

## Ministry of all Christians

Christ is God's gift of love to the world and that love takes the form of servanthood. The ministry of Christ is a response to that love and the church is a new covenant made in Christ and in response to the love of God revealed in Christ. This is a general ministry required of all Christian believers. Every Christian is a minister of Christ.

**Ordained ministry:** within the general ministry and always remain a part of it.

- **Deacons:** those called to a ministry of Word and Service.
- **Elders:** those called to a ministry of Service, Word, Sacrament, and Order.

The call to ordained ministry comes inwardly from God and is outwardly affirmed through the judgment and the validation of the church. Takes place through the board of ordained ministry and the ordained ministers in full connection at an annual conference, who vote upon ordination and conference membership.

All parts of ministry (deacon, elder, lay) do not rank above other parts. Pastors are not considered to be employees of local churches (despite how IRS and other outside entities classify them).

## Local Church

The *Discipline* says, "The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world. It is primarily at the level of the local church that the church encounters the world. The local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society." The church is not an institution existing for itself. It exists to encounter and serve the world in which it lives. The image of the servant church is based on the servanthood of Christ himself, who continuing body the church is.

The local church is not so much a place where you go to do church work as it is a training ground from which you go to do your most vital church work in your daily contacts with the people in the world outside the church. Worship that does not lead to service to the world is sterile and service to the world that is not rooted in worship has no lasting foundation.

*Pastoral charge:* a community of persons over whom a pastor, appointed by a bishop, is *charged* with pastoral oversight. But being *in charge* does not mean the pastor has the authority to run the church and do all the decision-making. It means that the pastor is ultimately held responsible for what happens in the charge committed to him or her by appointment of the bishop. It is an honor with responsibility to be named a pastor of an United Methodist Church.

Parish: a number of local churches of various denominations come together to provide various forms of ministry to a certain area. The parish concept is being increasingly used.

## ***The Meaning of Church Membership***

We're members of a local church and the global UM connection and of the church universal. Unbounded by geography or time. The vows of membership are a kind of covenant with God and with the members of the local church.

“Do you in the presence of God and this congregation renew the solemn vow and promise made at your baptism?” This recognizes the two-step process of becoming a full member of the church: baptism and confirmation.

“Do you truly and earnestly repent of your sins?” Repentance is critical before passage into full joy and responsibility of church membership.

“Do you believe in God the Father? ...Do you believe in Jesus Christ? ...Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” These questions evoke a declaration of belief, framed around the ancient creed of the Western church: the Apostles' Creed. Personal pledge of loyalty to the Triune God with a central emphasis on Jesus Christ. A Christian is defined more in terms of following Christ than in terms of having a particular doctrine or theory *about* Christ. Various theories but the same Christ.

“Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?” Clearly identifies the Christian faith with the biblical faith. The interpretation of the biblical faith is not spelled out because every Christian is free to read and interpret the Bible for him/herself. United Methodists passionately believe in that freedom.

“Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to keep God's holy will and commandments and walk in the same all the days of your life as a faithful member of Christ's holy church?” Calls for everyday deeds and attitudes that reflect the doctrinal affirmations already made. In the Wesleyan idea of grace “according to the grace given you” provides the source of motivation that enables us to promise to live a Christian life. It is life lived in grateful response to God's gracious gift in Christ.

“Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?” Specifies our responsibility toward a particular branch of Christ's church, The UMC. Two-way street of both privileges and responsibilities. We're the ones responsible for carrying out the mission. Is this a life-time binding to the UMC? No. Our promise to lifetime membership is to the church of God, the church of Jesus Christ. The last vow is made with the understanding that it is in effect until such time that your own circumstances may dictate that you should transfer your membership to another denomination. So, church of Christ for life and UM branch of that church for the time being.

Age of confirmation is not specified, but usually the youngest is after completion of sixth grade. The members and pastors are called upon to bring youth into confirmation classes but no specification of the number of sessions. It should be enough so that confirmands know what they are getting into. Baptism make people members but confirmation makes

them “professing members”. Only “professing members” are counted in the church stats. Much of the meaning of confirmation is found in the participation of the congregation.

Transfer of membership by “certificate of transfer” is for those who are members in good standing of other denominations and have been baptized. For those who were members of churches that don’t issue certificates, they may be received on their declaration of faith and willingness to be loyal to the UMC.

