

These Three Marks

*A Study Document on Ordination, Commissioning,
Licensing, and Episcopacy*

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*“You didn’t choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit,
and that your fruit should remain.”*

John 15:16

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Part One: The Ground

Why This Document Asks What It Asks

Ask a room of United Methodists what an elder is, and you will get a list. An elder went to seminary. An elder itinerates. An elder has a guaranteed appointment. An elder presides at the Table, votes in the clergy session, and holds membership in an annual conference rather than in a local church. Every item on that list is true. Not one of them is a theological statement.

Try the same question about the others and the same thing happens. A deacon is ordained but does not itinerate and usually secures their own appointment. A licensed local pastor may preside at the sacraments within the charge to which they are appointed, and may not preside outside it. A bishop is an elder who has been elected and consecrated, is paid from a general church fund rather than by a conference, and serves for life. These are accurate descriptions. They describe a personnel system.

I do not think we can go on like this. When the church is asked what it means by ordination, it reaches for language that sounds theological and turns out, under any pressure, to be a description of what we already do. We know the branding and we have lost the substance. And the loss is not

merely intellectual. Vague words about ministry are usually defended as humility, as an appropriate reticence before mystery. They function as something else. A trust that cannot say what is entrusted, to whom, or how it might be broken, is a trust no one can be held to. Imprecision at this level does not protect the mystery of ordination. It dissolves the accountability that ordination is supposed to create.

And then you open the service books, and the church is saying something else entirely.

At an ordination the bishop prays, “Father Almighty, pour upon Name the Holy Spirit, for the office and work of an elder in Christ’s holy church,” and then, with the ordinand’s hands on a Bible, says, “Full Name, take authority as an elder to preach the Word of God, to administer the Holy Sacraments and to order the life of the Church.” The Ordinal’s own introduction states, without hedging, that “ordination confers a new role in the life of the church as well as authority for leadership in specific forms of ministry,” and that “ordination itself is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit.” When a bishop presents licenses to local pastors, the church declares that “we have inquired diligently concerning him and have found him to be fit for this sacred vocation,” asks the candidate, “Do you believe you are moved by the Holy Spirit to serve as a local pastor?”, and then prays that God will “prepare him in body, mind, and spirit for his task, and continue him in your grace.” At a commissioning the bishop lays on hands and prays, “Pour out your Holy Spirit upon Full Name. Send him now to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.”

None of that is vague. It is confident, specific, and unembarrassed about divine action. The church that cannot say what an elder is turns out to be perfectly able to say it, at the altar, in the hearing of the whole conference, several times a year.

So the problem is not that we lack a theology of ordination. We have one, and it is in our prayers. The problem is that it has never been allowed to govern anything else. Our law does not follow from it, our credentialing does not reflect it, our examinations have been trimmed away from it, and our explanatory documents write as though it were not there. The oldest rule in Christian theology is that the church believes what it prays. We have arranged things so that the church prays one doctrine of ministry and administers another.

That is what this document is about, and it sets the task. The work here is less a matter of supplying something missing than of holding the prayer book open beside the *Discipline* and asking why they do not match.

There are two directions a doctrine of ministry can run, and everything depends on which one we choose.

The first runs upward from practice. It begins with the arrangements we have (three tracks, four categories of authorization, a licensing system, an itinerant career with a guaranteed appointment at the end of it) and looks for theological language adequate to bless them. This is the direction most of our recent work has run, and it is not the product of bad faith. It is what happens when a church is under pressure to explain itself quickly. But the results are predictable. Because the arrangements came first, the theology arrives as vocabulary rather than as argument: words like *covenant*, *apostolic*, and *sacred trust*, laid over structures whose actual justification is that we already have them. Ask such an account why the licensed local pastor may preside within the charge and not beyond it, and it will answer with a need. Ask why the elder alone itinerates, and it will answer with a history.

Neither answer is about God.

The second direction runs downward from God. It begins with who God is and what God does, asks what kind of creature a human being is such that God can call one, and only then asks what an office in Christ's church could be, what the several offices are, and what practices follow. On this account, the arrangements are not the foundation. They are the last thing considered, and they stand under judgment rather than under description.

This document takes the second direction, and it does so for a reason that is itself theological. In the tradition we have received from Wesley, the doctrine of God is generative. Wesley did not hold his doctrine of providence beside his doctrine of God as a compatible opinion; he held it *because* of what he believed about divine omnipresence and omniscience. He did not defend Christian perfection as a separate enthusiasm; he defended it because a ceiling on what God can do in a human life is a claim about a deficiency in God. His convictions about the human person, about liberty, about the invisible world, all radiate from one center. If that is how the rest of Methodist doctrine works, then a doctrine of orders that cannot be derived from who God is and what a human being is has no claim to be doctrine at all. It is a personnel policy with a liturgy attached.

This is not a petition, and it does not propose legislation. It is a study document, which means its work is to make certain questions impossible to keep avoiding. On the hardest of them, i.e. what the church should finally do about licensing, it will set out the honest alternatives with as much force as I can give each, and it will decline to choose. That restraint is deliberate. The choice belongs to the church, and a church that has never had the question put to it clearly cannot be said to have chosen at all.

Neither is it a departure from what United Methodists have already agreed. Two adopted teaching documents stand behind this one. *By Water and the Spirit* (1996) says that ordination is "grounded in the same baptism that commissions the general priesthood of all believers," and divides the action with care: "God calls and the church authorizes." *This Holy Mystery* (2004) says that "God calls and the church sets apart certain people for leadership," and that "the Holy Spirit gives to such people the grace and gifts they need for leadership in obedience to their call." Both sentences are exactly right, and this document is in large part an attempt to take them seriously enough to build on them.

This Holy Mystery does something else as well, which is the immediate warrant for the work that follows. Having listed everyone the *Discipline* authorizes to preside at Holy Communion, and having explained honestly that these provisions exist so that small congregations without elders can receive the sacrament, it says this:

The church continues to seek the best ways to meet this need and still uphold the historic linkage of ordination and administration of the sacraments.

That sentence was adopted by the General Conference in 2004 and has never been withdrawn. It is the church's own admission that the question is open. More than twenty years later, we have added provisions, extended authorizations, and grown more dependent on the ministry it describes, and we have not answered it. What follows is offered as one attempt at the answer the church said it was still seeking.

A word about sources. Scripture comes first, and the argument stands or falls on whether it is

reading Scripture rightly. Wesley appears throughout, not as a mascot but because his sermons and conference minutes contain the sharpest Methodist thinking about what a call is and how a church tests one. Our services of ordination, commissioning, and licensing are treated here as primary theological texts rather than as ceremony, for the reason just given. The *Book of Discipline* appears late and in a particular role: this document does not build on the *Discipline*, it examines it. Where the *Discipline*'s language is genuinely theological, and in places it is, I say so gladly. Where a paragraph that governs sacramental ministry contains no theology at all, I say that too.

Two conventions, so that nothing surprises anyone. Scripture is quoted from the World English Bible unless noted. And in quotations from seventeenth and eighteenth century writers I have modernized the spelling silently, lowered the capitals, and given British forms in their American ones, keeping the wording and the punctuation as they stand. Wesley's contemporaries wrote *Bishop* and *Prefbyter*, and there is nothing to be gained by making a reader pick through it. Documents still in use are another matter and are quoted exactly as they are printed, so where a modern ecumenical text spells a word its own way, it keeps it.

One source will recur often enough that it deserves a proper introduction rather than a footnote. In 1982, at Lima in Peru, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches adopted a text called *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the product of a study process running back to the first Faith and Order Conference of 1927 and of drafting by theologians answerable to churches that disagree with one another about nearly everything in this area: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, and more. Over a hundred churches had already returned detailed comments on an earlier draft. The result, usually called **the Lima text**, is the nearest thing the divided church has to a common statement on baptism, the Lord's Supper, and ministry, and it is cited throughout the Christian world by its own paragraph numbers.

Two things make it more than a courteous nod for United Methodists. The first is that we have already taken it up: *This Holy Mystery* quotes the Lima text on the authority of the ordained minister and builds on it, which makes its language part of what this church has adopted. The second is simply that it is good, and on several of the questions in this document it says plainly and without embarrassment what we have been reluctant to say for ourselves. Anyone who wants to test the claim that our vagueness about ordination is ecumenical caution should read it. A convergence text answerable to Rome and to Geneva at once turns out to be considerably less shy than we are.

I will also say, because it is true and because it shapes how I read it, that I do not come to that document as a stranger. Geoffrey Wainwright, who worked on it and was proud of it and of its ecumenical claims, was my teacher. I have tried to engage it here with the gratitude that is owed, which includes disagreeing with it in the places where I think our tradition has something to add.

One last thing, since it shapes the tone of everything after it. The people who built the system I am about to examine were trying to solve real problems, and mostly they solved them. Congregations that would have gone without the sacrament received it. Faithful people who could not have gone to seminary were given a way to answer a call. The critique here is not aimed at their motives or their competence. It is aimed at what happens to a church that solves problems for fifty years without ever going back to ask what its solutions mean. That is a failure of theological nerve, and it is the more painful because the resources for repairing it have been in our hands the whole time.

The God Who Calls

Everything in this document descends from a single claim about God. There are two ways of choosing a person, and Scripture is unusually insistent about which one God uses.

The first is **selection**. To select is to choose on account of attributes, to prefer someone because of what they are. We select constantly, and rightly: we hire the strongest candidate, we pick the sound fruit, we admire what is fitting and able. Selection sorts by qualities and settles on the one that fits. There is nothing wrong with it in its place. But notice what it makes the bond depend on. In selection, the worth of the relation rests on the qualifications of the parties, and if the qualifications were different the choice would fall elsewhere.

The second is **election**, in the old theological sense of the word rather than the political one. To elect is to choose in a way that precedes attributes, binding oneself first and letting the relationship do its work afterward. Election does not sort. It sets its heart, and then it goes about making the beloved into what the love requires.

The God of Scripture loves and chooses by election, and goes out of the way to say so. When God chooses Israel, the reasons are named precisely in order to be ruled out: “The LORD didn’t set his love on you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples: but because the LORD loves you” (Deuteronomy 7:7–8). The reasoning closes on itself. They were loved because they were loved, and that closed circle is grace.

The pattern holds wherever God chooses a person for a work. When Samuel is sent to anoint a king and does what any of us would do, looking at the tall and impressive eldest son, he is stopped with a sentence that could stand as the motto of this whole document: “Don’t look on his face, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him: for I see not as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). One after another the qualified sons are passed over, until someone remembers the youngest, out with the sheep, not thought worth calling in from the field. He is the one. Paul makes the same point about the church as a whole: “God chose the foolish things of the world that he might put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong... that no flesh should boast before God” (1 Corinthians 1:27–29).

Wesley knew this about God and said it in exactly the place where it matters for us. Arguing about who may preach, and tracing the offices of priest and prophet back through Israel’s history, he observed that the priesthood ran by birth while prophecy did not, and that prophets turned up in the wrong tribes and the wrong families with some regularity. His explanation was one clause long: “For in this respect God always asserted his right to send by whom he would send.” That is a statement about God before it is a statement about ministry. The freedom to send is God’s own, and it is not surrendered to any system that the church may build for recognizing the sent.

Our own *Discipline*, to its credit, says something very like this: “God’s call has many manifestations, and the Church cannot structure a single test of authenticity” (§ 304.1). That sentence is true and it is costly, and we will need to ask later whether the paragraphs that follow it behave as though it were true.

God does not call the qualified; God qualifies the called

Now the move on which everything else depends.

If God chose ministers by selection, the order of events would be obvious: a person would first become the kind of person fit for the work, and God would then choose them for it. Qualification would precede call. This is, I think, how most of our processes are actually built, and it is worth noticing how natural it feels.

It is not how the call narratives run. In them the order is reversed, and reversed so consistently that the reversal is plainly the point.

Moses is called and answers, “I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.” God does not dispute the assessment. God says, “Who made man’s mouth?... Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall speak” (Exodus 4:10–12). Gideon is called and answers, “my family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.” God does not offer a second opinion about the family. God says, “Surely I will be with you” (Judges 6:15–16). Isaiah sees the LORD and cries out that he is a man of unclean lips, and the seraph does not argue; the seraph brings a coal from the altar and touches his mouth with it. Only then, with the lips that were unclean and have been made clean, does he hear “Whom shall I send?” and answer, “Here I am. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:5–8).

Jeremiah gives us the form entire, and it is worth reading as a whole:

“Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you. Before you came out of the womb, I sanctified you. I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord LORD! Behold, I don’t know how to speak; for I am a child.” But the LORD said to me, “Don’t say, ‘I am a child;’ for to whoever I shall send you, you shall go, and whatever I shall command you, you shall speak. Don’t be afraid because of them; for I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD. Then the LORD stretched out his hand, and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.” (Jeremiah 1:5–9)

Four movements, in order. God calls, and the call reaches back before the man existed, which forecloses any possibility that it rests on what he has become. The called man protests, and his protest is an attribute test: *I am a child, I cannot speak, I am not the sort of person this work requires*. God overrules the protest without denying the facts of it. And then God touches his mouth, and what was true a moment ago is no longer true. The words are in him because God put them there.

That fourth movement is the one our theology of ordination has lost. It is not encouragement. God does not tell Jeremiah that he has hidden gifts, or that he will grow into the work, or that his sense of inadequacy is a good sign. God supplies what was missing. The touch is the giving of the very capacity the man correctly said he lacked.

So the sentence I would put at the center of any Methodist theology of ordination is this: **God does not call the qualified. God qualifies the called.**

This is not a pious formula. It is a claim about the direction in which divine action runs, and it has immediate consequences. If the call itself confers the fitness for the work, then fitness is evidence of the call rather than a precondition of it, and everything the church does in examining a candidate is a matter of reading evidence rather than administering a gate. It means that a church which sorts

candidates primarily by attributes they brought with them has arranged its life around selection while confessing a God who elects. And it means that the church's own act in ordaining is not the conferral of a status on someone who has met a standard. It is the church recognizing a work God has begun, and asking God to continue it.

Two guardrails belong here, or the claim will be heard as something it is not.

The first: election is free in its ground and exacting in its end. God's choosing owes nothing to merit, and God chooses *for* something: for holiness, for covenant, for a work. Israel is elected without qualification and held to account without mercy. To say that the ground of a call is grace is to relocate judgment, not to abolish it. The test moves from the front of the process to the fruit of it, and, as we will see when we come to Wesley's three marks, a fruit test is considerably more demanding than a credential.

