

ECCLESIOLOGY AND MINISTRY IN THE METHODIST CHURCH (1939-1968)

SARAH HEANER LANCASTER

The period of the existence of The Methodist Church in the United States is notable in the history of Methodism because it is marked at both the beginning and at the end by merger (the first merger reuniting The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and The Methodist Protestant Church, and the second merger bringing this reunited Methodism together with the Evangelical United Brethren). Many divided communions, such as Lutherans and Presbyterians, also sought reunification in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948 represented high ecumenical hopes across Christianity. In this climate, Methodists confronted questions about what it meant to be Church in a new way.¹ Having begun as a movement within a Church, and then somewhat haphazardly having become a Church, Methodism had not yet developed a fully reflective ecclesial identity. In the climate of ecumenism, reunified Methodists began to engage in more intentional reflection and articulation about ecclesiology; but as they did so, it became apparent that The Methodist Church lacked a coherent theology of ministry. In this paper, I will explore the developing understanding of ecclesiology that is displayed through the *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church* from 1939-1964,² using the traditional categories of the nature and mission of the Church, and then I will examine the major issues for ministry that faced The Methodist Church during this period.

The Nature of the Church

The clearest statement in the *Disciplines* of this period that intentionally defines the nature of the Church is Article XIII of the Articles of Religion: “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered

¹ In this paper, I will follow the convention of capitalizing the word “Church” when I am referring to the universal Church or The Methodist Church, and I will begin the word with lower case when I am referring to a local church. The *Disciplines* during this period do not always follow this convention.

² While The Methodist Church existed into early 1968 until the formal union with the Evangelical United Brethren, the *Book of Discipline* from that year belongs to the newly formed United Methodist Church.

according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." Apart from this historic reference to the pure Word of God and due administration of the Sacraments, the *Disciplines* do not attempt theological development of ecclesiological statements, for instance of the "marks" of the Church. Instead, comments about the Church appear in different kinds of documents within the *Discipline*, including rules, rituals and resolutions.

The 1939 *Discipline* sets the framework for the *Disciplines* that are to follow, and one of its most explicit statements about "Church" appears at the end of the Historical Statement, where the nature and mission of the Church are almost indistinguishable (and thus this statement provides something of a different "test" for the true Church than Article XIII does):

The three branches that have united to form The Methodist Church have always believed that the only infallible proof of any genuine Church of Christ is its ability to seek and save the lost; to disseminate the Pentecostal Spirit and life; to spread Scriptural holiness over all lands and to reform all continents by the Gospel of Christ. And the sole object of the rules, regulations, and usages of The Methodist Church is that it may fulfill in all places and years its original divine commission as a leader in evangelism, in reforms, and in fraternal relations with all branches of the one Church of Christ, with which it gladly confesses its partnership in the spiritual conquest of the whole world for the Son of God.³

The Methodist Church is a specific instantiation of the Church of Christ, working with other Church bodies for the same mission shared by all Christians. This sense of shared values and mission becomes programmatic in many ways in the decades to follow. For instance, resolutions about social issues, such as war and peace or temperance or race, are often argued on the basis of the Church of Christ rather than Methodism itself. The Courses of Study to prepare Methodists for various ministries throughout this period included a mix of materials that combined education in broad Christian categories (Bible, Church history) with Methodist history and theology. The *Disciplines*, then, recognize that "Church" refers in two ways: to the Church of Christ and to The Methodist Church. This recognition that Church includes, but is broader than, the denomination was fairly simple and unreflective at first, but as the ecumenical movement gained momentum, the connection with the Church Universal became more explicit, and it began to have impact on the concrete structures of The Methodist Church.

A few Methodists, such as John R. Mott and Bishop Francis J. McConnell, had been ecumenically minded for some time before 1948, but the establishment of the WCC prompted much more interest. The Episcopal address to General Conference of that year included a call to ecumenism. From that point on, the *Disciplines* begin to reflect greater attention to what it means to be part of the larger Church, and not simply Methodist. The Historical

³ *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church 1939* (New York: The Methodist Publishing House), 7-8. Hereafter, I will use the title *Doctrines and Discipline* followed by the year of the version cited.