“Affiliate members” are those residing temporarily away from their home church for an extended period of time. They can participate and hold office in the church of their temporary residence but are still counted as members of their home church. “Associate members” are those whose home church is another denomination. They have the same privileges as affiliate members.

Although individual members do have the primary responsibility of faithfully performing their vows and living the Christian life, the pastor and church council is expected to provide a program of care and nurture that will assure the members of the continuing care and concern of the church.

**Five ways membership in a local UMC is terminated:** death, transfer, withdrawal, expulsion, or action of the charge conference. Pastors need to see that transfers are effected so that persons become members where they are, including notifying the pastor of the new local church where the person now resides. Withdrawal is the voluntary giving up of membership. Expulsion requires church trial under procedures given in the *Discipline*. Action of charge conference is when someone has stopped participating in any way in the life of the church. Over a two-year period, the church must try to locate and reactivate them. The names of the inactive members must be read at the charge conference for two consecutive years. So there’s a “first reading”, a “second reading”, and then finally a “third reading” of the inactive members when they are officially removed from church membership. Church membership is important and should not be terminated lightly. But our heritage of the disciplined societies of Wesley convinces us that membership carries with it obligations & responsibilities of the individual members. In no case do pastors have the power to terminate or transfer membership simply by their own action.

### ***How New Churches Are Started***

Though the *Discipline* makes it seem like starting a new church is a top-down approach with the bishop and his/her cabinet (all the district superintendents in the annual conference) arbitrarily deciding when/where to start a new church, it is actually the reverse. A need for a congregation becomes evident. The district superintendent is made aware of the need (pastor, laypeople in the new community, council of churches, etc.) and works to fill that need through the proper channels. What’s described in the *Discipline* is a “screening process” in the starting of new churches. This process ensures that commitments to start a new church don’t overtax the personnel and financial resources of the conference.

The district superintendent takes the case to the bishop and cabinet. Among other things, they decide if there would be someone available to pastor the new church. Then they confer with the conference board of global ministries which holds the money for the project (salary for the new pastor + grant/loan money for land purchase and erection of buildings). The board of global ministries has to consider the request but it does not have to approve it.

Then the superintendent must get the approval of the district board of church location and building. The actual constituting of the church usually takes place after some months of the appointment of the pastor to the field, has commenced holding worship services, and has gathered the nucleus of a congregation together. Only the superintendent or a pastor with special permission from the superintendent can constitute the new local church. On the appointed day those who desire to unite with the church are invited to present themselves for membership, by transfer and by profession of faith. As soon as these persons have been received, the superintendent immediately convenes the constituting church conference, made of all those who had just been received. All of them vote to elect members at large. Once the church is properly constituted, the superintendent adjourns the constituting church conference and calls the charge conference into session. At the charge conference, officers, trustees, and committees necessary to operate the church are elected.

### ***How Churches Are Governed***

The policies and programs of the local church are made by democratically elected bodies and officials operating within the framework of the *Discipline*. The pastor is involved creatively in the decision-making process, feeling free to initiate ideas without dominating the scene. Laity and clergy work together to carry out the mission of the church.

### **The Charge Conference**

The supreme governing body in the affairs of the local church. Has general oversight of the church council, which is the continuing year-round governing body. Historically it met quarterly but today it is usually just an annual meeting. Special sessions may be called usually related to taking action on important property matters that require charge conference approval.

Membership of the charge conference identical to that of the church council with exception of retired clergy and retired diaconal ministers who elect to hold membership in a charge conference but are not automatically members of the church council. Also: the district superintendent or his/her duly appointed representative must preside over a charge conference. Certain key decisions & actions can be made only by the charge conference. The requirement of having the superintendent or his/her representative present keeps the local church from making certain key decisions & actions in isolation from the connectional system. Our membership vow is to the whole United Methodist Church, not to just one particular local church. We are a connectional church!

“The members present and voting at any duly announced meeting shall constitute a quorum.” This provision is very different from most organizations which require a stated number of persons to be present for a quorum. United Methodism has refused to let its

structure be immobilized by members staying home. Thus if a charge conference has been properly called with ten days' notice and only the district superintendent and one other person show up for the meeting, the business can go forward. This provision also holds for the church council.