The second: none of this makes preparation unimportant. Isaiah's lips had to be touched, and Jeremiah's mouth had to be filled, and neither man was left as he was found. The question is never whether formation matters. The question is whether formation is understood as the shaping of someone God has called, or as the accumulation of the attributes that qualify a person to be considered. Those two things can look identical from outside and are opposite in their theology.

The Creature Who Is Called

A call requires someone who can be called. That sounds obvious, and it is precisely the step our discussions of ministry skip. We talk a great deal about who should be ordained and almost never about what a human being is such that God addresses one at all. But an account of ordination that has no anthropology under it will drift, inevitably, toward describing ministers as functionaries with permissions, because it has never said what kind of creature is standing there.

Wesley's answer is more specific than the pieties that usually occupy this ground. Preaching on the redemption of the whole creation, he asked what the image of God in humanity actually consists of, and answered: "In these, in the power of self-motion, understanding, will, and liberty, the natural image of God consisted." The human person images God in being able to move oneself, to understand, to will, and to be free. Elsewhere, examining what we mean by liberty, he called it "a power of self-determination," and he was careful about its extent: it does not govern every thought and imagination that crosses the mind, but it does govern our words and our actions in general.

This is not a minor piece of Wesley's system. It is the piece on which he refused predestination, defended the possibility of holiness, and made sense of grace as something a person could resist or receive. And it descends directly from his doctrine of God. Because God is free Spirit, the creature made in God's image is free; because God is not compelled, the creature is not a mechanism. Take liberty out of Wesley's anthropology and his entire soteriology collapses.

Now put that anthropology under the call narratives, and see what it yields.

A human being, on this account, is a creature capable of being addressed and capable of answering. Not merely used, since God can use anything, and Scripture is happy to say that God uses ravens and donkeys and the weather. To be addressed is different. It is to be spoken to as one who

can say “Here I am,” or can decline to. When God calls Moses and Moses argues, the arguing is not an interruption of the call; it is evidence that the creature God has called is the kind of creature God made. When Jeremiah protests, God overrules him and does not override him. He goes.

This gives us a first, load-bearing conclusion. The capacity to be called belongs to human beings as such, by creation. It is not conferred by education, by a committee, or by an order of ministry. Whatever ordination is, it cannot be the thing that makes a person addressable by God, because that was true of them already.

Baptism and the ministry of all Christians

To creation Scripture adds a second event, and it is the one our tradition has taught us to treat as decisive.

In baptism a person is incorporated into the body of Christ and receives, with that incorporation, a share in Christ’s own ministry. Our own teaching document on baptism says it with a precision worth quoting exactly: “Through baptism, God calls and commissions persons to the general ministry of all Christian believers.” And then, having said that, *By Water and the Spirit* takes the further step that most treatments of ministry never take. It says that when God calls some from within that general ministry to representative ministry, “their ordination to Word, Sacrament, and Order... is grounded in the same baptism that commissions the general priesthood of all believers.”

The same baptism. Not a higher initiation, not a second and superior grace, not an entry into a class of Christian that the baptized may aspire to. The ordained minister’s authorization to stand at the font is grounded in the water they themselves were washed in.

The *Discipline* opens its account of ministry with the ministry of all Christians (§§ 126–131), and the sequence is exactly right: the whole church receives the call, and set-apart ministry is named afterward, as something that happens within that call rather than above it. But read on and watch what the ministry of the laity comes to mean in practice. It becomes a preamble. It becomes the paragraph you affirm before getting to the paragraphs that matter, which are about credentials, categories, and appointments. Most damagingly, it becomes a pipeline: lay ministry valued as the soil out of which clergy grow, so that the layperson who will never be ordained and has led this congregation’s work for thirty years appears in our theology only as someone who did not become something else.

If baptism is what *By Water and the Spirit* says it is, that is an error about God, not merely a failure of appreciation. The baptized person has been called and commissioned. Their ministry is not preparation for ministry. It is ministry, and the church owes it the same seriousness of formation, accountability, and support that it gives to the ministry of the ordained. That claim has real consequences, and we will return to it when we ask what the annual conference is for.

Two clarifications keep this from collapsing into a flatness that helps no one.

First, saying that all the baptized share Christ’s ministry does not mean that all ministries are the same ministry. Paul’s insistence in 1 Corinthians 12 is the opposite: one Spirit, and a genuine diversity of gifts and services and workings, given “to each one... for the profit of all.” A body whose parts are interchangeable is not a body. The question this document has to answer is what

kind of difference the offices are, given that they are not differences of rank, of Christian standing, or of proximity to God.

Second, and more sharply: if the ministry of the baptized is real ministry, then no office can be justified merely by the work it does. Laypeople preach, teach, counsel, visit prisoners, feed the hungry, lead worship, plant churches, and carry consecrated bread to those who could not come. If an account of the elder or the deacon rests on a list of activities, it will not survive contact with a well-organized congregation, because the laity are already doing nearly everything on the list. Whatever distinguishes the offices has to be sought somewhere other than in the tasks. It has to be sought in what God is doing.

What an Office Is

Our *Discipline* begins its account of ordination with a sentence that is better than anything built on it: “Ordination to this ministry is a gift from God to the church” (§ 303.1). I want to take that sentence at face value and ask what would follow if we meant it.

A gift from God to the church. Not a status granted by the church to a person who earned it. Not a permission the institution issues and can adjust as staffing requires. A gift, given by God, and given to the church rather than to the one ordained. If that is what ordination is, then three familiar ways of construing an office are ruled out before we begin.

An office is not a **rank**. Nothing in Scripture supports the notion that ordination moves a person closer to God, and Wesley, who spent his life insisting that the plainest believer might know God as fully as any priest, would have regarded the suggestion as a species of blasphemy. Whatever difference an office makes, it makes no difference to the standing of the person before God.

An office is not an **employment class**. This is our most common confusion, and the one that has quietly organized our conversations for decades. When we ask what distinguishes an elder and answer with security of appointment, or compensation floors, or conference membership, we are not doing theology badly; we are not doing theology at all. Those are the terms of an employment relationship. They may be good terms or bad ones, but they cannot bear the weight of an office.

An office is not a **credential tier**. A credential certifies that a person has met a standard. If ordination is essentially a credential, then the orders are ranked by the length of the preparation behind them, and the whole system becomes a ladder with the seminary at the top. We will see in Part Two how nearly we have built exactly this, and how much theological damage it has done.

What, then, is it?

An office in Christ’s church is a distinct and real participation in a distinct mode of Christ’s own continuing ministry, given by God to the church, exercised in the church’s name, and entrusted to particular persons whom God has called and the church has recognized. Christ is the one who serves, who teaches and feeds, who oversees the flock. He has not withdrawn from these; he continues them. And he continues them in part by giving the church people through whom he does them, so that a congregation encountering its deacon or its elder is encountering something Christ is doing, not merely something the denomination has arranged.

Everything in Part Two is an attempt to say, for each office, what mode of Christ's ministry it participates in.

Does ordination effect something, or recognize something?

This is the question the church has been avoiding, and the avoidance has a shape worth naming. Recent official language has been careful to deny that ordination effects an ontological change in the person, while declining to say what it does instead. The denial is understandable. Behind it stands a long argument with other traditions about indelible character, and a proper Protestant nervousness about clergy who imagine themselves to be a different species of Christian. But a denial is not a doctrine. If we tell the church only what ordination is not, we should not be surprised when the church concludes that it is nothing in particular, and starts explaining it by salary and appointment instead.

I think the question is malformed, and that our own tradition has the resources to say so.

Return to the pattern in the call narratives. God calls, and the calling is what makes the called one fit (the coal on the lips, the words put into the mouth). If that is how God works, then by the time the church acts, God has already been acting, and the church's act cannot be the origin of anything. In that sense ordination *recognizes*: it declares what God has done and is doing, and it can be wrong, which is why the examination matters. But the church's act is not therefore an empty announcement, because God has not stopped working. The church ordains by praying, and by laying on hands, and asking God to give what the office requires is not a formality attached to the recognition. It is the church participating in the same qualifying work that the call began.

So ordination effects and recognizes, and the two are not in competition. It recognizes a call that God made effective before the church arrived, and it is itself an occasion of God's continuing to make that call effective.

We are not the first to notice this, and we are not out on a limb in saying it. The Lima text holds both halves together without any visible embarrassment, and it does so as a document answerable to churches that agree about very little else in this area.

Its definition puts them together: "Properly speaking, then, ordination denotes an action by God and the community by which the ordained are strengthened by the Spirit for their task and are upheld by the acknowledgment and prayers of the congregation." An action by God *and* the community. The document then describes the act of ordination as three things at once, "invocation of the Holy Spirit (epiklesis); sacramental sign; acknowledgment of gifts and commitment," and it is worth seeing how far the middle term goes: the church ordains "in confidence that God, being faithful to his promise in Christ, enters sacramentally into contingent, historical forms of human relationship and uses them for his purpose," so that ordination is "a sign performed in faith that the spiritual relationship signified is present in, with and through the words spoken, the gestures made and the forms employed."

That is not the language of a church too shy to say whether anything happens.

Note also what the Lima text says is established: not a quality inside the ordinand but "the new relation which is established between this minister and the local Christian community and, by

intention, the Church universal.” And it is careful about whose the gift is. Authority “is not to be understood as the possession of the ordained person but as a gift for the continuing edification of the body in and for which the minister has been ordained.”

United Methodists have adopted these sentences. We have simply not built anything on them.

And we already behave as though we believed it. The *Discipline* provides that “in keeping with ancient Christian teaching and our Wesleyan tradition, we affirm that ordination for the same, or equivalent order, is not repeatable” (§ 303.5). Consider what that rule implies. Nobody declines to repeat a mere announcement. If ordination were only the church’s public acknowledgment of a fact, there would be no reason not to acknowledge the fact again. We renew our baptismal vows, we reaffirm our covenants, we say true things twice all the time. We do not re-ordain because we believe that something was done which does not need doing again. Our practice has been confessing an effective ordination while our official language has been carefully declining to.

The Lima text has the same rule and gives the reason ours withholds. It says that ordination is never repeated “in recognition of the God-given charism of ministry.” Our *Discipline* grounds the rule in ancient teaching and our own tradition, which is to say in custom. Lima grounds it in the thing itself. Something was given by God, and you do not ask God for it twice.

I do not think we should be embarrassed about this, and I do not think we need scholastic machinery to say it. The realism here does not require a metaphysical substance to be altered in the ordinand. It requires only what Wesley believed about God: that God’s word does what it says. When God tells Jeremiah “I have put my words in your mouth,” the words are there. When the church prays for the Holy Spirit to make a person a faithful elder in Christ’s church, either that prayer is answered or our whole doctrine of prayer is a courtesy. What is effected is not a change in the person’s nature or worth. It is a real relation: this person now stands in the church, and before God, as one through whom Christ does a particular thing, and they will stand there whether or not they are appointed, whether or not they are paid, and whether or not they are any good at it.

Why this is the ground of accountability

Which brings me to the reason a study document should care about any of this.

If ordination is a vague honor, then unfaithfulness in office is a personnel matter, handled by whatever process the institution finds convenient, with the vocabulary of covenant deployed mainly to encourage cooperation. This is roughly where we are. Our language about ministry has become so general that it can be affirmed by everyone and violated by anyone, and complaint processes carry a weight that theology no longer carries.

If ordination is what I have described, accountability follows without effort. Something was given, and it was given for the church rather than to the minister. There is therefore a thing to be faithful to, and its content is specifiable: this mode of Christ’s ministry, exercised in this church, in this covenant, before this God. An elder who will not preside, a deacon who will not lead the church toward the world, a bishop who will not oversee, are not underperforming employees. They are failing to be what the church prayed they would be made.

Vagueness has been defended among us as reverence. Its practical effect is the opposite: it protects

no mystery and it shields the unfaithful, because you cannot hold a person to a trust whose content the church has never been willing to state.

Part Two: The Offices and the Practices

Part One asked what God is doing when God calls, and what an office in Christ's church is. Part Two takes each of our offices and each of the practices attached to them and asks the same question of it. Every section is in three movements. The Principle states what I believe the church should be able to say. The Background gives the reasons, from Scripture, from Wesley, from our own history, and from what we pray. The Practice says what would follow.

One rule governs the Principles. None of them may be satisfied by pointing at what the Discipline currently authorizes. A principle that reads "an elder or a person authorized under the provisions of the Book of Discipline" has not stated a principle; it has pointed at a rule and called it a doctrine. Every Principle below is meant to be answerable to God rather than to our own legislation, which means that any of them could turn out to convict our legislation. Several do.

The Deacon

Principle

The deacon shares in Christ's own ministry of service, and is ordained to embody and to focus, in the church's life, the servanthood to which every baptized Christian is called.

Background

Start where our own ordination prayer starts. The bishop, with hands extended over those to be ordained deacon, thanks God "that in your great love you sent Jesus Christ to take the form of a servant, becoming obedient even to death on the cross," and prays, "Give them a share in the ministry of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve."

That prayer assumes something the church rarely says outright. Service is not a lesser activity that the church assigns to people who will not be doing the important things. Service is what God does. The Son takes the form of a servant, and the church's diaconate exists because that form of divine action continues among us and God gives the church people through whom it continues. A deacon is not a person who has been given the humbler tasks. A deacon is a person through whom Christ goes on washing feet.

Scripture gives the office both its shape and its name. When the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked, the twelve told the community to "select from among you... seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business," and the community chose them and set them before the apostles, "and when they had prayed, they laid

their hands on them” (Acts 6:3–6). The need was material and the remedy was an office, chosen by the congregation and sealed with prayer and hands. Paul greets a church “with the overseers and servants,” *episkopoi kai diakonoi*, as two recognized groups in a single line (Philippians 1:1). And he commends “Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant of the assembly that is at Cenchreae,” asking that she be received and assisted, “for she herself also has been a helper of many, and of my own self” (Romans 16:1–2). The word behind “servant” there is the same word. Our own historic rite for consecrating deaconesses knew it, and prayed to the God “who didst call Phoebe and Dorcas into the service of thy Church.”

That settles the first question and raises the second. If servanthood belongs to the whole baptized people, and it plainly does, then what makes the deacon’s servanthood an office rather than an intensity? The layperson who has run this congregation’s food ministry for twenty years is not doing something less than diaconal.

