Ministry, in the Methodist tradition, is perhaps as difficult a subject to delineate with precision and confidence as any in the entire area of ecclesiology. Whereas in most denominations, the rite of ordination, no matter how it is interpreted, is the definitive difference between clergy and laity, this has not altogether been true of The Methodist Church, where we have had ordained laity who could administer both sacraments and perform the marriage ceremony\(^1\) and unordained clergy who could do neither if ordained colleagues were readily available to do it for them.\(^2\)

The reason for this is that ministry in Methodist history has been defined almost entirely by circumstance. Practical necessity in this instance has dictated theology as well as determined polity and devised the strategy of mission. The ministry as much as any other element or entity in Methodism is the result of improvisation. It has always been functional and pragmatic. What it has been able to accomplish has been read back into its nature, so that what it does has had priority over what it in itself might, either logically or theologically, have been thought to be. The ambiguity between an ordained layman and an unordained clergyman, for example, has hardly been recognized as such simply because the Methodist concern has not been with the nature of the doctrinal entities in a nice theological structure, but rather with effective functioning and satisfactory activity within an expanding ecclesiastical organism and with what it has taken to be tangible results in the salvation of men and the improvement of the world.

“T dare not exclude from the church catholic,” wrote Mr. Wesley in defiance of the Nineteenth Article of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, “all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be ‘pure word of God’, are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are ‘duly administered.’”\(^3\) The true members of the true church are simply they who live holy and blameable lives.\(^4\) “Here was the dawn of the proper gospel day. Here was a proper Christian Church. . . . He (Christ) not only taught that religion which is the true ‘healing of the soul,’ but effectively planted it in the earth, filling the souls of all that believed in him with righteousness, a gratitude to God, and good-will to man; attended

\(^1\) See as one example the Discipline of the Methodist Church, 1940, which was the legislative fruit of the first General Conference after union in 1939. Paragraphs 260, 261, and 262.

\(^2\) Ibid., paragraph 215.


\(^4\) Ibid., paragraph 30. Works, VI, 401.
with a peace that surpassed all understanding, and with joy unspeakable and full of glory.  

The peculiarity of ministry in Methodism, which seems incapable of making a proper distinction between clergy and laity or at least providing a theological reason for such distinction when in practice it becomes apparent, inheres in the very origin of the ministerial office in the eighteenth century revival under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley. Whereas in most historical instances ministry is incapable of definition apart from the church to which it belongs and in compliance with the doctrines and disciplines of which it serves, the Methodist ministry as a matter of historical fact emerged before the Methodist Church.

Wesley, who imitated George Whitefield by adopting open-air preaching on the afternoon of April 2, 1739, when he preached in the brickyard at the farther end of St. Philip's Plain, Bristol, to a crowd estimated at three thousand, likewise came to accept lay preaching, where he saw in it an effective means of converting sinners. Before the end of the year 1739 he had begun the United Societies, groups of people “who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption.” These societies were not churches, nor altogether did they constitute anything like an ecclesiastical organization or institution. They did not qualify for the designation “ecclesial communities” of Chapter III of the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II, since nothing about them approximated the meaning of church either in Anglican or in Roman Catholic usage or for that matter according to the broad and loose patterns of the free churches.

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5 Sermon LXI, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” paragraph 11, Works, VI, 256.
6 “At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation. . . .” Journal, Monday, April 2, 1739.
7 Wesley says that the first lay preacher who assisted him in England was Joseph Humphreys. This took place, according to him, in the year 1738. Journal, Thursday, September 9, 1790. Wesley supplies this information 52 years after the event. Luke Tyerman, his greatest biographer, insists he was mistaken and claims that John Connick, who began his work on June 13, 1739, was the first lay preacher. Luke Tyerman, Life and Times of John Wesley (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1872), I, 274. The most famous instance is that of Thomas Maxfield, for whom Susanna Wesley interceded when her son tried to stop him from preaching.