### **Powers and Duties:**

- Hearing reports of the officers, committees and organizations of the church
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the total program
- Establishing goals and proposals to be implemented by the church council
- Electing all officers and committees of the church
- Giving its recommendation (by written ballot with 2/3's majority) to all candidates for ministry before they can qualify. Those who know the candidates best are the best ones to judge if the persons have the "gifts and graces" to be good ministers of Jesus Christ.
- Setting the pastor's salary for the year
- Interpreting the amount the church has been apportioned for World Service and conference benevolences. The requirement of having the superintendent preside at the charge conference means the pastor has an advocate for adequate pastoral support. The superintendent is also an advocate for all the missionaries and workers of our Church who must depend upon the faithfulness of the local churches to sustain them. The superintendent makes sure there is a proper balance between pastoral support and support of the other church workers beyond the local church. A superintendent's argument is based on moral force and not on disciplinary sanctions. While the presence of the district superintendent does not dictate the decisions to be made, it does provide that they shall be made in the light of the total responsibility that a local United Methodist church carries.

### **The Church Council**

The month-to-month governing body of the local church. Certain officers are members by virtue of office but additional members can be elected by the charge conference. All members, organizations and agencies of the local church except the trustees must answer to the church council. The trustees answer to the charge conference.

Must meet at least quarterly and plan annually. "The church council shall provide for the planning and implementing of a program of nurture, outreach, witness, and resources in the local church and for the administration of its organizational and temporal life". The pastor is the administrative officer. The *Discipline* does not say whether or not the pastor has a vote. The pastor has the right to be present at any group meeting except for the pastor-parish (staff-parish) relations committee. The PPR (SPR) committee may meet with the district superintendent without the pastor being present to discuss the pastor's status.

The church council adopts the church budget. The finance committee has the responsibility of recommending a budget, but the church council has the final authority and may change the church budget as long as the members give their wholehearted support to a raise in giving for any increases in the budget. The church council assumes responsibility for the budget it has voted on.

### Some key officers:

- Lay leader is the top lay official of a local church who may chair the church council. The lay leader should have a broad understanding of the total work of the UMC that enables them to communicate and counsel with the pastor. The lay leader needs to make it his/her business to acquire a good understanding of the total work of the Church.
- Lay member(s) of annual conference represents the local church to the annual conference and votes on matters that may profoundly affect the local church. The lay member needs to be an effective communicator who can return from the annual conference and convey to the local church the significance of annual conference actions.

### The Council on Ministries

This used to be a mandatory structure before the 1996 General Conference. The church council now takes on the responsibility of matters of nurture, outreach, and witness.

### Committees

Three mandatory committees in the structure of each local church:

- **Committee on lay leadership** (nominations committee) presents nominations annually for practically all the offices, committees, and commissions of the local church. This committee's members are elected to three-year terms that are staggered to ensure continuity. Retiring members cannot succeed themselves. Also has responsibility throughout the year for working with personnel (other than paid staff) in conjunction with the church council. The pastor chairs this committee.
- **Committee on pastor-parish relations** deals with the delicate matter of the relations between the pastor (+ other employed staff) and the people of the church. It is to be a continuing, positive, creative group whose primary function is to aid the pastor (staff) in making his/her ministry effective by being available for counsel, keeping the pastor advised concerning conditions within the congregation as they affect relations between pastor and people, and continually interpreting to the people the nature and function of the pastor office. It must meet at least quarterly according to the *Discipline* but even more frequently is better. Not only does it inform the pastor of conditions within the congregation, it must also inform the congregation of the needs of the pastor (e.g., pastor's need for study time, for continuing education opportunities, and for adequate days off and vacation time).

Pastors should not insist being present every minute when the committee meets so that the members can discuss some things about the pastor without him/her present. When it becomes evident to the committee that a change in pastors is needed, the committee must furnish the pastor with this information itself; not rely on the superintendent to do that. The committee works in an advisory way with the district superintendent and bishop in the matter of a new appointment.

This committee is also the personnel committee for all paid staff, recommending

- personnel to the church council after consultation with the pastor. The committee also interviews persons of the local church seeking to be candidates for the ministry and to make recommendations about them to the charge conference.
- **Committee on Finance** is charged with budget making and budget raising. It answers to the church council. Needs to be commonsense, hard-headed but avoid letting preconceived notions of “how much we can raise” determine and limit the church’s program. Within reasonable limits the finance committee draws up the budgets of projected programs and then spearheads the annual canvass with a maximum effort, letting the people decide through their giving whether or not they will support the programs. If they don’t, then the finance committee needs to make recommendations to the church council to trim back the budget.