Statement of the 1948 *Discipline* was revised so that it referred in the first sentence to the nature of the Church as defined in Article XIII. The Statement goes on to acknowledge how the Articles of Religion “unite us with the historic faith of Christendom,” and closes as it did in the previous *Disciplines* with a vision for common mission with the whole Church of Christ.⁴ At the next General Conference in 1952, the *Disciplinary* paragraph that allowed churches to receive members in good standing from other “evangelical churches” is changed to read from “any Christian denomination.”⁵ In that same year, the understanding of “local church” also changes significantly. Beginning in 1944, the *Disciplines* define “local church” as:

a society of persons who have professed their faith and have joined together in the fellowship of a Christian congregation in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.⁶

In 1952, the paragraph defining “local church” is expanded to read:

The local church is a connectional society of persons who have professed their faith in Christ, have been baptized, have assumed the vows of membership in The Methodist Church, and are associated in fellowship as a local Methodist church in order that they may hear the Word of God, receive the Sacraments, and carry forward the work which Christ has committed to his Church. Such a society of believers, being within The Methodist Church and subject to its Discipline, is also an inherent part of the Church Universal, which is composed of all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and which in the Apostles’ Creed we declare to be the holy catholic Church.⁷

The earlier definition stresses the local church as a society, with a purpose and accountability similar to the small groups in early Methodism, while the later definition shows the integral relationship between a local congregation, The Methodist Church, and the Church Universal. This change shows not only a greater ecumenical spirit, but also a greater ecclesial self-understanding. The Methodist Church was beginning to think more carefully about what it meant to be “Church,” and Word and Sacrament, the defining elements in Article XIII, were playing a more central role even at the local church level.

⁴ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1948, pp. 3-6.

⁵ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1939, ¶135 and *Doctrines and Discipline* 1952, ¶111. There is no rationale given in the report brought for legislation for this change of phrase, and the debate recorded in the *Daily Christian Advocate* does not clearly indicate one either. I have sought without success an explanation for what “evangelical churches” actually referred to. In a different context, I have found the adjective “evangelical” used in contrast to “liturgical,” and I suspect that the use of this phrase here would indicate something similar. It broadens acceptable transfers beyond Churches with some kind of similarity, perhaps in worship practices or expectation of conversion, to other kinds of Christian Churches.

⁶ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1944, ¶102.

⁷ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1952, ¶102.

The Mission of the Church

Just as there is no single section that discusses the nature of the Church during this period, there is no single section that discusses the mission of the Church. Many of the Boards and Commissions at the denominational level state a purpose or aim for their respective areas, and other kinds of documents in the *Disciplines* name different kinds of tasks for the churches over the years. For instance, the worship materials for The Methodist Church include rituals for dedicating churches, laying cornerstones, etc., which make many statements about what a church is and does. They include roles for churches, such as social service inspired by spiritual motive, hallowing family life, worship, comfort, relieving distress, and much more. While there is no single clearly articulated mission statement during this period, certain structural decisions as well as specific emphases (backed by money, energy, and personnel) reveal important assumptions about the mission of the Church that were held by the denomination at the time.

A few areas in local church life became increasingly identified as central. In 1948, local churches could have as many as nineteen different committees and commissions, ranging from pastoral relations to good literature, but a Quarterly Conference could streamline the committee structure to cover four essential areas: worship and evangelism, community and world service, education, and lay activities.⁸ In 1952, the *Discipline* adds a clarifying introduction to its section on commissions:

Four phases of activity are essential to the spiritual life and ministry of every local church: evangelism, education, missions and finance. No local church however small is adequately and effectively organized unless definite provision is made for continuous participation in these four major concerns of the Church Universal.⁹

In this statement, not only are four areas identified as essential for a local church, but they are taken to be the major concerns of the entire Christian Church. The list in 1956 changes “finances” to “stewardship,” and in 1960 “Christian social concerns” is added. While social concerns are clearly important throughout this period, as evidenced in the Boards and Agencies of the Church as well as resolutions that were passed on numerous social issues, the general assumption seems to be that the building up of the Kingdom of God through social action depended first on winning people to Christ. As a result, mission and evangelism were given the highest priority.