Our *Discipline* has the right word for the answer, and then does not do much with it. It says the church “instituted an order of ordained ministers to **personify or focus** the servanthood to which all Christians are called” (§ 305). The Lima text says the same thing about ordained ministry generally: the ordained fulfill these functions “in a representative way, providing the focus for the unity of the life and witness of the community,” and it is explicit that the tasks “are not exercised by the ordained ministry in an exclusive way.”

Representative, not exclusive. That is the category we have been missing, and it does the work. The deacon does not perform the church’s servanthood on the church’s behalf, the way a delegate votes so that you do not have to. The deacon’s ordination makes visible, and holds before the congregation, something that is already true of all of them and is easily forgotten by all of them. A congregation with a deacon has a standing reminder in its own leadership that the gospel sends people outward, and it has someone whose particular charge is to make sure the reminder is obeyed. That is why the ministry is described as standing at the intersection of church and world, interpreting each to the other. The deacon is where the congregation’s attention is deliberately turned outward and kept there.

This also explains why a diaconate confined to the sanctuary has gone wrong. The Lima text names the failure precisely and says it happens in many churches: “the function of deacons has been reduced to an assistant role in the celebration of the liturgy: they have ceased to fulfill any function with regard to the diaconal witness of the Church.” A deacon whose whole ministry is inside the building is not a deacon who is being modest. Something the church intended has stopped happening.

Two honest difficulties belong here rather than in a footnote.

The first is that the questions I have just answered have not been settled ecumenically, and the churches know it. The Lima text lists them without pretending: “there is today considerable uncertainty about the need, the rationale, the status and the functions of deacons. In what sense can the diaconate be considered part of the ordained ministry? What is it that distinguishes it from other ministries in the Church? Why should deacons be ordained while these other ministries do not receive ordination?” Anyone who tells you the theology of the diaconate is obvious has not read the ecumenical literature. What I have offered is an answer, and it is our own church’s answer

developed, but it is offered into a genuinely open conversation.

The second is closer to home. In 2020 the church authorized deacons to preside at the sacraments when it is contextually appropriate, and in 2024 that authorization stands (§ 328). I am not arguing against it here. I am pointing out that we made a significant sacramental change without publicly revisiting the theology that had previously reserved presidency to elders, and that our own teaching document on Holy Communion, adopted in 2004 and still in force, describes deacons as “assisting the elders in the administration of the sacraments” and nothing more. Our practice moved and our teaching did not follow. This is exactly the pattern this document exists to name, and it should be uncomfortable that one of the clearest instances of it is a change many of us welcomed.

The order of deacons in its present form is younger than most United Methodists assume, and the history is worth having, because the church made real gains in it and paid a price nobody costed.

Before 1996 there was no permanent order of deacons among us. There was a *transitional* diaconate, a step people passed through on the way to elder’s orders. There was the **diaconal minister**, a lay office created in the 1970s, consecrated rather than ordained, which by 1992 the *Discipline* mentions well over a hundred times. And there were deaconesses, whose office is older than either.

In 1996 the General Conference created the deacon in full connection, and gave the diaconate what it had never had in American Methodism: a permanent order of its own, entered by ordination, to a lifetime ministry of Word and Service. That was a genuine achievement, and the diaconal minister office began to wind down as it took hold; the references thin from one hundred sixty-nine in the 1992 *Discipline* to eighty-two in 1996 and fifty-six by 2004.

The price is visible only if you know what the diaconate had been doing for two centuries. It had been **the door through which ministers who were not going to itinerate could be ordained**. Local preachers were ordained local deacons from 1789, and local deacons could become local elders from 1813, until 1976 closed that road. Associate members could still be ordained as deacons after 1976; the 1992 *Discipline* provides that “associate members are eligible for ordination as deacons but may not be ordained elders unless they qualify through probationary membership.” That provision is simply absent from the *Discipline* of 1996 and every one since.

So two routes to ordination for ministers rooted in a place were closed twenty years apart, in 1976 and in 1996, and each closing was a side effect of a reform aimed at something else. **The reform that finally gave deacons an order of their own removed the last way a non-itinerant minister could be ordained among us**. Nobody appears to have intended that, and no theological account of it survives.

Practice

Every congregation served by a deacon should be able to say, without consulting the *Discipline*, what their deacon is for. If the only available answer is a list of things the deacon helps with, the congregation has a staff member rather than an order.

Deacons should be deployed where the church meets the world, and appointed with that in view. When a deacon’s work drifts entirely inside the congregation’s own life, the annual conference and the cabinet should treat that as a matter to be examined, not as a convenience.

The church should give a public theological account of diaconal presidency at the sacraments, and it should begin by reading its own paragraph. ¶ 328 authorizes it twice, in two different registers. The first is qualified: deacons give leadership “in assisting the elders in administering the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, **or in presiding at the celebration of the sacraments when contextually appropriate.**” The second is not qualified at all: “**For the sake of extending the mission and ministry of the church and offering the means of grace to the world, the deacon is authorized to preside at the celebration of the sacraments.** Presiding at the celebration of the sacraments involves taking responsibility to lead the gathered community in celebrating baptism and Holy Communion.”

Three things in that paragraph deserve the church’s attention.

The rationale given is missional. Sacramental authority is extended “for the sake of extending the mission and ministry of the church and offering the means of grace to the world.” That is need-based reasoning, and it is the same reasoning that has always justified licensing. The church has now used it to extend presidency to an order of ministry, which means the argument from missional need is no longer something we apply only to provisional arrangements. If it is a good enough reason here, the church should say what work it can and cannot do elsewhere.

The authorization carries no boundary. A licensed local pastor may preside “within and while appointed to a particular charge” (¶ 317.1). A deacon’s authorization in ¶ 328 has no such limit; the only softening is the phrase “when contextually appropriate,” which is a matter of judgment rather than jurisdiction. So the church now permits an ordained deacon, who does not pastor the congregation, to preside more freely than a licensed pastor who does. That may be right. It has not been explained, and the two paragraphs have never been read against each other in public.

And the *Discipline* still says something else, in the paragraph that defines the office. ¶ 303.2 names those who are ordained deacon as persons who “respond to God’s call to lead in service, word, compassion, and justice and equip others for this ministry through teaching, proclamation, and worship and **who assist elders in the administration of the sacraments.**” That clause is essentially unchanged from 1996 and 2004, when assisting was the whole of it. The change was written into ¶ 328 and the defining paragraph was never conformed, so the 2024 *Discipline* defines a deacon as one who assists elders with the sacraments and, twenty-five paragraphs later, authorizes the same person to preside at them.

And our teaching still says something else. *This Holy Mystery*, adopted in 2004 and never withdrawn, describes the deacon’s sacramental role as “assisting the elder in serving the Communion elements” and setting the table, and its principle for presidency names elders and those authorized under the *Discipline*. Our practice has moved and our teaching has not followed. Whatever the church decides, the present arrangement, in which the paragraph authorizes one thing and the teaching document describes another, is the least defensible of the available positions.

There is a further question the church should be willing to face rather than route around. The ecumenical tradition ties presidency at the table to oversight of the community: the one who presides is the one who gathers, teaches, and watches over this people. If that link holds, then extending presidency to deacons is a claim about the deacon’s relation to the gathered community, and the church should make it. If the link does not hold, then the church has changed its doctrine of presidency,

and should say so plainly rather than by implication in a paragraph about diaconal leadership.

And in every service of Word and Table, the deacon's liturgical role should be what our own Ordinal and Book of Worship describe: receiving the gifts, setting the table, and dismissing the people to serve. Those actions are a sermon about what the congregation is for, and they are wasted when they are treated as choreography.

The Elder

Principle

The elder shares in Christ's ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order, gathering a people around font and table and ordering their common life so that the gathering continues. The elder is ordained not to a congregation but to the whole connection, and shares with every other elder in the oversight of the church's life and of one another.

Background

Ask an elder what they are and you will usually get the three words: Word, Sacrament, and Order. Ask what the three words mean together and the answer generally becomes a list of duties, as though ordination were a job description with three headings.

They are not three jobs. They are one action described from three sides. Christ gathers a people to himself by his Word, he sustains them at his table, and he orders their life so that the gathering holds. An elder is a person through whom that one action goes on happening in a particular place. The preaching is for the sake of the gathering, the sacraments are how the gathered are fed, and the ordering exists so that next week there is still a congregation to preach to and feed. Take away any one of the three and the other two stop making sense. An elder who preaches and will not administer, or administers and will not order, has not chosen a specialty. They have taken up a third of an office.

Our own examination of elders says this better than our *Discipline* does, and it says one thing more that we have almost entirely forgotten. The bishop tells the candidates that an elder is called to preach and teach the Word, to administer the sacraments, to lead the people in worship and prayer, to lead persons to faith, and then this: **“to exercise pastoral supervision, to order the life of the congregation and the connection.”**

And the connection. Every elder in The United Methodist Church has stood before a bishop and an annual conference and affirmed a rule of life that includes ordering the life of the connection, and has then gone out into a ministry in which “ordering the connection” is understood to be someone else's job, belonging to district superintendents and bishops and paid staff. We have taken a charge given to the whole order and assigned it to a few officers.

This is where the elder's genuine distinctive lies, and it is not any of the three things usually named.

It is not itineracy. Full-time local pastors are appointed by the bishop and moved by the cabinet,

and deacons are ordained and do not itinerate in the elder's sense at all. Whatever itineracy sorts, it does not sort ordained from unordained.

It is not security of appointment, and it is not a seminary degree, for reasons taken up in later sections.

It is the relation to the whole conference. An elder is not ordained to a congregation. An elder is received into an order and into membership of an annual conference, and from that moment the other churches of that conference are not merely neighbors in ministry. They are, every one of them, places this person may be sent. The elder is ordered to the whole, and is therefore sendable to any part of it. That is a genuinely different way of belonging to a church than any other in our system, and it is the thing itineracy expresses rather than the thing itineracy creates.

Once that is in view, the neglected half of the examination recovers its sense. If the elder belongs to the whole conference, then the oversight of the conference's life is not an administrative function delegated upward. It is the order's own work, exercised together. The Lima text puts three dimensions of ordained ministry side by side and insists all three are needed: it should be **personal**, **collegial**, and **communal**, and it asks each church to "ask itself in what way its exercise of the ordained ministry has suffered in the course of history." For United Methodists the answer is not in much doubt. Our personal dimension is robust and our collegial dimension has thinned into administration. We have bishops and superintendents who oversee, and an order of elders that meets.

The word for what the order is meant to do is one we already own. Wesley's definition of a Methodist society, printed among our doctrinal standards, is "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united 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." That is what an order of elders is: not a professional association with worship attached, but a company of people who have agreed to watch over one another in love, in the oldest and most exacting Methodist sense of the phrase, which never meant encouragement alone.

I owe this way of putting it to the Rev. Dr. Thomas Martin of First United Methodist Church in LaGrange, Georgia, who asked in conversation what it would mean for an elder, in ordering the life of the church, to think past the local congregation and into the realm of superintendency: not superintendency as a district superintendent's administrative work, but elders actually superintending and looking over one another in love. That is the question this section is trying to answer.

Three supports for this, the first and weightiest from Scripture.

The New Testament does not describe our arrangements, and this document has no interest in pretending that it does. But on the one point at issue here it is unusually direct. Paul, at Miletus, "sent to Ephesus, and called to himself **the elders** of the assembly," and then told those same men, "Take heed, therefore, to yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to shepherd the assembly of the Lord and God which he purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:17, 28). The elders are the overseers. Paul writes to Titus to "appoint **elders** in every city," and in the next breath gives the qualifications of "the **overseer**" (Titus 1:5-7), moving between the words without explanation because no explanation was needed.

And 1 Peter puts the whole of this section into four verses:

“I exhort **the elders** among you, as **a fellow elder**, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ... Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, **exercising the oversight**, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, not for dishonest gain, but willingly; neither as **lording it over** those entrusted to you, but making yourselves examples to the flock. When the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the crown of glory that doesn’t fade away.” (1 Peter 5:1–4)

An apostle calls himself a fellow elder. He charges elders, in the plural, to exercise oversight. He tells them the danger of the work is not neglect but domination. That is the collegial dimension, presbyteral oversight, and the warning against lording it over the flock, all in one paragraph, and all of it addressed to elders rather than to a separate order above them.

Wesley held, and said so in writing when he acted on it, that **“bishops and presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain.”** If that is true, then oversight is not something the presbyterate lacks and the episcopate supplies. It is something the whole order possesses, which the church focuses in particular people for the sake of good order. A Methodist theology of episkopē that begins anywhere else has left Wesley behind on the one point where he was most explicit.

And the ecumenical conversation has been waiting on precisely this question. The Lima text observes that “the relation of the presbyterate to the episcopal ministry has been discussed throughout the centuries, and **the degree of the presbyter’s participation in the episcopal ministry is still for many an unresolved question of far-reaching ecumenical importance.**” United Methodists are unusually placed to say something useful here, because our bishops are elders, our orders are conference-shaped, and our founder thought the two were the same order. We have been sitting on an answer and treating it as an embarrassment.

Practice

Orders of elders should do what the *Discipline* says an order is for, which includes holding its members accountable (§ 307), and should treat that as the practice of oversight rather than as a program. An order that meets for a speaker and a meal, and never once looks at how its members are actually doing in ministry, is not exercising the collegial dimension of the office. It is having lunch.

The charge to “order the life of the congregation **and the connection**” should be taught to candidates as a real obligation and examined as one. An elder who has no working relationship to the wider conference is not simply under-involved; they are living at odds with the vows they made.

Superintendency should be understood, and where possible practiced, as the order’s work focused in particular officers rather than as a separate class of activity performed upon the order. District superintendents and bishops are not the church’s oversight. They are its concentration.

And when the church asks what distinguishes an elder, the answer given should be the one that is true: not a salary floor, not security of appointment, not a degree, but a covenant with the whole conference and a share in the care of the whole church.

The Bishop

Principle

A bishop is an elder set apart to focus and to represent the oversight that belongs to the whole order of elders, for the unity of the church and the ordering of its mission. The office rests on the church's consent and remains answerable to it.

Background

Our *Discipline* says that the episcopacy is “a special ministry, not a separate order” (§ 402). That sentence has a long Methodist pedigree, and I want to defend it before I say why our practice makes it hard to believe.