Henry Moore, Life of the Reverend John Wesley (N. Bangs, J. Emory, N. Y., 1824), I, 414-415.
8 “A plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” Works, VIII, 248-249. December 27, 1739 is the most probable date for the beginning of the United Societies, though there is no entry under this date in Wesley’s Journal. Prior to this he had been a prominent member of Fetter Lane, London, founded May 1, 1738. It was dominated by the Moravians. When he withdrew from this, he organized a society of his own in London. Six months later he organized another at Bristol, April 4, 1739. See Thomas McCulloch’s paper, “The First Methodist Society,” in Wesley Historical Society, III, 166.
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I

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functioning in Wesley’s day. The point is they were not designed as substitutes for the Anglican or any other church. They were auxiliary to the church, supporting her mission by enriching and deepening the spiritual life of the members who used their services. In reality, they most clearly resembled “Tertiaries” or “Third Orders” of High Mediaeval Western Catholicism, though there was never an element of strict monasticism about them, since they did not provide for communal living or encourage celibacy. They did, however, insist on fasting, prayer, worship, and benevolence as did the Catholic Third Orders, composed as they were of men and women engaged in ordinary occupations.

It was in relationship to these United Societies and in the promotion of evangelism that Mr. Wesley employed his lay preachers. They were used for what they could very well do. The justification of their vocation was simply their accomplishments. By their labors sinners were saved from sin, holiness characterized the lives of people who had been unholy, virtue triumphed over vice, and their converts became on the whole faithful members of the United Societies, the general conditions of which anticipated, so Mr. Wesley thought, life as it is in the everlasting kingdom of God.

The ministry of the lay preachers, though perhaps spiritually richer and morally more effective in some aspects, was far less complete than the ministry of the ordained clergy of the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and other Christian denominations of the time. There was a very definite demarcation between their vocation, designed as it was to meet specific needs, and the vocation of those set aside by ordination to care for the total work of the church and to serve her membership from the font of baptism to the open grave. Wesley did not claim for his lay preachers “the fulness of the priesthood” by which men “are gifted with sacramental grace enabling them to exercise a perfect role” of pastoral oversight in the church.

John Wesley is very explicit on this point. When he held his very first conference with his preachers in 1744, he raised the basic question as to the nature of their work and ministry. When it was proposed to them in what light they were to consider themselves, they gave, under his tutelage, the answer, “As extraordinary messengers, raised up to provoke the ordinary ones to jealousy.”

The work of these extraordinary messengers was “wholly and solely to preach the gospel.” They were not allowed even to baptize children, a privilege accorded to any Christian in dire emergency. “You are to do that part of the work which we appoint,” Mr. Wesley admonished.
them. "Did we ever appoint you to administer the sacraments; to exercise the priestly office? Such a design never entered into our mind; it was the farthest from our thoughts; and if any preacher had taken such a step, we should have looked upon it as a palpable break of this role, and consequently a recantation of our connexion." 14 Mr. Wesley denied that an inextricable bond existed between the ministry of the Word and the ministry of sacrament. He said that he had received his lay preachers as prophets but not as priests. "And those who imagine these offices to be inseparably joined are totally ignorant of the constitution of the whole Jewish as well as Christian Church. Neither the Romish, nor the English, nor the Presbyterian Churches ever accounted them so." 15

The reason that underlies this distinction is apparent. The United Societies which the lay preachers served were in the intention of their founder "interdenominational" or "ecumenical," if we may deliberately use our own contemporary labels to describe a unique eighteenth century phenomenon. They welcomed into membership persons of any church. . . "we require no unity in opinions, or in modes of worship, but barely that they 'fear God and work righteousness.' " 16 Consequently Methodists did not at first constitute themselves into a sect, a party, or a church. "They do not separate from the religious community to which they at first belonged," insisted Mr. Wesley; "they are still members of the church;—such they desire to live and to die." 17 Whereas heretofore most religious societies had worked within the confines of a particular church or denomination and had sought to deepen the spiritual life of that body and renew it by the power of the Holy Spirit, the United Societies worked in behalf of all denominations and churches, so that their lay preachers were evangelists serving the whole of Christendom. Wesley therefore thought of what he was doing as a unique development, different from anything else in the entire range of history. "Point any such out, whoever can: I know none in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America! This is the glory of the Methodists and of them alone!" 18

II

What had been a partial and restricted ministry during the early and middle years of Mr. Wesley's career became before it closed a full and unrestricted ministry; for the Methodist movement itself, at least in one of its major geographical segments, became a church. It was an autonomous ecclesiastical body, as independent and as competitive for members as any other existing denomination. That which Mr. Wesley had earlier disallowed in regard both to his preachers and to his societies, disclaiming for the former sacramental

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14 Ibid., 11.  
15 Ibid., 10.  
16 Ibid., 21.  
17 Ibid., 14.  
18 Ibid., 21.
rights and for the latter ecclesiastical status, he not only allowed and sanctioned but he also took the initiative in causing to happen. Here again circumstances dictated policy, and theology defined a situation which had already been brought about by a practical man’s response to the pressure of events.