Shortly after union, as structural matters were becoming more settled and as World War II was drawing to an end, The Methodist Church began to name a series of quadrennial emphases to focus its work. These emphases suggest the understanding that the Church had of its mission at that time. The Crusade for Christ (1944-1948), while broader in its goals than strictly mission and evangelism, gave a huge boost to both efforts. The Advance for

⁸ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1948, ¶147, 148, and 152.

⁹ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1952, ¶219.

Christ and His Church (1948-1952) brought a remarkable increase in financial donations toward mission. In 1952, the General Conference instituted an Advance Committee to ensure continual attention to mission needs by legislating a body of oversight. During this period, the focus was on reaching out to the unsaved and the unchurched.

While that effort remained a top priority in subsequent years, Methodists were becoming more and more concerned about the growing number of inactive members. It became clear that the Church's witness to those outside its bounds was compromised by its own uninvolved members. The emphasis for the 1952-1956 quadrennium turned to the local church, highlighting stewardship, youth programs, church extension, and encouraging local churches to restructure themselves according to the areas identified by the *Discipline* as essential.¹⁰ The General Conference of 1956 celebrated the gains from previous efforts, but also acknowledged that growth in numbers did not always reflect growth in faith for its members. It continued attention on the local church, this time with specific goals for "improving the quality of Christian experience, dedication, and Christlike living of all our ministers, members, and other constituents."¹¹ It also added an emphasis on higher education, stating, "By missions and evangelism we extend the frontiers of the Kingdom. By education we build the City of God. These are two phases of one magnificent enterprise."¹² Over time, then, The Methodist Church saw its task as not simply bringing people to Christ, but also nurturing them in a relationship with Christ.

The Ministry of the Church

Without a clearly stated ecclesiology, The Methodist Church did not even attempt a clearly stated theology of ministry in its *Disciplines*. Instead, its focus was on organization and practice. The basic organization of the ministry that was agreed on initially with merger remained largely intact through the existence of The Methodist Church. Bishops were consecrated, not ordained, and they served within regions, assisted by District Superintendents. Traveling preachers (also called effective ministers) were ordained first deacon, then elder. Local preachers (called supply pastors when employed by a District Superintendent to serve a charge) were necessary for meeting the needs of all the churches, and following the pattern that had developed in southern Methodism, they could receive consent to serve communion in their charges. The office of deaconess allowed women the opportunity to be consecrated for an important ministry in the church, even though the number of women pursuing this vocation was declining. These constituted the major forms of ministry in The Methodist Church. While the overall structure did not change much during this time, a few areas became the focus of

¹⁰ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1956, ¶2016.

¹¹ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1956, ¶2017.

¹² *Doctrines and Discipline* 1956, ¶2018.

discussion in ministry studies that were conducted every few years, namely, recruitment, education, and ordination. These concerns overlap with each other, and they revolve around the practice of having both effective ministers and supply pastors.

A few matters require clarification before we can understand the kinds of problems that The Methodist Church was wrestling with during this time. First, ordination and conference membership were not as tightly connected as they are now. To be a traveling preacher, one needed both ordination and conference membership. But it was possible to be ordained and not be a conference member. The *Discipline* allowed for “local deacon” and “local elder” categories, in other words, persons ordained for a specific location rather than for the whole Church. The ritual for ordination, whether for traveling ministry or local ministry, was exactly the same. The same bishop lay hands on each and pronounced the same words, “Take thou authority” But ordination did not constitute “clergy” status. According to the definitions in the glossaries of the *Disciplines*, local preachers, whether licensed to preach or ordained, were still considered laypeople. In other words, “clergy” status during this period was connected with conference membership rather than ordination.¹³ Conference membership was significant enough that starting in 1944, there was an order of worship for admission to an annual conference that was distinct from the orders of worship for ordination and that included a prayer of consecration. The educational standards were actually higher for conference membership than they were for ordination (one had to have a four-year college degree to be admitted on trial). This situation meant that in order to perform the duties required of them in their charges, supply pastors who could not meet the educational requirements of conference membership had to receive written consent of a bishop or be ordained locally.