The pedigree begins with Wesley, who wrote plainly what he thought and then acted on it. “Lord King’s *Account of the Primitive Church* convinced me many years ago,” he told the American Methodists in 1784, **“that Bishops and Presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain.”** On that basis he appointed Coke and Asbury not as bishops but as **Superintendents**, and used the same word two years later. When Asbury accepted the title bishop, Wesley’s response was not measured:

“I study to be little: you study to be great. I creep: you strut along... **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!”

It matters what Wesley was objecting to. He was not objecting to oversight; he exercised more of it than any Methodist bishop since. He was objecting to greatness, to title, and to a man’s appetite for being something. “I study to be little: you study to be great” is a criticism of the social form of an office, not of the work.

Wesley names a book as the thing that changed his mind, and almost no United Methodist has read it. Peter King’s *Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church* appeared in 1691 and set out to establish what the church of the first three centuries actually looked like. Its argument about bishops turns on a distinction our debates have lost: the difference between **degree** and **order**. King’s thesis is that presbyters “were different from the Bishops *in gradu*, or in degree; but yet... were equal to them *in Ordine*, or in Order.”

His definition of a presbyter states the whole case in a sentence:

“A Person in Holy Orders, having thereby an inherent Right to perform the whole Office of a Bishop; but being possessed of no Place or Parish, not actually discharging it, without the Permission and Consent of the Bishop of a Place or Parish.”

Two things are being held apart there. The presbyter possesses, by his ordination, an inherent right to do everything a bishop does. What he does not possess is a *place*. And in the church King is describing, authority to act attaches to holding the cure of a particular congregation, so a man with the right but not the place exercises it only where the one who holds the place permits.

King illustrates this with the arrangement his readers lived under, and it needs one word explained.

In the English church, the pastoral charge of a parish is called the **cure of souls**, and one clergyman holds it. Others may serve in that parish, and they are in exactly the same holy orders as the man who holds it, but they minister there by his leave rather than in their own right. King's example is the curate, the assisting clergyman who serves a parish he does not hold:

“As a Curate hath the same Mission and Power with the Minister, whose Place he supplies; yet being not the Minister of that Place, he cannot perform there any Acts of his Ministerial Function, without Leave from the Minister thereof: So a Presbyter had the same Order and Power with a Bishop, whom he assisted in his Cure; yet being not the Bishop or Minister of that Cure, he could not there perform any Parts of his Pastoral Office, without the Permission of the Bishop thereof.”

That is the entire argument in miniature. The curate is not a lesser sort of priest. He is the same sort of priest without the charge, and the moment he is given a parish of his own, nothing about him changes except that the permission is now his to give. King then offers a shorthand, that bishops, priests, and deacons would be clearer in English as “Rectors, Vicars, and Deacons,” meaning by rectors the bishops as “the actual Incumbents of a Place” and by vicars the presbyters as their assistants. His terms are looser than English parish law, where a vicar is himself an incumbent of a sort, and the looseness does not matter to his point, which is the distinction between the one who holds the charge and the one who serves under it.

He is also disarming about his own certainty, in a way this document would do well to imitate: “I am not so wedded and bigotted to this Opinion, but if any shall produce better, and more convincing Arguments to the contrary, I will not contentiously defend, but readily relinquish it, since I search after Truth, not to promote a particular Party or Interest.”

Then King argues the case three ways. First, that presbyters did everything bishops did: “A Bishop preached, baptized and confirmed, so did a Presbyter. A Bishop excommunicated, absolved and **ordained**, so did a Presbyter... the only Difference that was between them was in Degree; but this proves there was none at all in Order.” Second, that Scripture and the earliest writers use the two words for the same men, in Ephesus and Philippi, and Clement of Rome calls the same Corinthian leaders both. Third, and most simply, that the ancients counted two orders and not three: bishops and deacons, or presbyters and deacons, “and if there were but these Two, Presbyters cannot be distinct from Bishops, for then there would be Three.”

King's second argument can be checked in a few minutes with a concordance, and it holds. Paul calls the Ephesian elders together and tells them the Holy Spirit has made them overseers (Acts 20:17, 28); Titus is to appoint elders, and the qualifications given are those of the overseer (Titus 1:5–7); Peter charges the elders to shepherd the flock, “exercising the oversight,” as their fellow elder (1 Peter 5:1–2). The one place the New Testament gives the title without qualification is to Christ, “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25), which is why our own prayer at the ordination of elders addresses God through Christ, “Apostle and High Priest, Shepherd and Bishop of our souls.” Every human oversight in the church is derivative of that one.

One image from King is worth more than the arguments, and it may be the best short description of episcopacy this document can offer. He describes the presbytery of an early church seated in a semicircle, with the bishop's chair at the head, “on a Seat somewhat elevated above those of his

Colleagues,” and concludes that the bishop was thereby distinguished from them “**by his Priority in the same Order, but not by his being of another Order.**”

The bishop’s chair is higher, and it is in the same semicircle. That is what our ¶ 402 is trying to say, and it is what Wesley believed, and it came to him from this book.

The pedigree continues with our first bishops, who explained themselves at the request of the General Conference of 1796. Coke and Asbury take up the episcopal form and do something startling. They give away apostolic succession entirely. The doctrine of “the apostolic, uninterrupted succession of bishops,” they write, is what “all the learned world at present know to be **utterly indefensible,**” and Protestant writers have stopped trying to defend it. Then: “**Now, the idea of an apostolic succession being exploded, it follows, that the Methodist Church has every thing which is Scriptural and essential to justify its episcopacy.**”

What do they put in its place? Every church’s right to choose the episcopal form; the unanimous approbation of the General Conference, “which is the chief synod of our church”; the continuing compliance of the members; the respectability of the source; and, on the next page, the fruit: “Mr. Wesley therefore preferred the *episcopal* form of church government; and God has (glory be to his name!) wonderfully blessed it among us.”

Not one of those is a claim of divine institution. **Methodist episcopacy is grounded in the consent of the church and vindicated by its fruit.** A bishop who is not of a separate order, whose office rests on the church’s agreement and is answered for by its results, is exactly what ¶ 402 says. Our first bishops were more radical on this point than the paragraph is.

Two cautions before going further. First, the Coke and Asbury notes were annotations, not law, and Emory reminds us that “the bishops themselves disclaimed having any authority to make laws or regulations.” Second, and more pressing: their bluntness about succession sits awkwardly beside our contemporary habit of saying that ordination secures apostolic continuity. Both can be held, but only with care. The Lima text distinguishes **the apostolic tradition of the whole church**, which is the gospel handed on and lived, from **the succession of the apostolic ministry**, which is the historic chain of hands. A church may confess the first without asserting the second, and that is very close to what Methodists have always meant. What we cannot do is use the word *apostolic* warmly and vaguely and hope no one asks. That is precisely the habit this document exists to interrupt.

And there is a second stream, which most United Methodists do not know about and which changes the picture.

Our episcopacy is not simply Wesley’s, because our church is not simply Wesley’s. In 1968 the Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren, and the German-American stream brought its own doctrine of oversight. Its polity was described by its own historians as **composite, combining episcopal, presbyterial, and congregational features**, and its bishops were **elected for a term of four years rather than for life**, a contrast drawn deliberately against the early Methodist Episcopal Church. That is not a variation on our episcopacy. It is a different account of what oversight is and how it is held accountable.

The merger fused the two and never reconciled them. And the detail that makes this concrete is one almost every United Methodist has seen without knowing its origin. **The bishop’s crest is EUB.** It was made after the 1946 Uniting General Conference that formed the Evangelical United

Brethren Church, by the sculptor Ralph M. Holdeman, at the request of Bishop George Edward Epp, Secretary of the Board of Bishops. Holdeman explained its parts: the chi rho in the shape of a cross, “one of the most ancient symbols found in the catacombs”; the alpha and omega suspended from the crossarm; and the staff, which “not only points to the bishop as the chief shepherd of God’s flock but also **emphasizes the loving care that should motivate all administrative decisions.**”

The artist has stated the doctrine. **The emblem our bishops wear was designed to say that administration is subordinate to, and motivated by, shepherdly care.** It came from the tradition that elected its bishops to four-year terms. **We kept their symbol and the Methodists’ life tenure.**

Our own liturgy agrees with the crest. In the service celebrating the assignment of a bishop to an area, the signs of the office are presented in a deliberate order: first the pastoral staff, “be upheld and sustained by Christ the Good Shepherd”; then the Bible, the water, the bread and cup, the towel and basin, the stole; and only then the *Book of Discipline*, and last of all the gavel. The crook comes before the gavel. The bishop’s own promises in that service are entirely pastoral: to proclaim the Word and rightly administer the sacraments, to be “a teacher of the faith, a pastor of souls, and a means to the unity of the body of Christ,” and “a means of reconciliation and healing.” The rite is careful in the other direction too. It says the bishop “has been ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament,” which is to say ordained once, as an elder, and speaks of “my **consecration** to the episcopacy.” Our liturgy holds ¶ 402 exactly.

Now the difficulty, and it is not about any bishop’s character. **We disclaim a separate order while materially constructing one.** Bishops are elected for life. They are compensated from a separate general church fund (¶ 819) rather than by the conferences they serve, which insulates the office economically from the body that receives it. They are subject to their own complaint procedures (¶ 413). They form a council of their own. Whatever ¶ 402 says, an office with life tenure, its own revenue stream, and its own accountability track is functioning as something other than a temporary assignment given to an elder by the church’s consent.

The mirror image is worth naming, because it is the same failure running the other way. With licensed local pastors, the church **withholds the theology while depending on the ministry.** With bishops, the church **disclaims the theology while constructing the reality.** Both are gaps between what we say and what we do; they simply run in opposite directions; and both are to be judged by the same standard, which is whether the church can say what God is doing through the office and then arrange its life as though that were true.

There is a constructive edge here that the criticism should not be allowed to obscure. If oversight belongs to the whole order of elders and the bishop is its focusing, then ¶ 402 is not merely defensible; it is right, and our task is to make the practice match. On that account the problem is not that bishops are insufficiently distinguished from elders. It is that we have built the episcopate into something apart while allowing the eldership’s own superintendency to wither into administration. Recover the second and the first becomes far less strange.

King’s semicircle is the test. A bishop seated at the head of a company of colleagues, first among people who share his order and exercise his oversight with him, is a bishop the Methodist tradition can account for. A bishop supported by a separate fund, elected for life, judged by a separate process, and presiding over an order that no longer superintends anything, is seated somewhere else. The

question is not whether the chair should be elevated. It is whether it is still in the room.

Practice

The church should ask directly what in the office of bishop requires life tenure, and should be able to answer theologically rather than by appeal to precedent or to the difficulty of changing it. Half our own inheritance did without it.

The Episcopal Fund should be examined for what it teaches. A church that pays its bishops from a fund the conferences do not control has said something about accountability whether or not it meant to, and it has said it in the one language everyone understands.

Bishops should be given, and should be able to take, the pastoral time their own rite describes. When a bishop's calendar makes it impossible to be "a pastor of souls," the church has arranged the office against its own liturgy, and the fault lies with the arrangement rather than with the person trying to survive it.

And the crest should be taught. A church that explained to its people where that staff came from, and what its maker said it meant, would have begun the conversation about episcopal accountability from inside its own tradition rather than from outside criticism.

A Word Toward a Theology of Conference

This section is deliberately incomplete. Everything above depends on the annual conference, and the church has no worked-out theology of what an annual conference is. I can point at where one would come from. I cannot supply it here, and I would rather say so than pretend.

Principle

The annual conference is a means of grace before it is a jurisdiction: a company of ministers gathered to watch over one another in love, to discern God's call in those presented to it, and to order the church's mission in a region.

Background

We have no shortage of things to say about what the annual conference *does*. It is the basic body of the church. It is where clergy hold membership. It receives, examines, ordains, appoints, and votes. What we do not say is what it *is*, in terms of God's action, and the absence shows. A body that cannot say what it is will describe itself by its functions, and a body described by its functions will be reformed for efficiency, since efficiency is the only standard functions answer to.

There is also a precedent nobody disputes and almost nobody builds on. When the question of the Gentiles threatened to split the young church, it was not settled by an apostle's ruling. "The apostles and the elders were gathered together to see about this matter" (Acts 15:6). They argued, at length. They listened to testimony about what God had actually been doing among the Gentiles. And the decision, when it came, was issued by a body: "it seemed good to the apostles and the elders,

with the whole assembly” (Acts 15:22), in a letter whose most remarkable phrase is “**it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us**” (Acts 15:28).

That sentence is the charter of every conference Methodism has ever held. It claims that a gathered body, arguing about a contested question and reaching a judgment, can be an instrument of the Holy Spirit, and it says so without embarrassment and without claiming infallibility. It also shows the pattern our own conferences inherited: apostles and elders together, the whole assembly consenting, and evidence about what God has been doing offered as the substance of the debate. A church that reads Acts 15 as the first annual conference will find it hard to go on describing its own conferences as legislative sessions with worship attached.

Three starting points, offered as a sketch.

The first is that conferencing is a means of grace. Wesley added Christian conferencing to the means by which God conveys grace, alongside prayer, Scripture, the Supper, and fasting. This was not a metaphor and it was not an afterthought. The institution we call the annual conference descends directly from the conversations begun in 1744, and the document that has governed Methodist practice ever since is called, in so many words, *Minutes of Several Conversations*. Our founding genre is the conversation and our founding institution is the conversation made regular. If that is right, then an annual conference is a place where God is at work on the people gathered, and not only a place where business is done to them.

The second is that its composition was justified by its capacity to bear witness. Coke and Asbury explained in 1796 why yearly conferences exist and who belongs to them. The business that needs them is “the admission of preachers on trial and into full connection, the ordination of elders and deacons, the examination of the characters of the ministers and preachers, and the stationing of them all.” And the membership is what it is for a reason: these are the men “who have been traveling the preceding year among all the societies in those districts and circuits, respectively,” and therefore “**can give the fullest, the completest information on all the subjects which come under the cognizance of the yearly conferences.**”

The annual conference was constituted as a body of witnesses. Its members were qualified to sit in it because they had been out among the churches and could report what they had seen. This is Wesley’s “Inquire” turned into an institution: the three marks require someone who has watched, and the conference is the assembly of those who have watched. It also gives itineracy a justification we have entirely forgotten. Moving preachers around does not only serve the churches’ needs; it produces a body that knows the work well enough to testify about it. Mobility serves discernment.