Methodism had begun in America through the preaching of two persons who had been members of Wesley’s United Societies in Ireland—Philip Embury, who formed a society in New York, and Robert Strawbridge, who did the same thing in Frederick County, Maryland. They began their work without Wesley’s knowledge and permission. He responded, however, by sending in 1769 Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore, “who were the first regular Methodist preachers on the continent.” The method of operation in America was, broadly speaking, the same as it was in Britain. The primary organizational elements, society, circuit, and conference, were identical. Wesley’s authority was unquestioned and on occasion was appealed to. Though Strawbridge violated the rules by administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, his was a glaring exception, and the conference of 1772, under the chairmanship of Francis Asbury, one of Wesley’s missionaries, explicitly stated that all Methodist people were earnestly exhorted to attend the Anglican Church and receive the ordinances there.

The drastic change which took place and which transformed the Methodist Societies in America into a church was the Revolutionary War. As subjects of the crown in the colonies repudiated the crown and became the first citizens of a new nation, so the Anglican Church, the clergy of which were all ordained in England and which had no American bishop, soon became an anachronism; for in the thinking of many, including Mr. Wesley, it was incongruous in point of time with the cataclysmic political and social upheaval that had taken place in America. What America needed, so he thought, was an American church. The agency providentially provided to fulfill that need was the Methodists.

Francis Asbury was the only one of Wesley’s British missionaries who had remained by his post of duty in America throughout the war. Methodists had been misunderstood, and some had actually been persecuted by the patriots, because they still used the English Book of Common Prayer opposed the disestablishment of the Church of England in Virginia, and kept in contact with Mr.

10 Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (W. Ross, N. Y., 1787), Section 1, Question 2, Answer 3-4.
11 Journal, October 14, 1768. Here Wesley notes reports from America.
13 The Virginia Magazine History and Biography, XVIII (April 1910), 143-144.
The sacramental issue had arisen again right in the middle of the war, and Asbury had been pushed almost to the breaking point in maintaining Mr. Wesley’s point of view and averting a schism. Indeed, a temporary schism had occurred among the southern preachers in 1779. The problem about the sacraments became aggravated after the war, but none the less the status quo prevailed and Asbury was able to reassure Wesley: “We are not united; all things go on well, considering the storms and difficulties we have had to ride through.”

Nonetheless, in compliance with the demands of the times and to guarantee the continuance of his work in America and to insure its expansion, Mr. Wesley effected in the year 1784 the transformation both of his American societies into a church and of their lay preachers into a clergy. After 2 a.m. of September 1, in a private home, in Bristol, England, John Wesley, assisted by Thomas Coke, a priest of the Church of England, like himself, ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey deacons. The next day he ordained these same men elders (or presbyters) and laid his hands on Thomas Coke, setting him aside for the office of superintendent. He issued the three men certificates. Those of Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey were alike: “I have this day set apart for the said work, as elder, by the imposition of my hands and prayer . . ., as a fit person to feed the flock of Christ, and to administer Baptism and the Lord’s Supper according to the usage of the Church of England . . .”. Coke’s, in contrast, read: “Know all men that I John Wesley think myself to be providentially called at this time to set apart some persons for the work of the ministry in America. And therefore under the protection of Almighty God, and with a single eye to his glory, I have this day set aside as a Superintendent, by the imposition of my hands and prayers . . . Thomas Coke . . .”. It was his intention that those three brethren would do for Francis Asbury and the other qualified lay preachers in America what he had done for them. On September 18, by his orders, they set sail for America, arriving there on November 3. The Christmas Conference of 1784 convened in Baltimore on December 24. The very next day Francis Asbury was ordained dea-
con and on the two succeeding days elder and superintendent respectively. Asbury then joined Coke, and the two of them, assisted by Vasey and Whatcoat, ordained a number of others as elders and deacons.