The first ministry study was presented to the General Conference of 1944, and its primary concern was recruitment of young men going into effective ministry (ordained elder and in full connection).¹⁴ The problem seemed severe: with the pressures of two World Wars and the Great Depression affecting the number of young men available to consider ministry, and with other options for service (such as the peace movement) calling others who might consider ministry in another direction, the average age of Methodist ministers kept rising and the number of recruits kept dropping.

In order to meet the needs of a growing membership in this situation, The Methodist Church had to rely increasingly on supply pastors. The 1944 study identifies this trend as “counter to the general interest of the Church”

¹³ It is this practice that lies behind the granting of full clergy rights for women in 1956. Women could serve as supply pastors, but they could not be admitted to conference membership. Some women had already been ordained before 1956 as local deacons and local elders. What was new for them was receiving conference membership, and therefore being considered by the conference as “clergy.”

¹⁴ Murray H. Leiffer, *A Study of Retirement and Recruitment in the Methodist Ministry* (Chicago: The Methodist Publishing House, 1944).

and should be seen as a “more or less temporary expedient.” This reliance on supply pastors raised questions about education and ordination that follow in subsequent ministry studies and will be discussed below. At this point in time, and in the 1948 study, the main concern was to recruit more high-caliber young men for full-time ordained ministry. To this end, the study called parents and pastors to lift up ministerial vocation as a valued and desirable way for able young men to live out their faith. By the 1952 study of ministry, recruitment efforts were beginning to bear fruit, as the number of effective ministers stopped declining and even rose slightly.¹⁵ When the immediate numerical problem lessened, the later ministry studies started addressing some other topics that had come to light through these initial studies.

One of the reasons that the increasing number of supply pastors was seen as a temporary expedient is that the educational level of the entire nation was increasing, and the Church recognized it would take a highly educated clergy in order to provide adequate ministry for them. The first conclusion of the 1944 study reads:

The Church cannot claim spiritual and intellectual leadership in the community if it lowers its educational standards at a time when the national educational level is rising. What is needed, then, is not an abandonment of the expectation that young men entering the Methodist ministry will have both college and seminary training, but the development of a program of selection which will reach into every church in search for the ablest young men who are suited for the ministry.¹⁶

Recruiting capable seminary students was the essential first step for recruiting effective ministers. To enter the traveling ministry, a young man needed a four-year college degree and additional theological training. A seminary degree was preferred for theological education, but it was also possible to attain this goal through Course of Study. The 1944 *Discipline* established two tracks for Course of Study, a more rigorous track for those going into effective ministry and a less rigorous track for supply pastors, many of whom did not have formal instruction beyond the high school level and therefore could not meet the first basic requirement (a four-year college degree) for effective ministry.

Though the primary goal of this and subsequent ministry studies was to recruit and equip effective ministers, questions surrounding the practice of using supply pastors demanded attention. The next ministry study (1948) subdivided “supply pastor” into six groups: career, student, retired, part-time, conference members serving outside their own conferences, and members of other denominations serving Methodist churches. It recognized with

¹⁵ Leiffer, *The Methodist Ministry in 1952 and the Recruitment Needs of the Church* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1952).

¹⁶ Leiffer, 1944, 29.

gratitude the value of the service supply pastors provided.¹⁷ It further noted that the term “supply pastor” was not liked by those who served in those positions because of its connotation of inferior substitute, and that the term “local pastor” would be preferable. The study lifted up the loyalty and dedication of these ministers, and suggested that it was important to remove their irritations and unrest as much as possible.