And it explains something we now do badly. A conference that examines candidates through files and interviews has lost the very capacity for which it was composed this way. When the witnesses stopped being asked, the paperwork had to answer instead, and paperwork can only report attributes. That is how a church that once asked “have they fruit?” came to ask whether a candidate shows promise of future usefulness.

Coke and Asbury also explain why the conference is not made of delegates from the circuits: “It would utterly destroy our *itinerant plan*. They would be concerned chiefly, if not only, for the interests of their own constituents.” **Delegates represent constituencies; itinerants represent the whole work.** That is the same claim the section on the elder made from another direction, and it

is the deepest thing our polity knows about connectionalism.

The third is that oversight of one another is participation in God's own providence. Wesley's God is not a clockmaker who set the world going and withdrew, but one whose omnipresence and omniscience mean a particular, attentive care for every creature. A church whose doctrine of God is that one will be a church in which oversight is care rather than management, and in which watching over one another is not administration but a creaturely share in the way God attends to what God has made. That single line of derivation, from the doctrine of God to the practice of mutual oversight, would organize everything the previous sections have said about elders, superintendency, and bishops.

Practice

I will not propose practices for a doctrine I have not finished. Two observations will have to do.

First, an annual conference whose sessions consist of reports, budgets, and legislation, with worship at the edges, has become the thing it was not supposed to be. Whatever a means of grace is, it is not a meeting with a devotional opening.

Second, if conferencing is a means of grace and the conference is a body of witnesses, then the parts of our common life where people actually give account of their ministry to one another are not the ceremonial parts. They are the point. We have tended to protect the legislative hours and let the examination of character become a formality, and we have it exactly backwards.

The rest of this belongs to a document I have not written.

Deaconesses, Home Missioners, and a Word Toward a Theology of Laity

Principle

The church has long had ministries that are permanent, consecrated, publicly accountable, and lay. They are not lesser ordinations, and they are not waiting rooms. They stand within the ministry of all the baptized, which is the church's foundational ministry and not a reservoir from which clergy are drawn.

Background

A document about orders can give the impression that recognized ministry and ordination are the same thing. Our own church is the standing refutation.

"There shall be in The United Methodist Church the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner" (§ 1913.1). Not a program, not a certification: an *office*. Its purpose is "to **express representatively** the love and concern of the believing community for the needs in the world," which is the same category, representation, that the previous sections used to say what an order is. And the people who hold it are "professionally trained **laypersons** who have been **led by the Holy Spirit** to devote their lives to Christlike service under the authority of the Church," who are "**consecrated and commissioned by a bishop.**"

The details of how the office is constituted matter for everything that follows. Full-time service is the norm, meaning the person's "entire vocational time" is given to the work. The appointment is **fixed by the bishop and printed in the list of appointments in the annual conference journal**, exactly as clergy appointments are. The conference secretary keeps a permanent record of everyone consecrated to the office. Deaconesses and home missionaries are **seated at annual conference with voice and vote** as lay members. They enroll in a pension plan. They may take a leave of absence. Involuntary termination follows the church's judicial procedures under ¶ 2702, the same chapter that governs chargeable offenses. And ¶ 1918 describes the relationship in the plainest possible terms: it "acknowledges a **covenant of mutual commitment, accountability and support**" between the church and the deaconess or home missionary.

A covenant. Mutual accountability. A permanent record. An appointment fixed by a bishop. A pension. A judicial process. Every one of those is a mark of a ministry the church takes with full seriousness, and all of it belongs to an office the church calls lay.

The history is long and mostly unknown to us. The office was created in the nineteenth century in connection with the women's home missionary work, and the older Disciplines show how carefully it was constructed. A candidate had to be at least twenty-three, "a single woman or a widow," a member in good standing who had "shown a fitness for this work by active service in some line of Christian work," with a good education and a physician's certificate. Her certificate was renewed annually. She was to relinquish "all other pursuits" and devote herself to the work. And, in a provision worth remembering, "**No vows shall be required of any Deaconess.**" This was to be a life given without being a life vowed.

The consecration rite is the part our church should know and does not. In the 1920 Discipline the service begins with a prayer to "O eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **who didst call Phoebe and Dorcas into the service of thy Church,**" asking God to "look upon these thy servants who are now to be **set apart to the office of Deaconess,** and **grant them thy Holy Spirit,** that they may worthily discharge the work committed to them." The candidates are told that "a door of usefulness has been opened for you," that "released from other cares, you are to give yourselves without reservation to the service of the Lord of the vineyard," and that "**the Church now solemnly sets you apart for this special service.**" Their charge is concrete and unglamorous: "to minister to the poor, visit the sick, pray with the dying, care for the orphan, seek the wandering, comfort the sorrowing, and save the sinning."

Then the questions, and the first of them will sound familiar: "**Do you believe that you have been led by the providence of God to engage in this work, and to assume the duties of this office?**" Then a prayer that "the **Spirit of the Living God** descend upon you and abide with you evermore." And then the moment itself. The consecrator takes **the right hand** of each candidate and says: "**I admit thee to the office of a Deaconess in the Church of God, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.**"

That rite does two things at once. It invokes the Holy Spirit. It sets a person apart. It admits her to an office, in the triune name, with a formula as solemn as anything in our books. And it marks the difference from ordination **in the gesture**: the right hand taken, not hands laid on the head. The church knew exactly what it was doing and said so with its body rather than by withholding

the theology. That is a liturgical precision our licensing rite does not manage.

Two harder things belong here, and leaving them out would be dishonest.

The first is why this office existed in the form it did. For most of its history, the church that consecrated these women to give their whole lives to ministry would not ordain them. The requirement that a deaconess be a single woman or a widow meant that the price of a recognized full-time vocation was, for most of them, not marrying. It is not possible to tell the story of this office as simply a noble lay tradition. It is also the story of what the church built for women instead of ordaining them, and of the women who filled it with a ministry far larger than the box they were given.

The second is that we owe the diaconate to them. ¶ 328 says the distinctive ministry of the deacon “has evolved in United Methodism over many years,” and names the sources: **“the continuing work of the deaconess, the home missionary, and the diaconal minister.”** Our order of deacons stands on a lay foundation, and the church continues the office of deaconess alongside it.

The church already knows how to constitute a lifelong, consecrated, accountable, covenanted lay ministry. It does it for deaconesses and home missionaries. And the comparison with our licensed ministry is not comfortable. A deaconess holds an office, is consecrated by a bishop, is appointed by a bishop and listed in the journal, has a permanent record kept, holds a covenant of mutual accountability, has a pension, is subject to the church’s judicial process, and sits in annual conference with voice and vote. A licensed local pastor holds a license renewed annually, void without an appointment, in a fellowship that offers support and is not charged to hold anyone accountable, whose credentials are surrendered when the appointment ends and whose retirement is classed with discontinuance.

The lay office is more securely and more honorably constituted than the licensed one. Whatever the church decides about ordaining those in local pastoral ministry, that comparison is a judgment on our arrangements, and it opens a possibility the debate rarely names: that a ministry might be recognized permanently, consecrated, covenanted, and held accountable, **without** being ordained, because we already do this and have done it for well over a century.

A word toward a theology of laity

This is a gesture, like the one toward a theology of conference, and for the same reason. The document this church most needs on ministry may not be about orders at all.

Everything in these pages rests on a claim made early and then mostly assumed: that baptism is a commissioning, and that the ministry of the baptized is real ministry rather than preparation for it. *By Water and the Spirit* says it outright. “Through baptism, God calls and commissions persons to the general ministry of all Christian believers,” and ordination “is grounded in the same baptism that commissions the general priesthood of all believers.” Our *Discipline* opens its account of ministry the same way, with the ministry of all Christians before any office is named.

If that is true, a theology of laity would have to say at least three things this document has not.

It would have to take seriously that Scripture gives the whole church the language our tradition reserves for its ministers. “You are a chosen race, **a royal priesthood**, a holy nation, a people for

God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Chosen, priestly, and commissioned to proclaim, said to a congregation of ordinary people. Any theology of laity that does not start there will end up describing volunteers.

It would have to give an account of **vocation in the world** which does not treat the workplace as a mission field and nothing more. The deaconess rite's charge is instructive precisely because it is so ordinary: visit the sick, care for the orphan, comfort the sorrowing. A theology of lay vocation would have to say how such work is Christ's work when it is done by an accountant or a nurse who was never consecrated to anything.

It would have to recover **mutual oversight as a lay practice**. The Methodist answer to how ordinary Christians grow was never a program. It was a company of people who met to watch over one another in love, and the class meeting was a lay institution led by laypeople. The section on the elder argued that the order of elders should recover that practice. The laity had it first, and lost it more completely.

And it would have to say what the church owes the layperson who will never hold any office. That person is not a resource, not a volunteer base, and not a candidate who did not proceed. If baptism commissions, they were commissioned, and the church owes them formation, accountability, and honor of the same seriousness it gives the ordained. We have not begun to arrange our life as though that were true.

Practice

Teach the office of deaconess and home missionary. Most United Methodists do not know it exists, which is a considerable achievement given that it has existed for well over a century and that our order of deacons descends from it.

When the church asks what to do about licensed local pastors, put the deaconess model on the table beside ordination and licensing. It may not be the answer. It is a real third option, it is ours, and it has a track record.

And stop describing lay ministry as the pipeline. A congregation that speaks of its laity chiefly as the source of future clergy has told its people that the ministry they are doing now is a stage. Baptism does not commission anyone to a stage.

The Test of the Call: Grace, Gifts, Fruit

Principle

The church tests a call by three marks: grace, gifts, and fruit. Where these three concur in a person, the church has sufficient proof that God has called them, and the church's task is to recognize that call rather than to add further conditions to it.

Background

In 1744 the Methodist preachers met in conference, and among the questions they put to themselves was how to tell whether a person who believed they were called to preach actually was. The answer they gave has been in our books ever since:

Q. 50. How shall we try those who think they are moved by the Holy Ghost to preach?

A. Inquire, (1.) Do they know God as a pardoning God? Have they the love of God abiding in them? Do they desire and seek nothing but God? And are they holy in all manner of conversation? (2.) Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work? Have they (in some tolerable degree) a clear, sound understanding? Have they a right judgment in the things of God? Have they a just conception of salvation by faith? And has God given them any degree of utterance? Do they speak justly, readily, clearly? (3.) Have they fruit? Are any truly convinced of sin, and converted to God, by their preaching?

As long as these three marks concur in any one, we believe he is called of God to preach. These we receive as sufficient proof that he is “moved thereto by the Holy Ghost.”

Three features of that answer deserve attention, because we have kept the vocabulary and lost most of the structure.

First, **the questions are addressed to the church, not to the candidate.** The instruction is “Inquire.” Someone else is meant to look, and to report what they see. Notice how different this is from asking a person whether they feel called. The conference is not gathering intentions; it is gathering evidence.

Second, **all three marks are retrospective.** Grace, gifts, and fruit are things that either have appeared or have not. Even the second mark, which sounds like aptitude, is stated as observed performance: has God given them any degree of utterance, do they speak justly, readily, clearly. Nobody is being asked to predict.

Third, and most striking, **the marks are declared sufficient.** “These we receive as sufficient proof.” Wesley’s conference did not treat grace, gifts, and fruit as a floor beneath additional requirements. It treated them as the whole of what the church needs in order to say that God has called this person. That is a remarkably confident sentence, and it is confident precisely because it rests on evidence of God’s action rather than on the church’s assessment of potential.

The third mark is the one that needs no defense, because it is the test Jesus gives for exactly this problem. Warning about false prophets, “who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves,” he does not tell the disciples to examine credentials or to interrogate intentions. He gives them one instrument: **“By their fruits you will know them.** Do you gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?... A good tree can’t produce evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree produce good fruit. Therefore by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:15–20). It is a retrospective test, and it is offered as sufficient. Wesley’s conference did not invent the third question. It read the Gospel and asked what the Lord told the church to look at.

The same instrument appears where the appointing is done. “You didn’t choose me, but I chose you, and **appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit**, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16). Chosen, appointed, and sent to bear fruit, in that order, with the fruit as the end rather than the entrance requirement.

Now set our own practice beside it.

The three marks have not disappeared from the *Book of Discipline*. They have been redistributed, and the pattern of the redistribution is the thing to see.

Fruit survives at the beginning. When a district committee examines a candidate, it may require information “for determining gifts, evidence of God’s grace, fruit, and demonstration of the call to licensed or ordained ministry” (§ 310). At that stage, close to the congregation, among people who have watched the candidate work, the church still asks Wesley’s question.

Fruit survives at the end, in the paragraphs governing what happens when a minister’s effectiveness is in question. There the church asks whether a plan of action has “produced fruit that gives a realistic expectation of future effectiveness” (§ 334.1c; § 360). Even here the fruit is instrumental, valued for what it predicts rather than for what it shows, but the word is present.

Between those two points, at the moment when the church actually ordains, fruit is gone. The standing formula for what the community affirms in a candidate is “gifts, evidence of God’s grace, and promise of future usefulness” (§ 301.2; and see § 304.4, § 332). Grace remains. Gifts remain. In the place where Wesley’s conference asked whether anyone had been converted by this person’s preaching, we ask whether they show promise of future usefulness. Our teaching documents have absorbed the same phrase; *This Holy Mystery* quotes it when describing what the community affirms in those it ordains.

That phrase has its own long history among us, and no one inserted it in bad faith. The problem is not that the words are new. The problem is what they do at the place where they now stand.

A test of fruit looks backward at what God has done. A test of promise looks forward at what the church expects. And a forecast can only be made out of the materials available for forecasting, which are the visible attributes of the person in front of you: their education, their articulateness, their age, their availability, their poise in an interview, how much they resemble the ministers we have found useful before. When the church replaces evidence with prediction, it is not being more careful. It is doing the one thing Samuel was expressly stopped from doing. Man looks at the outward appearance. Promise of future usefulness is an attribute test wearing the vocabulary of discernment, and it arrives at exactly the moment when the stakes are highest.

The same substitution has happened inside the Historic Examination itself, which is the other place Wesley’s questions survive. Those questions (Have you faith in Christ? Are you going on to perfection? Will you keep the General Rules? Will you visit from house to house?) are genuinely Wesley’s, and they are put to candidates for full connection to this day. But every one of them is addressed to the candidate, and nearly every one asks about resolve. *Will you. Are you determined. Are you resolved.* The half of Wesley’s examination that asked the church to look at the person and report what God had done there is not in the paragraph. We kept the interrogation of the candidate’s will and dropped the church’s inquiry into the evidence.