This was no extraordinary transaction. It was more than a jubilee, planned to end with the one occasion when it took place. It was designed to set in motion a process that would be continuous. With premeditated care Wesley gave to his people in America all the forms of ritual, doctrinal confession, administration, and ministry which he deemed necessary for the maintenance of an independent and autonomous church. Indeed, even the service for the ordination of deacons, elders, and superintendents was included in materials which he sent. He did not intend that American Methodism would end with the deaths of Coke, Asbury, Whatcoat, and Vasey, but rather that the ordination he gave them would be conferred by them on others through all succeeding generations.

A year later he ordained three "well tried preachers" to minister in Scotland. In 1786 he added two more to the Scottish number and one for Antigua and another for Newfoundland. In 1787 five more received ordination at his hands, and the two following years he ordained two and seven respectively. One of the seven was set apart for the work of Superintendent in Scotland. Then, finally, on Ash Wednesday, 1789, Wesley ordained both Henry Moore and Thomas Rankin. Most of these were for the work in Scotland, where the Church of England was not involved and where no separation was effected with the Church of Scotland, "for we were never connected therewith, any further than we are now." Some were for foreign mission fields, and even a few were engaged in the Methodist work in England, for example, Mather and Rankin.

Though the constitution of the Methodists into an independent and autonomous church in England did not take place during John Wesley's lifetime, still, despite his protestations to the contrary, he himself did all that it was necessary to do to prepare the way for this event, and in the light of what he did, it would have taken almost a miracle to have reversed the process and to have kept the United Societies as they had been during the early years of the revival. The Plan of Pacification, issued by the British Conference in 1795, allowed each society to decide for itself whether or not it would function as a local church and, if it did, provided it with Wesley's abridgment of the sacraments, as well as instructed it that only those per-

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21 The Sunday Service of the Method-
ists in North America With Other Occa-
22 Journal, August 1, 1785.
23 Ibid. (1867), 622.
24 Ibid. (1867), 678.
sons authorized by the conference could perform these sacred rites. This plan made possible the transformation of the United Societies into a distinct church and the preachers into a full ministry. It took at least thirty years after the adoption of this plan for the traveling preachers to call themselves ministers, though they performed every ministerial function and depended upon no other ministry than their own to satisfy the ecclesiastical needs of their people.  

Therefore, in regard to the Methodist ministry, just as much as the Methodist Church, Mr. Wesley was definitely and unmistakably its architect and its builder. This holds true in the various fields of its service, at home in rivalry with the clergy of the Church of England, as well as abroad in foreign lands.

III

Up until 1784, when the first of his ordinations took place, Mr. Wesley, at least in his outward behavior and public utterances, seemed wholeheartedly to subscribe to the age-old three-ordered ministry of bishop, priest and deacon, in which each order is received by the sole means of the episcopate through the laying on of hands, which characterized the clerical character of the Greek, Latin and Anglican Churches.

For one reason, he behaved in this manner because he himself was a conscientious, faithful and devout member of the Church of England. It was not his disposition to act contrary to the teachings and practices of his own church. He did himself what he instructed his preachers always to do: “And in general do not mend our Rules, but keep them, not for wrath, but for conscience’ sake.”

But more than this, he sincerely believed that the episcopal form of government was the best form of church government. Indeed, he had begun his ministry with belief in the necessity of episcopal ordination and even in the validity of Apostolic succession. “We believe it would not be right for us to administer either baptism or the Lord’s Supper unless we had a commission to do so from the bishop whom we apprehend to be in succession from the Apostles.” Wesley went to the extreme by asserting: “We believe that the threefold order of ministers (which you seem to mean by Papal Hierarchy and prelacy) is not only authorized by its apostolic institution, but also by the written word.” There is no evidence that Wesley ever abandoned his preference for the episcopal form of government, but preference is not the same as conviction that this form of government

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28 Ibid., 55, 56.
is essential and that any other form of government is therefore to be excluded or proscribed.

Wesley always operated on the basis of priority of beliefs or a scale of doctrinal and ecclesiastical values, the more important taking precedence over and confirming or negating the less important. For him, all the regulations concerning church government, including ordination, were subservient to the effectiveness of mission. Whatever facilitated mission seemed right to him. "I would inquire," he wrote on June 25, 1746, "what is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends, and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth. . . . And, indeed, wherever the knowledge and love of God are, true order will not be wanting. But the most apostolic order, where they are not, is less than nothing and vanity." 39

