



General Board of Higher Education & Ministry

The Ministry of the Elder

Those whose leadership in service includes preaching and teaching the Word of God, administration of the sacraments, ordering the Church for its mission and service, and administration of the Discipline of the Church are ordained as elders. –2004 Discipline, ¶303.2

Ordained to Word, Sacrament, and Order

The elder has primary responsibility for Word, the apostolic task of the faithful transmission of the faith and proclamation of the Word of God. For the elder, this includes primary responsibility for the preaching and teaching ministry, though preaching in Methodism has included the lay preacher, the local pastor and the associate member. The unique focus of the elder is the responsibility for administration of the sacraments and the ordering of the ministry of the church. For most elders, this will be lived out as the pastor in charge of a local congregation, but the elder's ministry is not restricted to the parish. They may be appointed to extension ministries (¶343), serving in a variety of settings. Because elders have been ordained to ordering the ministry of the church and administering the *Discipline*, bishops and district superintendents are chosen from ordained elders. Elders lead and serve the whole church in ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order.

Ordained to Service

As of 1996, the elder is also ordained to service. The addition of the word *service* to the elder's ordination is important since all ordained ministry is rooted in servant leadership. Since the elder is no longer ordained as a deacon, this makes clear there is a diaconal aspect to the ministry of the elder, lest elders be narrowly defined as parish priests within the congregation. For Wesley this meant refusing the constraints of parish boundaries and claiming the world as his parish. For us it means that elders as well as deacons are responsible for leading the church in service in the world. The elder is specifically ordained to order the church for its mission and service and to lead the church in service to God in the world. (¶303 and ¶305) Through prophetic preaching, biblical interpretation, sacramental administration, and theological reflection, the

elder equips all Christians for their ministry of service in the world. Some elders serve in extension ministries which reach beyond the local church through ministries such as military chaplaincy, campus ministry, and education. Wherever they serve, elders carry their vows of "Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order" as ordained representatives of the church of Jesus Christ.

Itinerant Clergy

For more than 200 years, the distinguishing mark of elders in the Methodist tradition has been the willingness to offer themselves "without reserve to be appointed and to serve" (¶333) wherever they are needed for the sake of the mission of the church. The elder makes a commitment to full-time service in the connection as an itinerant, "traveling preacher" under the authority of the bishop. All elders who are in good standing shall be continued under appointment unless they are on leave and are assured equitable compensation for their ministry. (¶342)

The itinerant system has assured pastoral leadership for every local congregation and has enabled the appointment of women and ethnic minority persons throughout the church. It represents the missional thrust of Methodism and the desire to go wherever there is need for the preaching of the gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, and the mission of the church in the name of Christ.

Elder as Pastor in Charge

As pastor of a local congregation, the elder assumes responsibility to oversee the total ministry of the local church in its nurturing ministries and in fulfilling its mission of witness and service in the world. These responsibilities include administrative oversight, evangelistic leadership, and programmatic planning as well as spiritual nurture and pastoral care in the congregation. (Duties are outlined in ¶340). The pastor sets the vision and direction of the congregation for witness in the world and leads the church in worship and liturgical life.

Steps into the Ministry of the Elder

Listen for God's Call

The call to ministry as an elder in the church is different from a career option or a job opportunity. It is a call from God to serve the church and the world, proclaiming the gospel and leading the church in its mission and ministry. Listen for God's call in your life.

Talk to a Pastor

Your pastor is one of the most important guides in your discernment of the call. Others will serve in this role as well. Consult with youth workers, deacons, camp counselors, Sunday School teachers, campus ministers, and other Christian leaders who can help you discern the direction of God's leading in your life.

Get a copy of *The Christian as Minister* and the *Ministry Inquiry Process* from your pastor or another church leader. They can help you use these texts for further discernment of a call to ministry. Copies of these texts are available from a Cokesbury Book Store.

Meet with the District Superintendent

If God is leading you to pursue ministry as an elder, you will meet with the district superintendent, enroll in the Candidacy program, and be assigned to a candidacy mentor who will work with you through the *Candidacy Guidebook*. This program will prepare you for a public declaration of your call to ministry before the Pastor Staff/Parish Relations Committee, the Charge Conference, and the district Committee on Ordained Ministry.

Recommendation of Charge Conference

After completion of your explorations of ministry with a candidacy mentor, you will meet with the Pastor Staff/Parish Relations Committee and the Charge Conference. With Charge Conference approval, you will be recommended for certification as a candidate for ordination as an elder in The United Methodist Church.

Approval of District Committee

Once you have worked through the *Candidacy Guidebook* with a mentor, and received the recommendation of the Charge Conference, you then will be interviewed by the district Committee on Ordained Ministry that will approve you as a candidate for elder's orders.

Complete Your Education

For most persons this means an undergraduate degree plus three years in a United Methodist seminary or other approved school of theology. Upon completion of the educational requirements, you will be received into probationary membership in the annual conference for a period of at least three years.

Ordination as an Elder

Ordination comes as the fulfillment of this journey of faith, but it marks the beginning of a lifetime of leadership in "Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order."

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