There is one more sentence worth putting beside Wesley’s “sufficient proof.” Our *Discipline* says that in all votes regarding license, ordination, or conference membership, “the requirements set forth herein are minimum requirements” (§ 304.4). Wesley’s conference said three marks suffice. We say our requirements are the least that may be asked. Those are different theologies, and the difference is not subtle. One believes that God’s action in a person is enough and the church’s job is to see it.

The other believes that God's action in a person is a starting point on which the church may build whatever further conditions seem prudent.

Something should be said for what recovering the third mark would cost, since it is not free. Fruit is the hardest of the three marks to game and the hardest to bureaucratize. It cannot be earned by attending anything. It cannot be certified by an institution. It requires that somebody who has watched a person's ministry over time be asked what came of it, and be willing to say. That is slower than reading a transcript, and considerably more uncomfortable, and it cannot be delegated to a form. But it is also the only one of the three marks that is equally available to everyone God calls, which is why its loss falls hardest on exactly the people our system already screens out: the bivocational, the second career, the person rooted in a place, the one who could not move to a residential campus. A person who has been converting sinners in a small congregation for a decade has fruit in abundance and, quite often, no promise of future usefulness that our instruments can detect.

Practice

The three marks should be asked at every stage at which the church makes a judgment about a call, and asked in the form Wesley's conference used: as questions put to the church about the candidate, answered from evidence.

Boards of ordained ministry and clergy sessions should ask, of every person presented for licensing, commissioning, ordination, or admission into full connection, whether grace, gifts, and fruit concur in this person, and should be able to say what the fruit has been. Where the three concur, the church should be slow to withhold what it has been given sufficient proof to grant, and should be able to state its reasons in terms of the marks rather than in terms of unmet institutional conditions.

The Historic Examination should be restored to its full form, with the church's inquiry standing beside the candidate's promises. The bishop is already directed to explain the historic nature of these questions and to interpret their spirit and intent (§ 336); that is the natural place for the conference to be reminded that it is not only receiving promises but reporting evidence.

Candidates should be formed and examined in settings where fruit can actually be observed, over a period long enough for it to appear, and those who have watched them should be asked directly. A process that can be completed entirely through documents and interviews has no way of applying the third mark, whatever its paperwork says.

And wherever the phrase "promise of future usefulness" governs a decision about a call, the church should ask itself what it is actually measuring, and whether the answer is the candidate's usefulness to God or their resemblance to the ministers we are used to.

The Historic Examination

Principle

The historic questions put to those admitted into full connection are an examination, and the church should conduct them as one. That means the church reports evidence as well as receiving promises, that candidates answer in their own words, and that it is possible to answer badly.

Background

Everyone who has attended an annual conference knows the moment. The candidates stand, the bishop explains that these questions are very old and were asked by Mr. Wesley himself, and then a series of extraordinary questions is put and answered in unison, at speed, to warm applause. Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?

Those are the sharpest theological questions our church asks anyone, and we have made them a ceremony.

The first thing to see is that **the fault is not in the rite**. I assumed it was, and the Book of Worship corrected me. Our own order for the admission of candidates prints the historic questions with their answers, and the answers are neither uniform nor empty. They are calibrated, one by one, to what can honestly be promised:

Are you going on to perfection? **I am, by the grace of God.** Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? **God willing, I do.** Are you earnestly striving after it? **With God's help, I am.** Will you keep them? **I will so endeavor.** Will you preach and maintain them? **To the best of my ability, I will.** Will you visit from house to house? **This is my commitment.** Are you determined to employ all your time in the work of God? **That is my intention.** Will you observe the following directions? **The Lord being my helper, I will.**

Some promise, some intend, some endeavor. Every one of the perfection answers puts the weight on grace. Whoever set those answers was paying close attention, and the candidate who says "I am, by the grace of God" has just stated this entire document's thesis in six words. Nobody claims to be going on to perfection under their own steam. The ordinand confesses that God qualifies the called.

So the rite is substantial. **Our performance of it is perfunctory**, and the remedy is not to write new questions but to make the church hear the ones it has.

The second thing to see is that half of Wesley's examination is missing, and it is the half that did the church's work.

In 1744 the Methodist preachers asked how to try those who believe they are moved by the Holy Ghost to preach, and the answer began with an imperative addressed to the examiners: **"Inquire."** Do they know God as a pardoning God? Have they gifts for the work? Have they fruit? Those questions are about the candidate and are put to somebody else. The conference was gathering evidence.

Now read ¶ 336. Nineteen questions, and every one of them is addressed to the candidate, and nearly all ask about resolve. *Have you faith. Are you going on. Will you keep them. Are you determined. Are you resolved.* These are Wesley's questions, genuinely, and they are worth asking. But they

are the half that examines a person's will. The half in which the church looked at the person and reported what God had done in them is simply not in the paragraph.

The result is an examination in which only the candidate is speaking. The church, which is the party with information, says nothing.

The third thing to see is that the *Discipline* itself supplies the frame that makes the questions feel ceremonial. It directs the bishop to "explain to the conference the **historic nature** of the following questions and seek to interpret their spirit and intent" (§ 336). Antiquity is a poor frame for an examination. Told that a question is old, a room hears heritage and prepares to be moved. The bishop's other duty in that same sentence, to interpret the questions' **spirit and intent**, is the one that would restore them, because it asks what going on to perfection actually means and costs.

And the *Discipline* leaves the door open for the missing half. The questions, it says, "are these **and any others that may be thought necessary**." Nothing prevents an annual conference from adding the church's own inquiry to the candidate's promises. We have simply never thought it necessary to ask whether these people have borne fruit.

Practice

Restore the church's half before the candidate's. Before the questions are put, let the Board of Ordained Ministry report to the conference what it has found: the grace, the gifts, and the fruit, named concretely, in the case of each person to be admitted. Wesley's conference did this first and asked the candidate afterward. The *Discipline*'s own clause about "any others that may be thought necessary" is sufficient authority.

Interpret their content, not their age. When the bishop explains the questions, let the explanation be about Christian perfection, about the General Rules, and about what it costs to employ all one's time in the work of God. The historical note can take one sentence.

Require answers in the candidate's own words somewhere in the process. The unison response has its place in the liturgy, and the liturgy is not the whole examination. Before a candidate stands in that service, the conference or its board should have heard that person say, in their own words, what they mean by expecting to be made perfect in love in this life. A question that has only ever been answered in chorus has not been answered.

Be able to say what a failing answer would look like. This is the hardest and the most important. A question that cannot be answered badly is not an examination, and everyone in the room knows it. If the church cannot describe an answer to "are you going on to perfection?" that would give it pause, then the church is not asking, and the candidates know that too.

And ask the questions **severally**. Wesley's conference put them to the candidates "one by one, and their behavior severally considered." A person answering alone, by name, before people who know their ministry, is in a different act than a class answering together. The second is a ceremony about the first.

Licensing

Principle

The church must be able to say, in terms of God's action, what it does when it licenses a person for pastoral ministry, and how that act stands in relation to ordination. A ministry the church depends upon for a third of its pulpits, and authorizes to preside at font and table, cannot be left without a theological account.

Background

Read ¶ 315, the paragraph that governs licensing for pastoral ministry, and notice what is in it. Psychological reports. Criminal background and credit checks. A notarized statement about convictions and accusations. A certificate of good health on the prescribed form. Completion of the studies for the license, or one third of the work toward a Master of Divinity. Approval by three-fourths votes of the district committee, the Board of Ordained Ministry, and the clergy session.

Every one of those provisions is sensible. Not one of them is theological. The paragraph by which our church authorizes a person to baptize and to preside at the Lord's table does not mention God.

Now read the rite. When a bishop or district superintendent presents licenses to local pastors, the church says this:

"We have inquired diligently concerning him (her, them) and have found him (her, them) to be **fit for this sacred vocation."**

And this, to the candidate:

"Do you believe you are moved by the Holy Spirit to serve as a local pastor?"

And then it prays:

"We thank you for Name, whom we set aside in your Name as a local pastor. **Prepare him in body, mind, and spirit for his task, and continue him in your grace,** that he may increase and bless your Church through his labors."

That is a serious theology of licensing, and it has been in our books all along. The diligent inquiry is Wesley's "Inquire," and it survives here at exactly the point where ¶ 336 dropped it from the examination of elders. "Moved by the Holy Spirit" is Wesley's own question from 1744, nearly word for word. The church declares the person fit for a sacred vocation and then asks God to prepare them, which is to say it declares them fit and immediately asks God to make them so. **The licensing rite confesses that God qualifies the called.**

So the honest statement of the problem is not that the church has no theology of licensing. It is that the church's theology of licensing lives in its prayers and has never been allowed anywhere near its law.

The rites also do something the *Discipline* does not: **they distinguish licensing from ordination in terms of divine action rather than permission.** At an ordination the bishop lays both hands on the head and prays, "pour upon Name the Holy Spirit, **for the office and work** of an

elder in Christ's holy church," and then says, "**take authority** as an elder." At a licensing there is no invocation of the Spirit for an office, no "take authority," and no stole. The language is "we set aside," "you are hereby **authorized**," and, tellingly, "take care that you perform these duties faithfully **as much as you are able**." Something different is being done, and our liturgy knows it even where our paragraphs do not.

What Wesley did, and what he refused

The category is his. The office of a Helper in the Large Minutes is defined by a lack: "**In the absence of a Minister**, to feed and guide the flock." The Methodist preachers were justified in part by supply, sent "to supply their lack of service toward those who are perishing for want of knowledge." Anyone who says that authorizing ministry because a congregation would otherwise go without is a modern compromise has not read our founding documents. It is how the movement started.

But Wesley never let the need stand by itself, and four features of his practice are missing from ours.

He paired the need with a divine sending. The Large Minutes head this material "**The Design of God in Sending the Methodist Preachers**," and answer that they are to be considered "as **messengers sent by the Lord, out of the common way**." The supply argument and the sending claim are in the same sentence. Our ¶ 315 has kept the supply and dropped the sending; only the liturgy still asks whether the person is moved by the Holy Spirit.

He did not tie them to a place. The eleventh rule of a Helper is "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want you, but to those who want you most," with the gloss that "it is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society." Our licensed local pastors are authorized to preside at the sacraments "**within and while appointed to a particular charge**" (¶ 317.1). Wesley's provisional preacher went everywhere and could not touch the sacraments. Ours may touch the sacraments and only in one place.

He refused them the sacraments, and said why. In *The Ministerial Office* (1789) he told the English preachers that being called to preach does not commission anyone "to baptize, or to administer the Lord's Supper," and ended: "O contain yourselves within your own bounds... **In God's name, stop there!**"

And his provisional status had an end. This is the one that indicts us most directly:

"Taking on trial is entirely different from admitting a Preacher. One on trial may be either admitted or rejected, without doing him any wrong; otherwise it would be no trial at all."

Four years, then admitted or rejected, and admission was not a credential but a sentence of recognition: "As long as you freely consent to, and earnestly endeavor to walk by, these Rules, **we shall rejoice to acknowledge you as a fellow-laborer**."

A licensed local pastor's license is renewed annually (¶ 317.2), and may be renewed for a working lifetime. **We have kept Wesley's provisional category and removed the terminus that made it honest.** By his own standard, a trial that cannot end is not a trial.

What Wesley did when the deprivation was sacramental

Set beside 1789 the letter he wrote to the American Methodists five years earlier. His scruple about ordaining had never been doctrinal; he had believed for years, on Lord King's argument, that "Bishops and Presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain." What restrained him was that England had a church actually supplying the sacraments. America did not:

"In America there are none, neither any parish Ministers. So that **for some hundred miles together, there is none either to baptize or to administer the Lord's Supper.** Here therefore my scruples are at an end... I have accordingly appointed Dr. Coke and Mr. Francis Asbury to be joint Superintendents... as also Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey, **to act as Elders among them, by baptizing and administering the Lord's Supper.**"

When the deprivation was sacramental, Wesley's remedy was ordination. He did not devise a licensed sub-order. He ordained.

What our church did for a century and a half

And so did we. From 1789 the Methodist Episcopal Church authorized its bishops "**to ordain local preachers to the office of deacons.**" From 1813 a local deacon became eligible for elder's orders, on a recommendation certifying his gifts and "**the necessity of his official services as an elder in the circuit where he resides.**" Local ordination was not an emergency measure; it was routine annual business, and the conference minutes had standing questions for it: *What others have been elected and ordained Deacons? As Local Preachers. What others have been elected and ordained Elders? As Local Deacons.*

It lasted a very long time. The Disciplines of 1876, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1906, and of 1920 all carry it, and it did not end there. As late as 1964 the Judicial Council was ruling on the ministerial authority of local preachers, ordained and unordained alike, treating both as live categories, and in 1987 it was still deciding questions about local deacons and local elders. The practice of ordaining them ended in 1976. In 1920 the path is spelled out: a local preacher completes the Four Years' Course of Study for Local Preachers and is ordained deacon; four years later, with further prescribed studies, he is ordained elder; and an elder "has authority to preach; to conduct Divine Worship; to solemnize Matrimony, and **to administer the Sacraments.**"

Two things follow that ought to change how we discuss this.

The first is that our Course of Study was designed to end in ordination. The 1906 Discipline calls it "the Course of Study prescribed by the Bishops **as a preparation for elder's orders.**" The same curriculum that once made a man an elder now makes a person a licensed local pastor. Nothing changed in kind about the education. What changed is where the road stops.

The second is more important. In that system, **ordination, conference membership, and itineracy were three separable things.** A local elder was ordained, with credentials and sacramental authority. He was not a member of the annual conference; the 1920 Discipline provides that "every Local Preacher, **ordained or unordained,** not having a Pastoral Charge, shall be a member of, and amenable to, the Quarterly Conference where he resides." And he did not itinerate; he was ordained precisely because his own circuit needed an elder.

The Judicial Council went further than that, and its language is worth having exactly. Ruling in 1987 on where such people stood, it held: “**Local deacons and elders are lay persons**, members of and accountable to a Charge Conference. Under the 1964 Discipline these persons were considered lay persons and this has not been changed.” They were tried, when it came to that, under the provisions governing the trial of a lay person.

