

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS
GATHERING OF CHAIRS
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The Ministry Study Commission exists in part because of a problem endemic to a busy and dynamic movement like Methodism. As the question was stated in the Large Minutes, John Wesley's condensed record of conversations in the conferences of 18th century England which functioned as Methodism's first discipline: "Q.2. Have our conferences been as useful as they might have been? A. No, we have been continually straitened for time. Hence, scarce anything has been searched to the bottom."

This Commission was charged by General Conference with searching a few issues to the bottom – something there would never be time for at GC itself. The mandate was not as clear as it might have been but it did evoke a desire for clarity about some perpetually knotty matters in the church's ministries. It was not nearly as specific as the Large Minutes can be – "Q.28. What reason can be assigned why so many of our Preachers contract nervous disorders? A. The chief reason is either indolence or intemperance." Or the more pastoral question – "Q.31 Why is it that the people under our care are no better? A. Other reasons may concur; but the chief is, because we are not more knowing and more holy. Q.32. But why are we not more knowing? A. Because we are idle."

This kind of searing self-examination isn't exactly on the table now. Yet the task, even as broad as it was laid out, has required a lot of searching conversation. "Define the ordering of our shared life together," the omnibus legislative calendar item stated. "Report on the commonality and distinctiveness of certified lay ministry, consecration, licensing, commissioning, and ordination . . . clarify the denomination's ordering of ministry for the mission of making disciples of JC."

The commission's own minutes of several conversations are the substance of discussion time for this gathering, and I do not want to reiterate material that's there. I would like to say something about the *method and approach* of this document, in an effort to get us all in a common framework that might enhance our conversations over the next day.

To begin with, the commission has chosen a *distinctive form* of interacting with the UMC and all its many constituencies. Instead of hammering out and perfecting a report to be issued with other GC documents late in 2007 and sent to delegates' mailboxes, the Comm is trying to begin the conversation now. This is not only because almost all ministry study reports over the last 50 years have been rejected or unrecognizably revised by GC. The Comm wants to provoke a conversation and thereby build consensus about what the issues are and what are the best ways forward through challenges that face us.

Thus the document is in the form of conversations, extending the conversations of the Large Minutes of the late 18th c. As discussed in Q's 1-18, through the format of Q and A, new questions can be raised, new responses can be developed, and the process of thinking things through grounded in scripture, drawing on experience, extending our tradition, and using our human gifts of reason, can be shown for all to participate in. The Minutes posted on GBHEM now can be continuously revised; questions and answers can be added. In the next few months, of course, the Comm will write legislation to be considered, and this will be an expression of what will hopefully be a growing consensus about what to do.

For me personally this format is the fruit of a deep restlessness and even exasperation with the us-them mentality so pervasive in our connection. GC and its commissions too often are a "them" – "they" changed all the rules, "they" said we have to do this. As I often tell my polity students, "they" are devout UMs, members, pastors, or deacons of UM churches; "they" are our colleagues, neighbors, and friends in the connection; "they" serve as delegates, comm. members, general board staff, because collectively we have asked them to and they have concurred in God's call to serve. They also carry the mandate of doing their best to communicate, to talk with constituencies, in short, to keep as many people in the conversation as possible so that we can all move forward with a degree of consensus.

The UMC is a very large organization, spread over 50 US states and 50 nations. This communication is a terrific challenge. But if anything the internet should make it at least a great deal more possible to have the conversations we need. Something about our connectional systems in the past has encouraged too much childlike behavior, in family systems terms, a passive-aggressiveness that creates a lethal combination of deference, withdrawal, anger, and aggression focused on the very people whom we collectively ask to take on difficult and complex tasks. We need to *create systems that invite people into adult participation and responsibility* – and a full and rich conversation is one excellent possibility for doing so.

Over the last thirty years, the last ten years particularly, the UMC has made many changes in the system of ministries. The church has created numerous new categories through which peoples' ministries can be given legitimacy and resources. Someone told me not long ago that they counted 19 different categories of persons coming before annual conference at some point for legitimation of their ministries. This has led unquestionably to an unprecedented level of complexity and potential misunderstanding, particularly to the extent that people perceive resources and opportunities to be scarce or unfairly distributed.

