked to as examples of itinerant call to missions. In Genesis 12 Abraham is called by God to “go from your country,”(v.1) and promised he would “be a blessing to others.”(v.3b) Abraham(and his descendants) became travelers who carried the blessing with them wherever they went. Many of the prophets were examples of an itinerant kind of mission. Often the call is to a new place or people. In the case of Jonah we see a prophet’s resistance to answer this kind of calling, a phenomenon not uncommon to today’s itinerant preachers. My favorite example comes in Luke 10:

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two^a others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. ² He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. ³ Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. ⁴ Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road...When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. ⁹ Heal the sick who are

***there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'*¹⁰ *But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.'*"**

While I would not call this a direct example of itinerancy, this passage does demonstrate many of the same missional foundations that compose the system.

V. Itinerancy: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

John Wesley wrote in a letter in 1756, "We have found by long and consistent experience that a frequent exchange of preachers is best. This preacher has one talent, that another; no one whom I ever yet knew has all the talents which are needful for beginning, continuing, and perfecting the work of grace in a whole congregation."⁶ He recognized the benefits of a system that had the potential to "shrink" the mission field. He also saw the limitations of those called to fulfill God's mission. Wesley did not feel one person was called to the *Missio Dei* Wesley and so attempted to set up a system by which the mission field was able to experience many pastoral influences. Itinerancy broadens and diversifies the people of God's experience of grace.

The challenges for itinerancy are found in the necessary loss of relationship as pastor's are continually moving or being moved. We have come to understand that relationship is key to the *Missio Dei* (as it was with Christ) and often the depth of relationship becomes the weakness in the itinerant system. There is a disconnect between the amount of time it takes to build trust and the average appointment length of Methodist clergy. It seems at times that as soon as a connection is made and the pastor has earned the trust of the people he or she is appointed to a new mission field. This has become the most pressing question in the modern practice of itinerancy. Because we have failed to focus on the missional purpose behind it congregations only know that their pastor is being "taken away

⁶ Nolan B. Harmon, *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism: Vol. I.* Nashville, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974.1243

again.” This leads to another struggle that churches face, tension that this top down system can create between local congregations and Annual Conferences. Again I emphasize the need for the Methodist church to re-examine and recapture the missiology behind its itinerant system.

VI. Itinerancy as Cross Cultural and Cross Racial Mission

This topic could come under the “good” part of “*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*,” above but it is significant enough that I want to give it its own attention. This is one of the emerging aspects of modern Methodist itinerancy that I am most encouraged by. In recent years the church has begun to rethink the itinerancy system in regards to cross racial and cross cultural appointments. From the United Methodist Book of Discipline:

Cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments are made as a creative response to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the church and in its leadership. Cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments are appointments of clergypersons to congregations in which the majority of their constituencies are different from the clergyperson’s own racial/ethnic and cultural background.
(¶430. 4) BOD

Annual conferences shall, in their training of staff-parish relations committees, emphasize the open nature of itinerancy and prepare congregations to receive the gifts and graces of appointed clergy without regard to race, ethnic origin, gender, color, disability, marital status, or age.
(¶430.1)⁷

This shows the way in which the itinerant system can be effective in creating the kind of diverse dialogue which will allow us to experience our faith in new and fresh ways. It presents a sort of challenge to congregations to hear the gospel from a new voice and culture. The appointment process puts The United Methodist Church in a unique position to help local churches broaden their understanding and experience about who can do effective ministry. Another example of this is that many churches who would probably not have “hired”

⁷ Harriett Jane Olson(Editor), *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2000*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000. 231

a woman pastor on their own have learned to love and appreciate the clergywomen who have been appointed to serve them.⁸ The system, hopefully, allows us to celebrate the diversity of humanity. In addition I feel it serves to emphasize the universality of the gospel.

VII. The Itinerant system as Methodist Missiology

To summarize, I believe that behind the utilitarian structure of the itinerancy system is a deeply foundational missional theology. It is for the effective and meaningful transmission of the gospel and transformation of lives that the system has been put in place. Even if we have lost sight of this in our current practice I believe God is still at work in the system faithfully using it for *Missio dei*.

As a mission strategy the itinerant system develops and encourages strong lay leadership in mission to the world (priesthood of believers), creates ever changing opportunities for churches to re-examine their methodologies in mission, promotes the conversation of diverse visions between pastors and congregations, creates healthy challenges to the status quo for congregations and pastors, and ultimately allows for a relationship through which the gospel of God's love, as seen and lived in Christ, can be shared.

⁸ Erik Alsgaard. "Memories and Dreams: Four Clergywomen Reflect on Their Calling," *Circuit Rider Magazine* May/June (2006) : 24-26

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Alsgaard, Erik. "Memories and Dreams: Four Clergywomen Reflect on Their Calling," *Circuit Rider Magazine* May/June (2006) : 24-26

Harmon, Nolan B. *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism: Vol. I.* Nashville, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974

Kohler, Robert & Mary Ann Moman. 2001. Commentary: Itinerancy a strategy for church's mission. http://archives.umc.org/umns/commentary_archive.asp?ptid=&story={50ECA2

McAnally, Thomas S. *Questions & Answers About the United Methodist Church.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995

Olson, Harriett Jane(Editor), *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2000.* Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000.

Wesley Center Online, "The Letters of John Wesley" <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleysquos-letters-1756b>