Though the 1948 study of ministry had asked to reduce the irritations felt by supply pastors, the same General Conference (1948) that received this report acted to remove holy communion from the list of activities that unordained local preachers could perform by written consent of the bishop.¹⁸ In this year when the WCC was established and the Episcopal address set ecumenism before the General Conference as a challenge and opportunity for the whole Church, Methodists were beginning to pay closer attention to their connection to the larger Church and were assessing their own practices in that light. With this legislation, only ordained elders could provide holy communion for a congregation. Enough controversy arose about this action that the next study of ministry, published in 1952, had to cover this topic. The study raised the point that some local preachers were ordained, for instance, some were Methodist traveling elders serving as supply pastor in retirement and some were serving Methodist churches while ordained in another denomination. It also noted that about one-third were students who had been ordained deacon and were working toward ordination as elder. Still, many full-time and part-time supply pastors were not ordained, and the General Conference action reduced their privileges. In response, more supply pastors during this period began to seek ordination.

This legislation was controversial enough that it did not last long. The 1952 General Conference reconsidered the action taken at the previous General Conference, and once again unordained local preachers could be given written consent by a bishop to serve communion, although the provi-

¹⁷ Leiffer, *The Methodist Ministry in 1948: Its Composition and Training and the Recruitment Needs of the Church* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1948). Later studies stop using the categories of ministers serving outside their conferences and ministers from other denominations serving Methodist churches.

¹⁸ The Episcopal address to the General Conference of 1948 says, “The Uniting Conference adopted legislation by which unordained ministers of our Church may be authorized to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. After observing the operation of this practice for these nine years, we are now more than ever convinced that it involves us in an unsound and illogical position with respect to the meaning of the sacraments and the purpose of ordination. The granting of this authority to ministers who have not been ordained tends to remove the incentive for seeking ordination; it sets our Church at variance, at this point, from the major bodies of Protestantism, and, in effect, it nullifies our conception of an ordained ministry. We are aware that the withholding of these ministerial privileges will make less frequent the dispensing of the sacraments in congregations where they are now being administered by unordained pastors. We believe, however, that this privation will be more than compensated for by the increased significance that will be attached to the sacraments when administered by the District Superintendent or other ordained ministers.” *Daily Christian Advocate*, April 29, 1948, p. 39. See *Doctrines and Discipline* 1948, ¶308 for the final wording that was passed.

sions attached to the paragraph in the *Discipline* made it clear that the intent was to allow this privilege to those who were actively seeking but had not yet attained ordination and conference membership. Perhaps mindful that the previous quadrennium had added a new “irritation” to supply pastors, the 1952 *Discipline* also included for the first time an order of worship for licensing a person to preach.¹⁹

Methodist practices of allowing unordained local pastors to administer the sacraments and of making conference membership rather than ordination the real mark of “clergy” status looked more and more peculiar and problematic as Methodists engaged more deeply in ecumenical dialogue. The need for a theology of ministry became acute, and theologians started to work on it. In 1959, the Department of Ministerial Education of the Board of Education sponsored a convocation on “The Ministry in the Methodist Heritage,” and the papers were published in a book by that name in 1960. Franz Hildebrandt’s essay on ordination raised extensive and serious questions about Methodist practices and understanding, including not only the relationship between ordination and conference membership but also the double ordination to deacon and then elder.²⁰

In this climate, the 1964 study of ministry looked very different from its predecessors.²¹ It included but did not start with data about recruitment, placement, education, etc. Instead, it began by devoting several chapters to developing a theology of the church and its ministries, and it proposed a restructured ministry. It called the practice of ordaining laypeople as local deacons and local elders an “indefensible contradiction,” and it recommended eliminating those positions.²² It further recommended that ordination and conference membership should be simultaneous acts that were connected only to the order of elder. To handle the very real problem of supplying churches when an elder was not available, the study recommended a very different solution. Elders would receive only one ordination so that the title “deacon” could be reserved for a lay office, allowing the persons filling that office to perform all the duties of a pastor (including administering sacraments) within the bounds of a pastoral charge.²³ A layperson could also be licensed to preach and serve a charge in limited ways, but no sacramental privileges would accompany that licensing.

This report marked a significant move toward theological reflection about

¹⁹ *Doctrines and Discipline* 1952, ¶1923.

²⁰ Franz Hildebrandt, “The Meaning of Ordination in Methodism,” in *The Ministry in Methodist Heritage*, ed. by Gerald O. McCulloh (Nashville: The Board of Education of The Methodist Church, 1960), pp. 67-100.