So the separation went further than three variables. **In our own polity, ordination and lay status were not mutually exclusive.** The church laid hands on these people, gave them credentials and the authority to baptize and preside within a charge, and went on counting them among the laity. Whatever else that arrangement was, it was not a church that believed ordination must carry clergy status with it. A reader may well find this troubling from the other direction, and the worry deserves stating: an ordination that leaves a person a layperson may look like an ordination emptied of meaning. That is a fair question, and the church should answer it. What cannot be said, after 1987, is that we have no way to ordain someone who will not be a conference member.

We have fused all three. Ordination now entails conference membership, which entails availability for appointment. And that fusion, rather than any doctrine, is what makes the modern question feel unanswerable. When we say we cannot ordain a licensed local pastor, what we usually mean is that ordination now carries a career with it and this person is not available for that career. **That is a statement about our polity, not about God, and we are the ones who made it true.**

How we got here, which is less deliberate than it looks

The record does not show a church deciding that local ministry should be permanently unordained. It shows drift.

The decisive moment turns out to be 1976, and the legislation of that year is worth reading closely, because it does three things at once and we have kept only two of them.

It granted the sacraments. A local pastor was “authorized to perform all the duties of a pastor... **including the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion** as well as the service of marriage, burial, confirmation, and membership reception, while assigned to a particular charge under the specific supervision of a counseling elder subject to annual renewal” (§ 408.1, 1976).

It ended the ordaining. The same legislation carries a clause preserving what it was discontinuing: “None of the provisions in this legislation shall be interpreted to change or limit authorizations to **persons ordained as deacon and elder prior to 1976** or enrolled in the appropriate studies prior to January 1, 1977” (§ 409.5, 1976). That sentence is how we know the date. It travels forward into the Disciplines of 1980 and 1992, protecting a shrinking remainder, which is why the Judicial Council was still ruling on the status of local deacons and elders in 1987 and why the category is otherwise absent by 1992. Before 1976 the church ordained these ministers. After 1976 it licensed them and gave them the Table instead.

And it said what the license was for, in a sentence that should be read aloud in every conversation we now have about local pastors:

“The license as a local pastor is given only for the purpose of the practice of ministry while one is in preparation for conference membership and ordination.” (§ 407, 1976)

Only for the purpose of the practice of ministry while one is in preparation for ordination. The General Conference that authorized unordained persons to baptize and preside did not believe it was creating a permanent order. It believed it was equipping people who were on their way, and it said so in the paragraph headed “Authority of a Licensed Person.”

That third element is the one that fell out, and its disappearance is the whole difficulty. We kept the sacramental authority and we kept the withholding of orders, and we quietly dropped the assumption that made the combination coherent, which was that this was a condition people were passing through. What was designed as a way-station now holds a third of our appointed pastoral leadership, some of them for thirty years, renewed one year at a time. Wesley said that a trial which cannot end is no trial. The 1976 legislation said, in effect, the same thing, and we have made a permanent estate out of a preparation.

In 1960 the figure is “an **unordained** approved supply pastor,” permitted to administer the sacraments while appointed to a charge. In 1968, at the union, the new *Discipline* removed that authority: a lay pastor “shall not be authorized to administer the Sacraments.” In 1976 the General Conference restored it. **The church reversed itself on a sacramental question twice in eight years, and neither decision left behind a theological account that has survived.**

Then the category itself blurred. The *Discipline* still called a local pastor “a **lay person**” in 1988, and struck the phrase in 1992. Full-time local pastors were made clergy members of the annual conference in 1988, part-time in 1996. In eight years the church moved these ministers into conference membership and deleted the word “lay,” **without ever saying what they had become instead.**

And the door out closed by accident. Associate members were still “eligible for ordination as a deacon” in the 1968 *Discipline*, by direct descent from 1789. In 1996 the church created the deacon in full connection, giving the diaconate its own permanent order, and the ordained-deacon track for associate members was phased out with it. When associate membership returned in 2004, new associate members would be licensed pastors “instead of an ordained deacon as was the case prior to 1996.”

The reform that finally gave deacons a real and permanent order closed the only door through which non-itinerant ministers had been ordained since 1789. Nobody set out to do that. It happened while the church was fixing something else, and no one has given a theological account of it since.

The thing our polity says out loud

One provision states the church’s actual position more clearly than any argument could.

For elders and deacons, retirement is a relation. ¶ 358 says retired clergy members “have been **placed in the retired relation**,” and they remain members of the annual conference.

For local pastors, retirement is discontinuance. ¶ 320.1 lists it in the same clause as severing relationship with the church and having one’s appointment ended: “whenever a local pastor **retires**... **license and credentials shall be surrendered**,” and “the former local pastor shall designate **the local church in which membership shall be held**.” A retired local pastor not under appointment attends annual conference “with voice but not vote.” A retired local pastor who wishes to go on bap-

tizing must **annually request** a license to serve “in the local church where they hold membership.”

A ministry that ends when the job ends was a job. Retirement is the moment when the work stops and only the relation remains, which makes it the moment a church finally says what a standing always was. For elders and deacons something remains. For local pastors nothing does.

The fork

Here is the question, with both horns at full strength. I am not going to choose between them. The church has to.

One. If what God does through a licensed local pastor is the same divine action that ordination recognizes and effects, then the church should ordain them, and the machinery that prevents it is our own and can be changed. The evidence is considerable. The church prays over these people that God will prepare them and continue them in grace. It declares them fit for a sacred vocation after diligent inquiry. It sends them to baptize and to preside at the Lord’s table, which is the work of an elder. Wesley ordained when the deprivation was sacramental. We ordained local preachers, on the ground of local necessity, for a century and a half, using the very course of study these people now complete. On this reading, licensing is a selection mechanism laid over an electing God: it sorts by attributes the candidate brought with them, in a church whose own doctrine is that God supplies what the called lack.

Two. If what God does through a licensed local pastor is genuinely different from what ordination effects, then the church should say what the difference is, in terms of God’s action, and should stop using the language of ordination around it. There is a real case. Our rites do distinguish: no invocation of the Spirit for an office, no “take authority,” no stole, and an authorization bounded by an appointment. Wesley, faced with preachers among a people who *did* have access to ordained ministry, told them to stop at preaching. The scarcity we face is relative rather than absolute; a church with thousands of elders is not the America of 1784. A church may licitly authorize a person for a season, for a purpose, without ordaining them, and Wesley’s “extraordinary messengers” were exactly that.

Three. And there is a possibility the debate almost never names, which is that a ministry can be permanently recognized without being ordained, because we already do it. The Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner is lay, and it is also an office: consecrated and commissioned by a bishop, appointed by a bishop and printed in the conference journal, permanently recorded, pensioned, seated at annual conference with voice and vote, subject to the church’s judicial process, and held in what our own *Discipline* calls “a covenant of mutual commitment, accountability and support.” The historic rite of consecration invoked the Holy Spirit, set the person apart, and admitted her to an office in the triune name, marking the difference from ordination in the gesture rather than by withholding the theology. Whatever else is true, the church clearly knows how to constitute a lifelong lay ministry with dignity and accountability. On this reading the problem with licensing is not that it withholds ordination but that it is a thin and provisional thing where a substantial and permanent thing is possible.

And there is the position we actually occupy, which is the only one that cannot be de-

fended. We borrow ordination's theology and withhold its recognition. We pray for the Spirit's preparation and call it authorization. We declare a sacred vocation and attach it to an appointment. We ask people to be provisional for thirty years in a system whose founder said a trial that cannot end is no trial. And we make the whole standing depend on holding a post, so that when the post ends the credentials go back and the person is a layperson again.

Whichever horn the church takes, it will be telling the truth. The present arrangement is the only option that requires us not to.

Practice

Some things follow no matter how the fork is resolved.

Give the provisional relationship a terminus. If licensing is a trial, it must be capable of ending in admission or rejection. A license renewed annually for twenty-five years is not a probation; it is a permanent status the church has declined to name. Wesley's four years is not the only possible answer, but "indefinitely" is not an answer at all.

Stop making ecclesial standing depend on employment. Whatever a licensed local pastor is, they should not cease to be it when a church closes. If the church means what its rite says about a sacred vocation, then retirement should be a relation for these ministers too, and the surrender of credentials should mean what it means for everyone else: that something has gone wrong, not that a person has finished serving.

Let the theology in the rites govern the paragraphs. ¶ 315 should be able to say what the liturgy already says. A paragraph authorizing sacramental ministry that never mentions God is not neutral; it teaches, and what it teaches is that this is an employment matter.

Separate the three variables again, at least in thought. Whether or not the church decides to ordain those in local ministry, it should stop saying that ordination is impossible for them, because that claim is false and our own history refutes it. What is true is that we have bound ordination to conference membership and itineracy. That binding may be wise. It is not given.

And ask the three marks of them, and mean it. These are the ministers whose fruit is most visible and whose credentials are thinnest, which is precisely the situation Wesley's test was built for and precisely the situation a promise of future usefulness cannot see.

Commissioning

Principle

Commissioning is the church's sending. In it the church recognizes that God has called a person, prays for the Holy Spirit to empower them, and sends them into ministry for a season of formation and testing before ordination.

Background

¶ 325 says that commissioning “publicly acknowledges God’s call and the response, talents, gifts, and training of the candidate.” That is true and it is thin, and it leaves two obvious questions unanswered. If commissioning acknowledges God’s call, what did licensing acknowledge? And if ordination also recognizes God’s call, what does ordination add?

Our Ordinal answers better than our *Discipline*, and it answers with a text.

“Commissioning may be compared to the experience of the early church in Antioch when the Holy Spirit instructed the community to ‘**set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them**’ (Acts 13:2).”

In Antioch there are prophets and teachers at worship, and the Spirit speaks. Barnabas and Saul are already called; the Spirit says so in the past tense, “the work to which I have called them.” The community fasts, prays, lays hands on them, and sends them off. **That laying on of hands is not ordination.** Paul does not date his apostleship from it, and the church has never read it as the origin of his ministry. It is a sending, by a congregation, of people God had already called, into work God had already assigned.

That is a real and distinct act, and it is what our rite performs. The bishop lays both hands on each candidate’s shoulders and prays, “**Pour out your Holy Spirit upon Full Name. Send him now** to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to announce the reign of God, and to equip the church for ministry.” There is an invocation of the Spirit and there is a laying on of hands, and there is a specific and careful withholding: “**No stole or other instruments of office are given** to commissioned ministers.”

The Ordinal’s own summary of what commissioning does runs to five clauses. It “acknowledges and affirms God’s call and the candidates’ response, gifts, abilities, and training”; it “**invokes God’s grace** for true service”; it credentials them to lead; it “calls candidates to enter a time of evaluation of their effectiveness”; and it offers them the annual conference’s support. And it says that commissioning “has implied that the person is being **sent** for service and the church invokes the Holy Spirit to empower commissioned ministers during their time of provisional membership.”

So the church already has the theology of commissioning that ¶ 325 does not state. It is the provisional **sending** of the called: real divine action invoked, real authority given, and the signs of an order deliberately withheld because the question of the order is not yet settled.

The rite also grounds it where this document has grounded everything. It opens by reminding the congregation that “by affirming the covenant of baptism, all members of Christ’s holy church pledge to serve as Christ’s representatives in the world,” and it puts the prophet’s words in the candidates’ mouths: they come “ready to respond generously to the Lord in the words of the prophet: ‘**Here I am; send me.**’” That is Isaiah 6, the same call narrative in which the coal is laid on the unclean lips before the sending. The rite has understood exactly what it is doing.

Commissioning as we practice it is a biblical distinction without a historic match in other traditions, and the document should say so before a reader discovers it. The Antioch pattern is genuinely there in Scripture. But no major communion has a permanent order or rite called commissioning that sits where ours sits, between licensing and ordination. The nearest analogue

elsewhere is the transitional diaconate, in which a person is ordained deacon on the way to priesthood, and that is not the same thing: it is ordination, and ours deliberately is not. When we commend commissioning ecumenically we should say what it is, a Methodist arrangement with a scriptural warrant and no direct parallel, rather than implying an ancient pedigree it does not have. This document has criticized the church for using words like *apostolic* warmly and vaguely. The same discipline applies to our own good ideas.

Two further difficulties belong on the record.

The first is that commissioning's meaning depends entirely on what follows it, and for many it now leads nowhere in particular. The provisional relationship is meant to be a season. But ¶ 327.7 provides that provisional members "**may not be retired**" and that those reaching mandatory retirement age "shall be **automatically discontinued**," though they may then be classified as retired local pastors. A relationship that cannot end in retirement and can end in automatic discontinuance is not a season of formation. It is a holding pattern with a cliff at the end.

A smaller provision shows the same shape and is worth having in view, because it is easy to get half right. Commissioned ministers who have completed all their educational requirements **may vote** to elect the clergy delegates to General and jurisdictional conferences (¶¶ 327.2, 602.1b). They **may not be elected** as delegates themselves: "They shall not be eligible for election as delegates to the General, central, or jurisdictional conferences" (¶ 327.3), and our Constitution restricts the pool, providing that clergy delegates "shall be elected from the clergy members in full connection" while listing a wider electorate that includes associate members, qualified provisional members, and qualified local pastors. So a commissioned minister helps choose who will speak for the conference and cannot be among those who speak. That may be exactly right for a season of testing. It is another place where the church has arranged a real distinction and never said what it rests on.

The second is that the church has never clearly said what distinguishes the Spirit's work in commissioning from the Spirit's work in ordination. Both invoke the Spirit; both involve the laying on of hands; one withholds the stole. If the difference is real, it is the difference between being *sent for a season to be tested* and being *sealed for life in an order*, and the church should say so, teach it, and make the practice show it.

Practice

Let the *Discipline's* account of commissioning say what the Ordinal already says. If commissioning is a sending, ¶ 325 should call it one, and should name Acts 13 as the church's warrant.

Teach the difference. Every congregation receiving a commissioned minister should be told, in terms of God's action, what has happened to this person and what has not, and why the stole was withheld.

Hold the provisional period to its purpose. If it is a season of evaluation, it should evaluate, it should conclude, and it should conclude in ordination or in an honest ending. The current provision by which a provisional member simply reaches an age and is discontinued treats a person's vocation as a term of employment that ran out.

And say what commissioning is not. It is not a lesser ordination, and it is not a waiting room.

It is the church saying to someone it believes God has called: go, we are sending you, and we will watch what God does through you before we say the rest.