Which connects with the ways our organizational culture has been reshaped over the last fifty years. The UMC needed to make some dramatic changes in mid-20th c. Women were included in ordination paragraphs in 1956 but almost none were seeking MDiv degrees 20 years later. The two basic constitutional elements of our denomination, conferences and episcopacy, were separate and unequal through racial division. We needed to address the full rights of participation of all, and that has been a colossal

struggle that in many forms continues. But at least we have ¶¶4 and 5 of the constitution stating that we are constituted to be an inclusive church that by its very identity opposes any form of racism. And we have made progress in ordaining much larger numbers of women and in becoming truly a connection of churches and conferences across lines of race and ethnicity.

One striking legacy of this past half-century is how the *language of rights* – who has the right to do what – has become the dominant paradigm for thinking about how the church’s ministries are constituted and organized. Who has the right to vote in annual conference? – that question makes some sense because it is about the political right to participation and voice in a governing body.

Who has the right to administer the sacraments? I hear asked regularly. Or who has sacramental rights – an interesting pun on rites. Why shouldn’t all pastors under appointment, ordained or not, have the right to celebrate communion in their charge? These questions make less sense because they address the constitution and substance of an office of the church as if it too were a political matter.

The Comm was asked to seek clarity about ordination, as about other forms of legitimation such as commissioning and licensing. *Ordination* as an office of the church does not lend itself to rights language. *Access* to ordination indeed is a matter of rights and I trust the church will continue to try to live up to its constitutive claims of inclusiveness. But ordination itself as an office is a matter of *authority*. The community of faith authorizes persons to carry out certain offices – authorizes them for the sake of the good order, well-being, and fulfillment of the mission of the church. The church sets apart persons – “take thou authority” our ritual says – to carry out particular forms of ministry on behalf of the whole community.

We have not talked about authority much in recent decades. It has become a term with negative connotations, as in the bumper sticker, resist authority. The less we have talked about authority and clarified what we mean by authority, the more we have flooded our system with ambiguity. People don’t know where they stand, or how they stand in relation to other roles and categories. This leads to withdrawal, anger, all those attributes of passive-aggressive behavior – not because there is too much authority in the church, but because the church is not clear and forthright enough about its forms of authority.

To focus on authority *changes the questions*: not “what do I have the right to do?” but “what has the church authorized me to do?” This puts the onus on the community of faith, the connection, to decide *what offices we will have and how we will authorize persons to carry out those offices* and how different offices relate to each other. This is much of the content of Part V of the Minutes as they stand now, describing ordination as a particular calling and office within the ministries of the baptized, interpreting the terms Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order, and demonstrating that the authority of ordination is neither exclusive nor territorial but constituted for the good order of the community of faith, the ordained exemplifying and leading the whole community of the baptized in carrying out Christ’s ministries in the world.

The church needs to live into its language of ordination, to draw deeply on tradition and to find new ways to connect its offices of ordained ministry to contemporary contexts. We need the richness of our heritage of ordination to sustain us for ministry today. A few years ago one of our bishops was quoted as saying that perhaps ordination is obsolete and a hindrance to the ministry of all the baptized. I could not disagree more. If we do not have the authority of ordination, grounded in the actions of the connection in creating certain offices and authorizing persons to carry out those offices through leading and exemplifying the ministries of all – if we do not have this communal authority of ordination, then what authority are we left with in the church? As Martyn Percy and others have argued eloquently in our historical mother church, the Church of England, *without communal authority grounded in tradition, we are left only with the authority of performance and production*: the one with the largest church wins. Effectiveness in ministry is measured by numbers of members, growth of programs and buildings, influence in the community – those who succeed by such measures enjoy the authority of notoriety, while those who do not succeed by such measures lose authority.

The church is a living community, continuous across generations, linked by scripture and creed in a vast human family that crosses history, national boundary, language and custom. The authority of ordination is an expression of that living community, the way the community – the connection as we say in our own tradition – authorizes persons to carry out constitutive offices for the community’s good. Take that away and we have church as widget factory, measuring its performance and production, competing with other organizations for resources of time and money perceived to be scarce, and marketing itself as a new and improved brand that promises more of salvation than, say, a new SUV, beer, or perfume.

Many people around the church (including me) have questioned the 1996 GC decision to remove all language of “representative” ministry – a language shared across the ecumenical church – and replace it with language of “*leadership*” or “*servant leadership*.” This language is not in any way defined in the *Discipline*, and since it was borrowed from the corporate business world it’s hard to make out what it means for us. When I first started working with the Comm I thought we should just restore the pre-1996 language. But I’ve come to believe that it’s better that we instead say what we mean by “leadership.” After all, Methodism may have been among the first Christian bodies to use this terminology, as described in the role of “class leader” in the General Rules of 1743. So in Q’s 34-36 we attempt a definition of leadership in Wesleyan mode, connecting it with our communal understanding of ordination.

