



DISCOVERY

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THE *DISCIPLINE* AND THE RECOGNITION OF ORDERS: A BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW

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“Ministers and preachers coming from other denominations may be received by the conference, or, in the interval of conference, by the president, without their having the recommendation required in other cases.” This sentence appears in the first *Discipline* of the Methodist Protestant Church (1830, p. 45). It is the earliest instance of a disciplinary provision by any of the constituent elements of the United Methodist Church regarding how to receive ministers from other denominations. Essentially the same wording was carried by the last *Discipline* of the Methodist Protestants (1936, p. 55). There is no mention of imposition of hands. Clearly, then, properly credentialed ministers from other churches were received, not reordained, by the M.P. Church.

Ten years later the Methodist Episcopal Church added to its *Discipline* a section on the reception of ministers from other denominations. “Those ministers of other evangelical Churches, who may desire to unite with our Church, whether as local or itinerant, may be received according to our usages, on condition of their taking upon them our ordination vows, without the reimposition of hands, giving satisfaction to an annual conference of their being in orders, and of their agreement with us in doctrine, discipline, government, and usages; provided the conference is also satisfied with their gifts, grace, and usefulness. Whenever any such minister is received, he shall be furnished with a certificate, signed by one of our bishops, in the following words. . .” (1840, p. 35). Robert Emory, first historian of the *Discipline*, merely noted this 1840 addition. Emory nowhere indicates that it was a departure from regular Methodist treatment of the

orders of other denominations (*History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 5th rev. ed., 1857, p. 131). Osmon Baker, considered by Bishop Holland N. McTyeire to be a pioneer in the interpretation of episcopal Methodist law, noted that ministers from other denominations could be received into full connection (*A Guide-Book in the Administration of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1877 ed., p. 47).

McTyeire's southern Methodism found no reason to depart from the 1840 stance of the united church. Moreover, both of the disciplinary historians in the late nineteenth century acknowledged the continuation of that policy (David Sherman, *History of the Revisions of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1874, p. 163; P.A. Peterson, *History of the Revisions of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1889, p. 66).

Another authoritative canonist, Bishop Stephen M. Merrill of the northern connection, commented upon the treatment of ministers transferring into the M.E. Church. The Methodists could "recognize their standing without repeating their ordination." Unitarians, Universalists, and Roman Catholics were excluded from enjoying such a privilege. On the other hand ministers of both the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren in Christ were to be treated like "other Methodists" and could be admitted to conference either on trial or as members in full connection (*A Digest of Methodist Law*, 1885, pp. 88,91).

Methodist Protestant and Methodist Episcopal recognition of the orders of other evangelical Christian churches was maintained in The Methodist Church subsequent to unification in 1939. The last *Discipline* of that denomination (1964) still contained the words "without the reimposition of hands" (par. 411.4). The seriousness with which the denomination took its historic position of openness on the matter of ordination is demonstrated by one of the early cases to come before the Judicial Council. The case developed from a somewhat bizarre situation in the North Texas Annual Conference. In 1940 a minister in full connection, with more than 20 years service, withdrew altogether from The Methodist Church. He surrendered his credentials. Then he joined a Baptist church and was ordained as a Baptist minister. In 1941 he sought readmission to the North Texas Conference, this time as an ordained minister transferring from another evangelical church, under paragraph 311 of the *Discipline*. The conference committee on ministerial qualifications voted favorably upon his request. The conference itself, however, denied admission. An appeal was made to the presiding bishop, Ivan Lee Holt, who ruled in favor of readmission. His decision rested squarely upon paragraph 311,

especially section 3. In its subsequent review of the case, as required in all instances of episcopal rulings on questions of law before an Annual Conference, the Judicial Council sustained Bishop Holt's decision (*Decisions of the Judicial Council of The Methodist Church*, Number 16).

Sometime between 1845 and 1853 the United Brethren in Christ put a similar recognition into their *Discipline*. It was stated that transfer ministers "may be exempt" from the laying on of hands (1853, p. 61). The earliest disciplinary recognition of orders from outside the regular channels of the Evangelical Association was in 1876. The Evangelicals voted that a transfer minister "may be received as deacon or elder, according to the rank which he held in his former Church" (*Discipline*, p. 42). The Evangelical United Brethren Church adopted essentially the wording of the 1876 Evangelical legislation (*Discipline*, 1947, par. 352 and 1967, par. 307).

The United Methodist Church specifically continues the tradition of its constituting denominations in granting to an Annual Conference the right to recognize the ordination of transfer ministers. To be sure there is no mention in any of the *Disciplines* of the UMC of the matter of reimposition of hands (1968, par. 375; 1972, par. 376; 1976, par. 426; 1980, par. 428; *Decisions of the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church*, Number 444). Specific prohibition, however, would not seem to be necessary: recognition and reimposition are contradictory actions.

In conclusion, the historic witness of the five denominational traditions which now constitute the United Methodist Church is one of unanimous agreement on the matter of recognition of ordination by other churches. Nevertheless in recent years in some Annual Conferences some ordained and properly credentialed ministers from other denominations have been reordained — have undergone the reimposition of hands — as one condition of their admission into full connection. Such practice is clearly unhistoric. It is also undisciplinatory. Perhaps it could best be ended permanently by a return to a combined form of the wording of the 1840 Methodist Episcopal and the 1876 Evangelical *Disciplines*. The only significant change needed would be to refer to other Christian churches rather than exclusively to other evangelical churches. Obviously in today's Methodism both catholic and reformed traditions are as fully recognized as are the more traditionally evangelical ones. For that matter United Methodism itself is at once catholic, reformed, and evangelical. That fact of the United Methodist way of being the Church stems directly from its Wesleyan Anglican origins, its traditional theological pluralism in this country, and its involvement in the ecumenical movement. At all events both

our law and our practice must make clear the distinction between Christian ordination and United Methodist conference membership; and it must do so in a manner which will protect the integrity both of the World Church and of our connection.