Wesley wrote his brother Charles on July 3, 1756: "As to my own judgment I still believe 'the Episcopal form of Church government to be both scriptural and apostolical': I mean, well agreeing with the practice and writings of the Apostles. But that it is prescribed in Scripture I do not believe." 40 Later in the same year, in a letter to James Clark, he expressed himself further on this subject: "I believe several who are not episcopally ordained are nevertheless called of God to preach the gospel. . . . That the seven deacons were outwardly ordained even to that low office cannot be denied; but when Paul and Barnabas were separated for the work to which they were called, this was not ordaining them. St. Paul was ordained long before, and that not of man nor by men." 41 He continued, "Concerning diocesan Episcopacy, there are several questions which I should be glad to have answered: as (1) Where is it prescribed in Scripture? (2) How does it appear that the Apostles settled it in all the Churches which they planted? (3) How does it appear they settled it in any so as to make it of perpetual obligation? It is allowed that Christ and His Apostles settled the church under some form of government. But (i) Did they put all churches under the same precise form? If they did, (ii) Can you prove this to be the precise form and the very same which now obtains in England?" 42

All these queries indicate the pragmatic bent of Wesley's concern. In the very raising of them he shows that he was but preparing himself to take any action that he deemed wise and expedient in the furtherance of his mission and in the propagation of the gospel.

Consequently in 1784, he was well prepared to justify his ordinations, scripturally and theologically, at least to himself, and hopefully to others. He sent a letter to the Methodists in America explaining

39 Ibid., 77, 78.
40 Ibid., III, 182.
41 Ibid., 200.
42 Ibid., 201.
what he had done in ordaining Whatcoat and Vasey as "elders" (fully constituted ministers) and setting Dr. Coke apart as a "superintendent" (in Coke's mind "bishop"). Said Mr. Wesley: "Lord King's Account of the Primitive Church convinced me many years ago that bishops and presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain. For many years I have been importuned from time to time to exercise the right by ordaining part of our traveling preachers. But I have still refused, not only for peace's sake, but because I was determined as little as possible to violate the established order of the National Church to which I belonged.

"But the case is widely different between England and North America. Here there are bishops who have a legal jurisdiction: in America there are none, neither any parish ministers. So that for some hundred of miles together there is none either to baptize or to administer the Lord's Supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end; . . .

"If anyone will point out a more rational and scriptural way of feeding and guiding those poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it. At present I cannot see any better method than that I have taken.

". . . As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the British hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free." 43

Samuel Drew, who was Thomas Coke's biographer and who knew Dr. Coke personally and no doubt talked with him about the ordinations, had this to say on Wesley's actions: "That, keeping his eye upon the conduct of the primitive churches in the ages of unadulterated Christianity he had much admired the mode of ordaining bishops which the church of Alexandria had practiced. That to preserve its purity, that church never would suffer the interference of a foreign bishop in any of their ordinations, but that the presbyters . . . on the death of a bishop exercised the right of ordaining another from their present body . . . and that this practice continued among them for two hundred years, till the days of Dionysius." 44

This is based on the fact that Mr. Wesley read and accepted the thesis of Bishop Stillingfleet's Irenicon. 45 He wrote Charles that he

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43 Ibid., VII, 238-239.
44 Samuel Drew, The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke (Soule and Mason, N.Y., 1818), 63-64.
45 This book, The Irenicon, or Pacificator: Being a Reconciler as to Church Differences was first published in London in 1691. It was reprinted in America in Philadelphia by Mr. Sorin in 1842. Lord Peter King's book, entitled An Inquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church, that Flourished within the First Three Hundred Years after Christ, Faithfully Collected out of the Fathers and Extant Writings of Those Ages, was first published in London in 1691. It was reprinted by Lane and Sandford in 1841.
did not think, as he had formerly thought, that episcopal government is prescribed in the New Testament. "This opinion (which I once heartily espoused) I have been heartily ashamed of ever since I read Dr. Stillingsfleet's *Irenicon*. I think he has unanswerably proved that neither Christ or His Apostles prescribed any particular form of church government, and that the plea for the divine right of Episcopacy was never heard of in the primitive church." 46 He answered his brother's objections to his ordinations by writing him from Plymouth on August 19, 1785: "It is the obedience to these laws, that I have never exercised in England the power which I believe God has given me. I firmly believe I am a scriptural [episkopos] as much as any man in England, or in Europe; for the uninterrupted succession I know to be a fable, which no man ever did or can prove." 47