The greatest mistake Methodism in its 250 years in America has made, in my view, is the extent to which we have lost the *centrality of the eucharist*. This is not universally true in our tradition by any means, for in many of our local churches and particular heritages Holy Communion holds a central, definitive place in the community of faith. But in many local churches the eucharist is a neglected add-on, and as “This Holy Mystery” notes, many people in the church are weary of communion being irregularly and poorly administered. They want more. At the table we meet Christ. At the table we gather around the one whose ministries we are called to carry on. At the table we are nourished

to be the inclusive community we say we want to be, and we are fed for the mission to which we say we are committed. Nothing is more significant than the central, constitutive acts of baptizing new disciples into the community and communing as the church with the very One we seek to follow. Thus we need people who *administer the sacraments with thoughtfulness, preparation, and presence*.

The community's act in setting apart persons with authority to celebrate at the Font and Table, for the good order of the congregation to preside, and in presiding there by extension to preside also in the congregation's work of deciding how to follow Christ in ministry and mission – this *presidency is critical to the church's life*. So how have we arrived at the situation of nearly a third of our pastoral charges having the sacraments administered by non-ordained persons who administer by virtue only of their Episcopal appointment? It's not a matter of whether local pastors have the *right* to celebrate baptism and communion; it's a matter of how the community of faith *authorizes* persons to preside in its most *constitutive acts, the rites that make us church*. Have we substantively answered the question, *is appointment by a bishop sufficient ecclesiological rationale for authorizing non-ordained persons to administer the sacraments in order to meet a missional exigency?* Are we saying that the bishop bears that authority and can distribute it as needed for missional purposes?

So the Comm has made *three moves* in the conversation so far, points at which your voice in the conversation is critical. *First the Comm proposes that at least many local pastors and certainly all associate members be ordained as local elders*. This ordination would be a ritual act specifically authorized by the annual conference and enacted by the bishop. The Comm proposes certain qualifications – that only local pastors who have completed COS be eligible, and that this local ordination be just that, an authorization for a local place of appointment. The *qualifications* in education and formation could, of course, be adjusted – but the principle remains. We have 8000 pastors under appointment celebrating the sacraments without ordination and this is not acceptable in our own heritage or in the ecumenical church. So let us ordain a number of those persons and provide presiding elders to celebrate in charges where no ordained person is appointed.

In parallel, the Comm proposes *secondly* to make the order of deacon clearer and more distinct by *deleting the term "service" from elders' orders and defining the office of deacon most centrally as the community's authorization for service* – service that exemplifies and leads the service of the whole community of faith, extending Christ's ministries in the world. This would define the UMC office of deacon more fully within the long traditions of the ecumenical church.

The *third* move also seeks to bring ordination into fuller expression, this by uncoupling it from conference membership. Here we propose to *ordain persons as elder or deacon on the occasion of their entry into probationary membership* in an annual conference. Ordination has always functioned in Methodism as the seal of approval on full conference membership. Once elected to full connection, one is then elected to the office of elder and ordained. This rationale grew out of the exigencies of early American Methodism in particular: the mission movement in the American colonies and western

frontier necessitated ordination (for lack of ordained priests) – so one became a traveling member in full connection to carry forward the mission, with ordination added on in order to be able to carry baptism and eucharist along.

We propose to *reverse this historic sequence* as a way of bringing ordination to fullest expression. The UMC is now, after 220 years in the USA building churches in over 95% of the counties in the nation, a church carrying out a mission, not a mission movement that by historical accident (“a very uncommon train of providences,” Wesley called it) becomes a church and starts ordaining. We propose that ordination stand on its own as the community’s act of authorization for office, that probationary members be authorized to fulfill this office in their ministries, and that they be understood to be on probation now not with regard to ordination but with regard to membership in the connection that extends the church’s mission.

Thus at the same time the *meaning of conference membership is also heightened*. Here one is on probation as one follows through a continued process of growth through mentoring, continued learning, and reflection on practices of ministry. This process culminates in being accepted as a peer and colleague, part of a conference order of mutual accountability and support. As an analogy for the sake of provoking thought on this possibility, in Roman Catholicism ordination as a priest is not the same thing as full membership in an order, and many priests are not members of orders at all – they are so-called secular priests. But religious priests, priests who are part of orders, have proceeded through two distinct processes, one for ordination to the priesthood, and one for joining an order of mutual support, accountability and growth. Not an exact parallel, but it helps me think constructively about what we are proposing here: ordination as the church’s act of authorization for set apart leadership in the church’s definitive acts (Word and Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order); and membership as a conference order’s act of incorporating a person into a covenant community of persons committed to a lifetime of service to the church’s mission.

