



# Itineracy & the Appointive System

Every year, as winter approaches, United Methodists gear up for another “appointment season,” where churches and church leaders begin to determine the deployment of pastors. It is a system that has been in place for many years, and yet there is often much confusion regarding how it works. Here are a few details to help you understand this process.

## The Ministry of all Christians

As the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* reminds us, all Christians are called by God, through their baptism, to be in ministry in the world. Thus all persons are “ministers of the Gospel,” offering God’s love to the world.

Within this body of ministers, the church recognizes that some are given specific gifts for leadership in the church. These persons are “ordained” or “licensed” for special service, and are usually referred to as “clergy.”

## Orders of Ministry

The United Methodist Church has identified three “orders” of persons serving vocationally in the life of the church:

**Local Pastors** are non-ordained persons who have fulfilled a minimum of educational requirements and are licensed to perform the duties of pastor in a local church. Often times these persons serve part-time, and are usually appointed to smaller congregations in rural areas. These persons have to complete a special “course of study over a five year period, and are mentored by ordained elders. These pastors are not guaranteed an appointment to a position under the United Methodist Book of Discipline.

**Deacons** are persons who have been ordained to ministries of service. These persons are non-itinerant, and serve in a variety of ministry settings. Deacons must undergo a more rigorous set of educational requirements than local pastors.

**Elders** are persons who have been ordained to lead congregations in the celebration of the sacraments, to preach the Word of God, and to guide and care for the life of the community. Elders are appointed by the Bishop to their settings on a year-to-year basis. Elders must have a Master of Divinity degree from an approved seminary, and undergo a rigorous candidacy procedure by the Board of Ordained Ministry. These persons are guaranteed an appointment by the Bishop under the rules of the *UM Book of Discipline*.

**Bishops** are elected from the order of Elders to provide “oversight and supervision of the spiritual and temporal activities of the church.” Bishops are appointed by the Jurisdictional Conference to serve a specific regional area. Yet, the Bishop doesn’t function as the chief executive officer of this area, but instead focuses on providing spiritual leadership for the churches and ministers under his or her supervision. One of the primary tasks for Bishops is to review the needs of local congregations and appoint ministers with the graces and gifts to help address those needs. The Bishops are assisted in this task by a **Cabinet of District Superintendents** who are elders appointed by the Bishop to assist in the task of supervision. District Superintendents are appointed to this task for a maximum of six years. Bishops, on the other hand, are elected for life.

## History of Itineracy

While all United Methodist clergy are appointed to their place of service by a Bishop, elders function under the system of “itineracy.”

Itineracy is a word derived from the word “itinerant,” which means “to travel from place to place, often working for a short time.” Itineracy is the system by which Bishops appoint pastors to serve congregations. The pastors, as a part of their vows of ordination, agree that they will travel to wherever the Bishop sends them, regardless of the location.

Methodism, as a movement, began with a group of traveling preachers (known as Circuit Riders) who would travel from place to place preaching and administering the sacraments. Francis Asbury, perhaps the most significant of the early Methodist bishops, believed that preachers grew stale if they served in one location too long (he believed that there were a fixed number of sermons in any preacher), and so he rotated these preachers among the various “circuits” in the church. This practice continues today, with United Methodist pastors appointed to a variety of congregations in a specific regional area (an annual conference).

## How Long Do Pastors Serve?

There is a myth among some persons that pastors are rotated on a regular schedule (every two years, every four years, etc.). This is not the case. Pastors are appointed on a year-to-year basis by the Bishop, and in fact can be moved at any time. While there was a tendency toward a regular schedule in past years, there has been a recognition in some circles that longer tenures are beneficial. The average length of a pastoral appointment church wide is 4.2 years.

## How Does This Work?

- In January, the Superintendent begins the process of **consultation**, a process of discerning the needs of congregations and pastors. During this time, the DS meets with all the pastors and the Staff Parish Relations Committees of all the churches to discuss how things are going, and to identify specific needs and concerns. The pastor and the SPRC also complete a form indicating their discernment regarding a move. Both the pastor and the SPRC are required to sign each other’s form so that no surprises occur.
- After all the forms are received and all the meetings are held, the Cabinet (the body of all the District Superintendents in a annual conference) meets with the Bishop to review the needs of the congregations and the preferences of the pastors. They also note any pastors who are retiring or taking leave, knowing that they will have to provide replacement pastors for these appointments.
- In a series of Cabinet Meetings in the late winter and early spring, the Bishop and the Cabinet determine what churches

and pastors are seeking moves. They then begin the process of matching the gifts and graces of pastors with congregations. As they do this, they take into consideration the family needs of the pastor, salary issues, and the size, composition, and history of the congregation. The Cabinet assists the Bishop with this task, but it is ultimately the responsibility of the Bishop to make the appointment.

- Once **projections** have been made by the Bishop, the members of the cabinet begin the process of informing the pastors and the congregations. These folks are usually given input into the projection, and there are occasions where pastors or congregations express their reservations about the projection. When possible, the Cabinet will then try another combination, until all the pastors are appointed. However, there are times when the wishes of the pastor or congregation cannot be met, and the person projected is appointed to a congregation against his or her will. That person then has to make the decision of living under itineracy (accepting the appointment) or to take some form of leave or retirement.
- Sometime in May, the District Superintendents send letters to the pastors and congregations officially informing them of the projected appointment. While these projections rarely change, it is still possible for changes to occur beyond this point.
- Finally, at the conclusion of the Annual Conference session in June, the Bishop reads and “seals” the appointments for the next year.

### **Why Don't We Get To Choose Our Pastor?**

The process of consultation with the DS and Bishop is a collaborative process of sorts. Yet, the *Discipline* gives the Bishop to sole authority to make the appointment. Why? While one reason is that it's part of heritage, the deeper reason is that we believe that the Bishop has the ability to see the full range of needs in the Annual Conference and thus has the ability to match pastoral gifts with pastoral needs.

- The sharing of gifts with multiple congregations.
- The ability to avoid a pastor-centered congregation and empower the ministry of the laity.
- Freeing congregations from the burdensome task of identifying and hiring pastors.
- A connect with other congregations (the shared pastor) which leads to synergistic alliances and partnerships.
- The guarantee of a pastor (for a congregation) and an appointment (for a pastor).
- A regular process of evaluation

### **What Are The Weaknesses of Itineracy?**

- Shorter pastoral tenure (on average).
- The inability of the congregation to self-determination of leadership.
- The difficulty for the pastor to become rooted in a community.
- Stress on the pastor and pastor's family

### **Current Challenges for the Itineracy**

- Dual career families
- The inconsistency of public / private education
- Parsonages versus housing allowances
- The desire of individuals to be rooted in a particular place

### **What Are The Strengths of Itineracy?**