Formation and Its Credentials

Principle

Formation is the shaping of those God has called, for the work God has called them to. It is not a set of attributes that qualifies a person to be considered, and the church should be able to tell the difference in its own processes.

Background

Nothing in this document is an argument against education. Isaiah's lips were touched and Jeremiah's mouth was filled, and neither man was left as he was found; God's qualifying of the called is not a substitute for preparation but the reason preparation is worth doing. Wesley, who required his preachers to read at set hours every day and built a curriculum for them, would have had no patience with the suggestion that learning is optional for a minister. Coke and Asbury put it well from the other side: "we are far from despising talents which may be rendered useful to the church of Christ. We know the worth of improved abilities."

The question is not whether formation matters. It is what role formation plays in the church's discernment, and there are only two possibilities. **Either formation is the shaping of a person the church believes God has called, or it is the accumulation of qualifications that make a person eligible to be called.** The first is election-logic and the second is selection-logic, and they can look identical from outside while being opposite in their theology.

Two features of our present arrangement suggest we have drifted toward the second.

The first is that our central credential measures an institution rather than a formation. The University Senate approves schools. A degree from an approved school counts; the same coursework elsewhere does not. What the church actually inspects is which institution a person attended, not what they learned, believe, or can do. That is not a criticism of the schools, many of which form ministers superbly. It is an observation about where the church has placed its trust: in a list of institutions rather than in an examination of persons. A church that believed its own doctrine of the call would be more interested in the second.

The second is that the same curriculum used to lead somewhere else. The Course of Study is now the educational track for licensed local pastors who are not ordained, and completing it is a condition attached to associate membership and to voting for General Conference delegates. In the *Discipline* of 1906 it is "the Course of Study prescribed by the Bishops as a preparation for elder's orders," and in 1920 a local preacher who completed the Four Years' Course of Study was ordained deacon, and four years later, with further study, ordained elder. The curriculum did not become inadequate. The road stopped.

Set that history beside the ecumenical consensus, which is more permissive than our practice.

The Lima text says candidates “need appropriate preparation through study of scripture and theology, prayer and spirituality, and through acquaintance with the social and human realities of the contemporary world,” and then adds: **“In some situations, this preparation may take a form other than that of prolonged academic study.”** The same document says plainly that “the church may also ordain people who **remain in other occupations or employment.**” Neither sentence is a concession wrung out of a reluctant committee. They are the settled view of churches that between them hold most of the world’s Christians.

There is a further cost that ought to be counted honestly. A residential graduate degree requires relocation, three years, and, for most people, considerable debt. Those requirements do not fall evenly. They fall hardest on people with dependents, on second-career candidates, on the bivocational, and on those rooted in a place by family or community. When a church makes a relocatable, debt-financed degree the ordinary road to ordination, it has not merely set a standard of learning. It has set a standard that selects for a particular kind of life, and it should not be surprised when the resulting clergy resemble the standard rather than the church.

None of this argues for lowering what ministers must know. It argues for examining people rather than trusting proxies. Coke and Asbury’s note on the trial of preachers says it as sharply as it can be said:

“Nothing will do for us without the life of God. **Brilliant parts, fine address, &c., are to us but tinkling cymbals, when destitute of the power of the Holy Ghost.**”

That sentence was written by two bishops who valued learning and had plenty of it. They were not disparaging preparation. They were putting it in its place, which is downstream of the call and in service of it.

Practice

Examine the formation, not the letterhead. Whatever educational requirements the church sets, the church should be able to say what it wants ministers to know, believe, and be able to do, and should test for those things directly. A credential is a proxy, and a proxy is only as good as the examination it replaces.

Make more than one road to the same competence, and say clearly where each road ends. If the church intends the Course of Study to be a genuine preparation for ministry, it should be honest about whether it prepares people for ordination, as it once did, or whether it has become a track designed to terminate.

Count the cost of the requirements the church sets, and name who pays it. A requirement that quietly selects for mobility, youth, and access to capital should at least be adopted knowingly, and defended as a formation requirement rather than allowed to function as a demographic filter that nobody chose.

And remember what formation is for. It is not to make a person worth calling. God has already done the calling, and, if this document has been right from the beginning, the calling is what supplies the fitness. Formation is the church’s part in a work God began, which is a humbler description of theological education than we usually give it and a far more hopeful one.

Itineracy and Appointment

Principle

Itineracy follows from the elder's covenant with the whole conference: ordered to the whole, and therefore sendable to any part of it. Appointment is the church's act of sending, and is to be governed by the mission rather than by the management of careers.

Background

Itineracy is usually presented to candidates as a requirement and defended as a sacrifice. Neither is a theological account, and the absence of one has left the practice looking like an employment condition dressed in noble language.

It does have a theological account, and this document has already laid the ground for it. An elder is not ordained to a congregation. An elder is received into an order and into an annual conference, and belongs to the whole of it. From that, sendability follows: a minister who belongs to the whole may be sent to any part. Itineracy is not what makes an elder; it is what an elder's covenant looks like when the conference needs someone somewhere. And appointment, on this account, is not the assignment of personnel. It is the church acting on the conviction that God "asserted his right to send by whom he would send," and trusting that the sending is God's before it is the cabinet's.

Sending is, in the first place, something Jesus does. He "appointed seventy others, and sent them two by two ahead of him into every city and place, where he was about to come," telling them that "the harvest is indeed plentiful, but the laborers are few," and that they should pray "to the Lord of the harvest, that he may send out laborers into his harvest" (Luke 10:1–3). They are sent in pairs, sent ahead of him, sent to places he intends to come himself. Paul makes the same point as a chain that ends in sending: "How will they hear without a preacher? And how will they preach unless they are **sent**?" (Romans 10:14–15). Our commissioning rite quotes the harvest saying, and our ordinal has the candidates answer in the words of Isaiah, "Here I am; send me." Sending is not a Methodist eccentricity. It is the ordinary New Testament shape of ministry, and itineracy is one church's attempt to keep doing it on purpose.

There is a second justification, older than the first and almost entirely forgotten. Coke and Asbury explained that the yearly conference is composed of those "who have been traveling the preceding year among all the societies," because they "can give the fullest, the completest information" on the matters the conference must decide: admissions, ordinations, the examination of character, and stationing. **A traveling ministry produces a body that knows the work well enough to testify about it.** Mobility serves discernment. When the church asks whether a candidate has borne fruit, it needs people in the room who have been out where the fruit is.

And there is Wesley's own reason, which was frankly about the preaching. Writing to Asbury in 1785 he was alarmed to hear of preachers staying three years in one place: "I startle at this... this is quite contrary to the whole economy of Methodism: **God has always wrought among us by a constant change of preachers.**" Whether or not one finds that persuasive now, notice the form of the argument. It is about what God does through a moving ministry, not about the orderly

management of clergy.

So itineracy can be derived, and this document derives it. Three honest difficulties follow immediately.

The first is that itineracy does not sort ordained from unordained. Full-time local pastors are appointed by the bishop and moved by the cabinet; they itinerate in every practical sense. Associate members are, by the *Discipline's* own words, "in the itinerant ministry of the Church" and "offer themselves without reserve." Deacons are ordained and do not itinerate in the elder's sense at all. Whatever line itineracy draws, it is not the line between those the church has ordained and those it has not.

The second is that the protections attach to the wrong end. Elders in full connection have security of appointment (§ 334), and associate members are granted "the same security of appointment as provisional members and members in full connection" (§ 321). Licensed local pastors have none. Guaranteed appointment is usually defended, rightly, as protection for clergy against congregations that would push out a woman, a person of color, or a prophetic voice. But a protection only protects those who have it, and the people most exposed to a congregation's displeasure are the ones the church has left outside it. That is worth naming as a fact about our arrangements rather than as an accusation against anyone.

The third is the one the church finds hardest to say aloud, and our own liturgy says it for us. In the order for admission of candidates, the bishop tells those coming into full membership: "You have indicated that you are **so situated in life** that you can accept the obligations of the itinerant ministry." And provisional candidates are asked whether they are "in debt so as to interfere with your work, or have **obligations to others** that will make it difficult for you to live on the salary you are to receive."

Being "so situated in life" is doing real work in those sentences. It is not a test of willingness; it is a test of circumstance. Who is so situated? People without dependents who cannot be moved, without aging parents nearby, without a spouse whose career is fixed, without a community they are needed in. When availability for relocation on the cabinet's timeline becomes the load-bearing condition for full clergy rights, the church has adopted a criterion that falls unevenly along lines of caregiving, class, and rootedness, and it has done so in language that makes the resulting exclusion look like a vocational choice the person made.

None of this is an argument that itineracy is unjust and should be abolished. It is an argument that a practice with a genuine theological ground has also been doing sorting work that nobody chose and few have examined. Both things are true, and a church that says only the first has not been honest with the people the second has cost.

Practice

Teach itineracy from the covenant, not from the requirement. A candidate who understands that they are being ordained to a whole conference and are therefore sendable within it has been given a reason. A candidate who has been told that itineracy is the price of ordination has been given a bill.

Appoint for the mission. Every appointment the church makes teaches the connection what

appointment is for, and appointments made to manage careers, to reward, or to park a difficulty teach that it is a personnel system. The elders who are moved will believe what the pattern tells them, not what the ordinal said.

Ask what “so situated in life” is actually screening for, and whether the church means to screen for it. If the answer is that the church needs ministers who can be sent, that is a real need and can be stated. If the answer is that we have been quietly selecting for a particular kind of household, the church should say so and decide whether it wants to.

And where the church protects clergy, ask who is left outside the protection. Security of appointment exists because congregations can be unjust. Congregations are not less unjust toward the ministers who lack it.

Conclusion: One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic

I began by saying that we know the branding and have lost the substance, and I have to end by admitting that this was not quite right. We have the substance. It is in our prayers. What we have lost is the connection between what we pray and how we order our common life, and once you start looking for that gap you find it everywhere: in a paragraph on licensing that never mentions God beside a rite that asks whether a person is moved by the Holy Spirit; in an ordinal that says ordination confers a new role beside official language that will only say what ordination is not; in questions about Christian perfection asked in unison and answered by applause.

The claim I have made throughout is that a doctrine of ministry has to run downward from God, and that this is not a methodological preference but the way Methodist doctrine works. Wesley’s convictions about providence, about the human person, about grace, all radiate from what he believed about God. If our doctrine of orders cannot be derived the same way, it is not doctrine. And the sentence I would put at the center of the whole thing is the one the ordinands already say for themselves, when they are asked whether they are going on to perfection and answer, *I am, by the grace of God: God does not call the qualified. God qualifies the called.*

The creed gives four marks of the church. They are a good place to test whether any of this has been worth saying.

One. We are a church of tiers, and the tiers do not correspond to anything our theology can name. We have ministers whose standing survives the loss of a post and ministers whose standing does not. We have an order that holds its members accountable and a fellowship that offers its members support and asks nothing, and we have arranged it so that the people asked for least are the ones on whom a third of our congregations depend. None of that came from a doctrine. It accumulated, one reasonable adjustment at a time, and the accumulation now teaches our people something about who counts that no one ever voted for. The unity of a church is not damaged only by schism. It is damaged by a settled arrangement that says, in the one language everyone reads, that some ministries are provisional forever.

Holy. Election is free in its ground and exacting in its end. God chooses without regard to what we bring, and chooses us *for* holiness, which is why a theology that begins in grace ends

in a demanding test rather than an easy one. Wesley's three marks are more exacting than any credential, because fruit cannot be earned by attending anything and cannot be certified by an institution; someone has to have watched, and someone has to be willing to say what they saw. A church serious about holiness would rather ask a hard question it might have to act on than a safe one that yields a file. It would also ask its candidates about perfection in a way that admitted of a disappointing answer.

Catholic. We are a small part of a large church, and on the questions in this document the wider church has been talking for a century and has said things we have not troubled to hear. The Lima text holds together what we have been unable to say in the same breath, that ordination is "an action by God and the community." It affirms without embarrassment that a church may ordain people who remain in other occupations, and that preparation "may take a form other than that of prolonged academic study." We already quote that document in our own teaching. We have simply not let it teach us.

And we have something to give, which is the more Methodist half of catholicity. The ecumenical text authenticates a call by the church's recognition of a person's **gifts and graces**. That is Wesley's first two marks, and the third is missing. *Have they fruit? Are any truly convinced of sin, and converted to God, by their preaching?* We should offer that question to the wider church, not as a correction, but as the thing our tradition has kept and might usefully hand on.

Apostolic. Here we must be more careful than we usually are, because our own first bishops were blunter than we are comfortable being. Coke and Asbury declared the doctrine of uninterrupted succession "utterly indefensible" and said that with the idea "exploded," the Methodist church has everything Scriptural and essential to justify its episcopacy. They grounded the office in the church's consent and in its fruit. So when we say *apostolic* we cannot mean an unbroken chain of hands, and we should stop letting the word do quiet work it cannot support. What we can mean, and what the ecumenical conversation gives us language for, is the apostolic tradition of the whole church: the gospel handed on, believed, and lived. And we can mean the plainer thing the word says. An apostle is someone who is sent. A church is apostolic when it goes on being sent, and it orders its ministry rightly when its offices are the shapes that sending takes.

Which returns to where the document started, and to what is actually at stake in all this precision. I have argued that vagueness about ordination is not reverence, and that its real effect is to leave no one accountable, because you cannot hold a person to a trust whose content the church has never been willing to state. The reverse is also true, and it is the more hopeful half. A church that can say what God does through its offices can ask its officers to be faithful to it, by name, and can say when they have not been. It can tell a licensed local pastor what she is, rather than what she is not yet. It can tell a deacon that his work in the world is the church's work and not an auxiliary to it. It can tell a bishop that the staff came before the gavel, and mean it. And it can tell the layperson who has led this congregation's ministry for thirty years that her baptism was a commissioning and that nothing in the church's order was ever meant to suggest she was someone who had failed to become something else.

Wesley's conference had a form for receiving a preacher into full connexion. They handed him the *Minutes*, inscribed with a sentence:

“As long as you freely consent to, and earnestly endeavor to walk by, these Rules, we shall rejoice to acknowledge you as a fellow-laborer.”

Not a rank, not a contract, and not a permission. An acknowledgment, offered gladly, on terms both parties could state. We could say that again, to more people than we currently say it to, if we first did the work of knowing what we meant.