The Methodist Church in Britain provides a closer parallel. In the papers posted on the GBHEM website – “What is a Deacon” and “What is a Presbyter” – this church argues that as one is ordained a deacon or presbyter (elder) one also joins a religious order that follows a common Rule of Life. The Large Minutes had a preface calling for preachers to consent to and “earnestly endeavor to walk by these Rules,” and the Methodist diaconate in Britain has been even more intentional about organizing as a religious order under covenant vows of commitment to a Rule of Life.

Thus as one step in this direction the Comm proposes that the church institute a system of peer review within the orders – to regularize and strengthen the sense of growing together in ministry – not a performance or production appraisal, but a conversation with peers about one’s evolving vocation and sense of purpose and goals for the future. And in the Q’s 87-93, the Comm urges much more attention to leadership development over the course of a career in full connection ministry.

Inevitably people are going to jump to the last part of the Minutes document to see what the Comm proposes, and then to whatever legislation gets written. A lot of the meat of the Comm's concerns and suggestions, though, are in the Q and A. Among other things the Comm has had much conversation, reflected here, about two matters: *how to get more people who have gifts for ministry IN, and how to get the people who shouldn't be in ministry OUT.*

Ministry, particularly the ministry of pastor, leading local church congregations, is not an especially popular vocational choice these days. A university executive commented the other day that when the economy is good fewer people enter professional degree programs especially in social work, education, and ministry – when the economy tanks, applications jump. And that's got some truth in it. We live in prosperous times, and the educational costs and eventual ministerial salaries the church offers are not appealing.

On the other hand, the Comm argues in Q's 72-75, the UMC has not done an effective job of challenging people to consider whether God is calling them to ministry. Our Disciplinary chapter on ministry reads too much like a rule book of hurdles and hoops – we'll take you in only if you measure up to our (admittedly nebulous and shifting) expectations – instead of reading as an invitation to the most challenging, exciting, and rewarding work on God's good earth. Many local church congregations have settled comfortably into passivity, believing that God rains down ordained ministers from some mysterious heavenly planet instead of raising them up out of our very pews. We could do more.

Having said much about getting them in, how do we get them out? We are still talking about this one. What do we do about ineffective or incompetent ministers? Some Comm members argue that the Discipline already says enough, it's just that nobody is willing to act on it. Q's 84-93 argue for the church to strengthen its means of continued learning, mentoring, and leadership development. Proposal VII advocates a system of peer review. The basic reference point is ¶329 for deacons and ¶334.2 for elders – the statement of responsibilities that among other things mandates continuing formation and participation in evaluation processes, together with willingness to mentor others. The administrative complaint process (¶362) also lays out a way of deliberate supervisory intervention with those who are not able to carry out ministry effectively.

Other Comm members and voices across the church have argued that the time has come to delete sentences like ¶337.1 – “all elders in full connection who are in good standing in an annual conference shall be continued under appointment.” Maybe it should say something like, “all itinerant elders in full connection shall be evaluated annually by the cabinet, their place of appointment, and their peers, and if found to be ineffective or incompetent in carrying out their ministry shall be suspended from the list of those available for appointment” – or maybe a sentence like “the bishop, together with the cabinet, shall appoint persons from among the itinerant elders in good standing to places of service, such appointments effective until the following annual conference” – or “itinerant elders in good standing MAY be continued under appointment” – or what?

Is so-called guaranteed appointment like a keystone in an arch? Pull it out and everything falls around it? Could itineracy in particular function without a mutual covenant to go where sent and its matching covenant to be sent somewhere? Is guarantee the right word; is it kind of a commercial employment term (like “guaranteed insurance coverage”) more than a communal term suitable to an order? *Isn't this more about covenant than about guarantees?* What do we owe each other in the covenants of our orders? Maybe if we ordain at the time of probationary membership, then we can raise the level of expectation of full membership in the covenants of our conference orders.

We have a lot of chess pieces to consider since every move entails other moves in a system as complex and interdependent as the UMC. The Comm is talking about it, testing the best wisdom we have been able to come up with, and need you now – to join the conversation, especially to ask good questions, that will help us and the church gain clarity about our ministries in the name and spirit of Christ.