It is obvious that John Wesley had come to believe that in origin the office of priest, or presbyter, and bishop was synonymous, and that he had the authority to do what any bishop in any church was authorized to do. Therefore, it is indisputable that he intended his ministerial ordinations to carry with them all the rights and privileges appertaining to full priesthood in the church. Likewise, he must have believed that he had the power as well to set aside persons for the office of general government in the church. He constituted Thomas Coke a superintendent. He eschewed the word bishop, but he did not in any way delimit the powers appertaining to that office which he himself had from the beginning exercised over both his preachers and his followers. The truth is Wesley actually sent over to America the service for the "ordination" of superintendents. He wrote in indignation to Asbury on September 20, 1788, "How can you, how dare you suffer yourself to be called Bishop? I shudder, I start at the very thought! Men may call me a knave or a fool, a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content; but they shall never by my consent call me Bishop! For my sake, for God's sake, for Christ's sake, put a full end to this!" 48 Wesley disliked the word "bishop" because of its connotation of pomp, prestige, and temporal privileges and power. Nonetheless he had conferred on his superintendents all the administrative authority that has traditionally been associated with the episcopacy. Charles Wesley saw this and candidly admitted it in a grief-stricken letter to a friend: "I can scarcely believe it, that, in his eighty-second year, my brother, my old, intimate friend and companion, should have assumed the episcopal character, ordained elders, consecrated a bishop, and sent him to ordain our lay preachers in America." 49

40 *Letters*, III, 182.
47 *Methodist Magazine*, 1786, 50.
48 *Letters*, VIII, 91.
49 Tyerman, op. cit., 439.
The ministerial plans and practices of John Wesley in varying degrees and ways, have been continued in both British and American Methodism, so that the basic pattern of our ministry is in keeping with his original design.

Whereas he was the permanent head of the Methodist movement as long as he lived and his offspring on both sides of the Atlantic looked to him for guidance as dutiful children look to a fond parent, the two churches today choose their president, or titular head, on an annual basis, the British being elected a year in advance of the beginning of his term of service by the Conference and the American, who must be a bishop, by his colleagues in the Council of Bishops. The custom of both churches is to give this high office to a different person each year, so that neither church offers to any one man the opportunity to design its policy or to preside over its affairs for a long period of time. There is no tendency toward monarchy on an over-all denominational scale in Methodism.

The office of secretary of the British Conference and of the Council of Bishops in the American Church, though subject to change at the discretion of the electing bodies, tends by custom to be a permanent position, so that one man remains in the office until the time of his retirement from active service in the ministry. In the church in America the person must be a bishop and is selected by his colleagues in the episcopal office. Both the British and American secretaries are persons of enormous influence in their respective churches, but they are not in any sense the head of the church and their voice is never singular but is always heard in concert with the voice of him who holds the presidential office.

The executive body of the American Church is the Council of Bishops, which usually meets twice a year and which gives oversight to all of the work of the denomination. Each bishop presides over an episcopal area, comparable to a diocese or arch-diocese in the Roman Catholic Church. However, he is assigned to his area on a quadrennial basis, and the law of the church now is that he is not to serve in any one area longer than twelve consecutive years. The United Methodist Church in the United States is divided into five large geographical areas which are called jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction holds a conference every four years, the representation of which is evenly divided between ministers and laymen. These conferences elect the bishops who serve the episcopal areas within their bounds. They are assigned to their respective areas by the conference itself on the basis of recommendations by an episcopal committee made up of an equal number of ministers and laymen representing all the annual confer-
ences and therefore episcopal areas of the jurisdiction. It is possible under special circumstances for a bishop to be transferred from one jurisdiction to another, so that the Methodist episcopacy is not diocesan, but like the ministry in general is regulated by the itinerant principle. A bishop cannot assign himself. He, too, is subject to the same appointive system as the parish minister. A bishop is elected to his office for life, that is, until the age of mandatory retirement from active ministerial service. Even then he retains the same rights and privileges short of administrative duties and level of compensation that obtain for his active colleagues. Indeed, the status of a retired bishop in The United Methodist Church is comparable to that of a retired bishop in the Roman Catholic Church.51

There is no office in the British Church comparable to the episcopal office in the American Church. The Separated Chairmen of Districts correspond more nearly to the American bishops, but these chairmen do not have either appointive powers over the preachers or executive supervision over the whole church. Though it is customary for them to serve continuously after appointment in this position, the office does not necessarily carry with it this privilege as in the case of bishops.52 Methodist ministers in Britain are stationed by the Conference itself upon recommendation of a committee and subject to the provisions set forth in the Deed of Union.53

