

“Have they fruit?”
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What does the process of clergy location have to do with a call for effectiveness? In the disciplinary paragraphs dealing with this matter, there is an explicit statement that clergy located have been found to be “ineffective, inefficient or indifferent” to the work of ministry. Clergy location is a result of a process of evaluation of clergy effectiveness which involves three major factors -- the individual clergy person, the Annual Conference, and the mission of the church.

The call for clergy effectiveness has its origins in John Wesley’s practical understanding of theology and ecclesiology. The conference structure – begun in England by Wesley, transplanted to America by Thomas Rankin, and nurtured under Francis Asbury – worked to formalize this call and develop procedures for dealing with clergy no longer “useful” to the conference. Rankin and Asbury (as well as many of the early bishops and clergy) fiercely guarded the small pool of Methodist clergy against any signs of ineffectiveness or inefficiency. They strongly felt any weakness on the part of the clergy weakened the effectiveness of the Gospel.

It is probably not a coincidence that no appeals regarding location reached the General Conference until after that body became a delegated body and until after the death of Francis Asbury. Nor is it likely a coincidence that the most sustained opposition to this in the 19th Century came at the point when the denomination was developing a more corporate and bureaucratic structure. Some clergy were, therefore, beginning to feel isolated from the mechanism of government. Writing in the early 1890s, Allen Gee noted that most opposition to location claims was on constitutional grounds, but in reality resulted from the fear of maladministration. This claim can be justly applied at any point in history.

Between its introduction into the *Discipline* in 1836 until 1980 there was little change in the overall process of how to locate clergy. Most of the changes made over time were to ensure that clergy received timely notice and a fair hearing by the conference. The focus of the legislation was to help the annual conference ensure the quality of its membership, thereby ensuring effectiveness in proclaiming the Gospel message.

The changes in the legislation introduced at the 1980 General Conference have put the focus on the preservation of clergy rights and downplayed the role and needs of the annual conference to have an effective body of clergy to spread the Gospel. While it can be argued that the 1980 changes seek to provide a better theological context for the discussion of effectiveness and location than prior editions of the *Discipline*, the changes introduce a more complicated set of procedures. The confusion of the administrative and judicial matters has allowed ineffective, inefficient, and indifferent pastors to remain in the itinerant system.

The actions taken in the 1880s by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the rulings of the Judicial Council between 1939 and 1968 sought to separate the administrative and judicial processes of the church. But the legislation introduced into the 1980

Discipline regarding complaints and location caused confusion on these matters. This confusion exists at all levels of the church – from the local staff-parish relations committee to the Council of Bishops, which has twice attempted to achieve a greater measure of clarity.

One measure of this confusion is in the number of ministers located each year in the United Methodist Church, recorded in the *General Minutes of the United Methodist Church*. In 1981, the first year the new language regarding location was in the *Discipline*, there were 112 clergy located, but by 2004, that number had dropped to 48. This is a dramatic decline in the number of clergy located. The decline is even more dramatic when you consider the larger trend. In 1970, for example, 264 clergy were located as compared to 48 in 2004. (See Appendix.)

While one would expect some measure of decline since the overall number of clergy has declined over time, the decline in location far exceeds the rate of decline of the clergy population. While multiple factors account for this decline, several possible explanations present themselves.

First, the confusion over the rules and procedures has made bishops and district superintendents reluctant to take this route. This confusion stems in large part from the actions taken at the 1980 General Conference. While the judiciary bodies of the church have affirmed repeatedly the need for due process, timely notification, and the rights of clergy to defend themselves before the annual conference, the current state of affairs may have unfairly tipped the scales in favor of the clergy and belittled the needs of the annual conference. The complicated procedures and the potential of legal proceedings seem to be a strong incentive for bishops and district superintendents simply to let ineffective clergy remain in the system.

Second, the church reflects the increased litigiousness of our society, thus increasing advocacy for rights of individual clergy over and against the annual conference. The increased litigiousness in our society has deadened the practice of locating clergy. Threat of possible civil action in secular courts requires increased diligence on the part of district superintendents and bishops, taking away both time and money from the mission of the church. There is little doubt that the church must think creatively about the nature of the itinerancy. But the 1980 legislation regarding clergy location may reflect a trend in the itinerancy system toward clergy rights, at the expense of the larger mission. The affirmation of clergy rights should not come at the expense of the mission of the church.

Finally, there is the confusion over what constitutes effectiveness and what the mission of the church is in the world today. These two issues are intertwined. Without a clearly articulated purpose it is hard to define effectiveness. The church needs to enter into a larger discussion about its purpose and mission and then begin to organize around that purpose.

Given this history and the present situation, what are some possible steps forward?

First, refocus the attention around clergy effectiveness and location from the individual clergy to the annual conference. The bishops need to build a broad consensus about what constitutes clergy effectiveness and how the process of location is to be used. Then, the bishops and the district superintendents should receive adequate training and support regarding these matters.

Second, annual conferences must develop and implement definitions of effectiveness to evaluate the members of the annual conference. While there has been a drop in the overall number of clergy being located in the United Methodist Church, a survey of location rates in the *General Minutes* indicates some conferences have programs that work to identify and remove ineffective clergy from the membership of the annual conference. West Ohio is one notable example.

A third way forward would be to seek a greater separation between the administrative and judicial processes of the church. In particular, it would be beneficial if the fair process review and process of administrative location served in place of the trial for clergy whom the conference seeks to locate. As it currently stands, clergy who are to be located may request a formal trial; this was not the case for much of our history. Judicial Council Memorandum 1001, if the question had not been moot, would have directly addressed this issue. Judicial Council Decision 485 affirms that given the state of *Discipline* in 1980 clergy did have a right to a trial, but does not directly reverse Decision 351. If Judicial Council Decision 351 is overturned, the right of trial to every clergy being located would be guaranteed.

A fourth way forward would be if the denomination or even an annual conference can regain a sense of missional urgency, as Bishop Oden describes it. It will help invigorate the call for effective clergy and has the potential to reshape the legislative agenda.

In an ideal world we could return to the language of 1972 *Discipline*, but that is not possible. Given the numerous changes that have occurred since 1980, more change may not be best in short term. The resulting confusion and inevitable Judicial Council cases would gain the church little. The best possible legislative change would be to separate administrative complaints from judicial complaints, putting as much editorial distance between the two as possible. Any such draft of legislation would need to take into careful account the reasoning in Judicial Council Decision 485.

In reviewing Judicial Council decisions related to clergy location dating back to 1940, a trend emerges, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. This trend is toward shorter Judicial Council decisions with less analysis included in the decision. It is arguable that the more recent Judicial Council decisions regarding clergy location have not consistently taken into account the historical precedents. The Judicial Council could aid the church by rendering more substantive rulings. While the workload of the Judicial Council currently presses against this, a more substantive dialogue and consideration is crucial.

The changes outlined above would have the advantage of focusing on the annual conference. They build on the rights and privileges given the annual conference and bishops under the Constitution of the church. Such methods are therefore more resistant to legislative change by those who oppose measures that seek to implement greater ongoing evaluation. The charged political atmosphere of the church, and in particular the General Conference, does not lend itself to making major changes in the process of location.

Given this long history, and especially the changes of the last twenty-five years, the best opportunity for change lies in the annual conference. Annual conferences must once again decide whether they are in the words of J. H. Buckley, “insurance societies for incompetent or inefficient men at the expense of efficient ministers” or agents for God’s purposes in the world through the efficient and effective implementation of ministry.