²¹ *The Study of Ministry 1960-1964* (Nashville: The Department of Ministerial Education of The Methodist Church, 1964).

²² *Study of Ministry 1960-1964*, p. 28.

²³ The proposals in the study were not without their problems. It eliminated the “indefensible contradiction” of having an ordained laity by talking about the lay “office” of deacon. Unordained laypeople could still administer the sacraments, though, so the purpose of ordination to Word and Sacrament stated in the study is undermined.

ministry, but it was not accepted by the General Conference because a radical restructuring of ministry right before an anticipated merger with the EUB would not be wise. Instead, further studies of ministry aimed at working out an acceptable structure for the anticipated merger. The 1968 *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* added the category of “associate member” of annual conference, and lay pastors were not allowed sacramental privileges. It kept the practice of sequential ordination, and deacons were allowed to administer the sacraments if they were serving as a regularly appointed pastor of a charge.²⁴ This *Discipline* also includes paragraphs that attempt to provide theological grounding for understanding the nature of ministry and ordination.²⁵ The structure of ministry was not radically different from what Methodists were used to, but the Church had moved significantly toward reflecting on its ministry in light of the Church Universal.

Conclusion

As The Methodist Church developed its ecclesial identity, the language of Word and Sacrament of Article XIII ceased to be simply an item in a historical document and began to play a programmatic role in significant *Disciplinary* statements. Word and Sacrament also began to play an increasing role in the way ministry was structured and understood. If the mission of the Church was not simply to win people to Christ initially, but also to nurture and form them in a life with Christ, then the congregation of the faithful, gathered for Word and Sacrament, needed attention. In order to proclaim the pure Word of God well to an educated congregation, clergy needed to be theologically educated. This point became even more important as the problem of inactive members became more apparent. Theologically educated clergy were important not simply because the congregation was increasingly educated through secular institutions, but because the theological education of members was important for the very mission of the Church. Ill-equipped clergy could not equip the laity as they should. In order to administer the Sacraments “duly,” ordination needed more careful reflection and consistent application. There were conflicting values that complicated this issue. Consent was given to unordained local preachers, or ordination was given to people not considered “clergy” in Methodism, because the people wanted and needed the Sacraments. And yet, these practices could not be defended on any basis other than pragmatism, and they made The Methodist Church vulnerable to the objection that it was not really as connected to the Church Universal as it claimed to be.

Along the way, a few people suggested that the solution to this problem was that traveling elders really travel. “Itineracy” had come to mean periodically being stationed in one place after another rather than continuously riding a circuit. The principle of ordination could be maintained along with

²⁴ See ¶¶311, 322, and 349.

²⁵ See ¶¶301-304, and 309-310.

frequent administration of the Sacraments if elders traveled to go to churches that needed them for this purpose, with perhaps District Superintendents and elders in special appointments playing that role frequently. This idea never received serious attention.

The recognition that clergy needed a significant theological education also was caught between competing values. Education was desirable, but churches needed to be served even when there were not enough fully educated clergy to serve them. In addition, not everyone was able to complete the higher education requirements for ordained conference members, and the 1956 ministry study acknowledges that raising the standards for effective ministers may have actually contributed to the larger number of supply pastors who could not become elders in full connection. Two tracks of education developed for people who were serving churches, and this practice resulted in two tiers of people in ministry. Again, the practice of stationing people in congregations (so that having one's own local preacher rather than sharing a traveling elder seemed to be preferred) worked against creative solutions based on a traveling ministry that might have been considered.

The Methodist Church was not able to resolve these tensions during its existence, but it was moving clearly in the direction of making its decisions based on a strong ecclesial self-understanding. As it joined with the EUB to become The United Methodist Church, the commitment to deeper and clearer theological reflection about the nature of the Church and its ministry carried forward into the new body. While it also bequeathed to the UMC some of the problems that we still struggle with, it moved in the direction of thinking of itself theologically as "Church," and a strong ecclesial identity should provide the basis for ongoing conversations that attempt to work through the questions about ministry that remain.