The office of District Superintendent belongs to the American Church, while that of Superintendent of the Circuit belongs to the British Church. The two offices are not at all alike. In reality, the American District Superintendent exercises practically the same responsibilities as the Separated Chairman of the District exercises in British Methodism. His appointment, however, is limited at any one time to no more than six years, after which he must return to the pastorate of a church or serve in some other connectional office for three years before he can be reassigned to a district. Both the American Superintendent and the British Chairman exercise pastoral and administrative oversight over the ministers and churches (or circuits) in particular geographical areas of the church. In both instances, the average number of such charges (either churches or circuits) is forty to fifty. In America District Superintendents serve under bishops and form the bishop’s cabinet in the annual conference in which their districts are located. They advise the bishop in the appointment of preachers to churches. The appointments are made only by the bishop himself.54 The Superintendent of the Circuit

51 See sections on Conferences and Episcopacy in the new constitution of United Methodist Church as well as paragraphs on Bishops in the Discipline of 1968.
52 The Deed of Union, par. 28.
53 Ibid., par. 22.
54 For American Methodism, see the paragraphs in the new 1968 Discipline on District Superintendent. In British Methodism, see The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Section Three.
in British Methodism is the minister first named to that circuit by the Stationing Committee of the Conference, and he in collaboration with the other ministers exercises general oversight over the circuit and presides at the official meetings of the circuit.\(^{55}\) There are one-minister circuits in Britain, but on the whole these are rare just as circuits of only one church are the exception rather than the rule; whereas in America most circuits, when they exist at all, have only a few churches in them and are generally served by but one minister. Increasingly single churches, however, demand, due to their size, a staff of ministers. The one named by the bishop as the pastor-in-charge exercises control over the ministerial affairs of that church and the other ministers receive their specific responsibilities from him. Likewise, areas of service both in the inner city and in the rural territories are adopting staff ministers.

The ministry itself in British Methodism is a one-order ministry, consisting of all persons who have been received into "Full Connexion with the Conference" through ordination and who are stationed by the conference either to circuits or to special work in the church.\(^{56}\) The ministry in The United Methodist Church is at least a ministry of two orders, consisting of elders and deacons. An elder is one who has been admitted into full connection into an annual conference and is entrusted with full ministerial responsibilities in the church; while a deacon is either a probationer in process of fulfilling the requirements of admission into full connection or else is a permanent associate member of annual conference, that is, one who is not deemed qualified to full conference membership or entitled to administer the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper. There are then two ordinations in The United Methodist Church, the second, namely that of elder, resting upon the first, that of deacon. But there is also now the permanent diaconate, for it is possible for some to remain deacons always and serve in that way in the ministry of the church.\(^{57}\)

Laymen in both British and American Methodism are licensed to preach, and in the British Church these laymen receive pulpit assignments on Sundays in most of the large circuits. Under special authorization by the conference, some of them are even permitted to administer the sacraments.\(^{58}\) The same practice prevailed in the American church until union in 1968, for we had local elders, or ordained laymen, who, though not ministerial members of an annual conference, nonetheless enjoyed the same sacramental privileges as the clergy. This practice has now been abandoned, so that for the

\(^{55}\) The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Section One, 21, 22. Section Four, 226.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., Section One, 38.


\(^{58}\) The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Section Four, 238.
first time ordination is the distinguishing mark between clergy and laity in The United Methodist Church. However, the office of lay pastor is continued, and “a lay pastor while serving under appointment as pastor of a charge, shall be responsible to perform all the duties of a pastor except that he shall not be authorized to administer the sacraments.”

V

In the light of the ministerial patterns of Methodism, as we have observed it in terms both of its origin and of its variety and basic unity in the two major branches of the church today, how shall we characterize the Methodist conception of ministry? What principles, theological and ecclesiological, underlie the structure and can be delineated in its practices and procedures?

The primary principle is that God acts directly and personally in the constitution of His ministry. The summons, as in the case of little Samuel in the Tabernacle, Isaiah in the Temple, and Saul on the road to Damascus, is from God to the person who must make the response, so that he knows that his vocation in life is more than a human enterprise. That is why the “call to preach” is central and basic in the Methodist understanding of how the ministry began and of how always it is replenished. How many of us, for example, received this advice from an older minister when we were trying to ascertain the validity of our own call to the ministry: “Young Brother, do not preach if you can possibly refrain from doing so. If you are able to do anything else, then do it, for this is a sure sign you have not been called. If you are called by God to preach, you won’t have any peace until you accept that call!” That is perhaps an extreme version of the situation. No doubt there are various options for an individual in investing his life within the will of God. But the point it conveys is sure. The decision for the ministry is initiated experientially, and the Holy Spirit enters into relationship with the person involved, so that he communes with God and receives God’s guidance in the depths of his own soul.

There is a corollary, however, to this principle of the personalization of the ministerial call, and that corollary is that its validity can and must be tested, not by the one who purports to have received it of the Lord, but rather by the church in the ministry of which he is to serve. The church, therefore, sets its own standards of testing, and proof of the call lies not alone in the signs of its initiation but also in the effects and accomplishments wrought in its fulfillment. That

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69 Ibid., par. 349, 378.
is why Methodism insists on the probationary period, what we in the American Church have until 1968 called "being on trial." A man is kept "on trial" by an annual conference for at least two years before he is given full membership in its ministry, that is, "admitted into full connection" into the itineracy. The successful fulfillment of standards of education, which are increasingly becoming more excellent and more demanding, is itself evidence of the genuineness of a man’s call to preach as is zeal in evangelism and missionary endeavor. Ordination is no more than the public act or ceremony whereby the church recognizes a person’s fitness for the ministry, whether of the diaconate or of the presbyterate, and attests the same by the laying on of hands and by prayers to God that he will constantly confirm this attestation by His Church with heavenly grace given in abundance to His minister.

Indeed, a person’s ministry is valid only as it is effective. The practice of “locations” either voluntary or involuntary, inheres in the very principle of ministry as understood by Methodism. At the opening of every annual conference the question is asked of each ministerial member: “Is he blameless in life and works?” The answer given is, “Nothing against him.” Both his character and official administration must be passed by the conference. When a man is located, that is, discontinued from active service, he thereby ceases to be a minister. He is returned to secular employment and has no voice or vote in the ministerial affairs of his annual conference. Synergism, which is so important a theological concept in the Methodist understanding of both justification and sanctification in personal salvation, so that God cannot save a man apart from man’s voluntary cooperation with divine grace, is likewise a significant concept in the Methodist understanding of ministry. In the beginning, whether a person becomes a minister or not depends upon his perseverence, his eager and loving fellowship with his Savior, his continuous receptivity to the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Grace for the ministry is not conferred through any sacramental act, nor are ministerial gifts separable from the moral and spiritual life of the minister. Therefore as a man grows in grace and becomes a more holy and devout person, so his effectiveness as a minister increases. The ministry in Methodism is altogether functional. Its powers are inseparable from their effects. The nature lies entirely in its vital expressions.

That is why orders as such are no more than delineations of responsibilities and privileges. A deacon means simply that a person admitted to that office is entrusted to do certain things in the church. An elder is a full minister. He is entrusted with what a deacon does and more besides. Whereas in the Roman Catholic Church the fullness of the ministry adheres only in the episcopate, the bishop in
Methodism shares the same ministerial order as an elder. In fact, he is an elder who is entrusted with administrative supervision over an episcopal area and who shares with his brother bishops executive powers over the whole church. But even a bishop ceases to be a bishop if he either voluntarily relinquishes or else is relieved by the church of his episcopal powers before the age of retirement or incapacity due to illness. For example, the episcopate in many overseas central conferences is temporary. We call it "term episcopacy." When a man's episcopal term is over and he is not re-elected to that office, he gives up all episcopal rights and responsibilities and privileges and receives those of the ministerial status he assumes. A bishop could locate, for that matter, cease even to be a minister, become a layman again, or conceivably even be expelled from membership in The United Methodist Church.

The final principle in this area of Methodist ecclesiology is that there is no inherent difference between ordained ministry and laity in Methodism. The distinction is one of vocational calling, not of substance or nature.

This is expressed most adequately in the British Methodist statement of ministry: "The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of priesthood of all believers, and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons; but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognized.

"The preachers, itinerant and lay, are examined, tested, and approved before they are authorized to minister in holy things. For the sake of Church order, and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office, the ministers of the church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments." 61

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