

## A Methodist Perspective on MOE

H.-M. Niethammer

I want to start with a paragraph from the United Methodist Document on Ecclesiology “Sent in Love, A United Methodist Understanding of the Church”, recently finished. It states:

“Maintaining the apostolicity of the church requires that a concern for continuity in the essentials of faith and practice be matched by an equal concern for an outward reaching missional perspective. This perspective is mindful that encountering the world with the gospel calls the church to ongoing reform and renewal of its life, a “traditioned innovation” that allows the church to express the life-giving truth of the gospel in fresh ways as the faithful encounter new people in new places (Sent in Love ¶56).” And it continues to identify four convictions that give life to our United Methodist sense of what it means to be God’s Holy Church in the world.

- The saving love of God creates community (called to be one).
- The saving love of God is transformative (called to be holy).
- The saving love of God empowers a missional community (called to be apostolic).
- The saving love of God is meant for all people (called to be catholic).

Apostolic Authority is a result of our participation in the mission of Christ. Core perspective of our Methodist discernment on Ministry, Ordination and Episkope is Gods mission, the *missio dei*. This has to be said first, before I start my report from the United Methodist Church in Europe.

Nevertheless: Despite claiming “traditioned innovation”, the United Methodist Church (UMC) also feels *the tension* between tradition and renewal: Diversification and differentiation of ministries have continued to increase in recent years. Traditionally, the UMC ordains “elders”—to Word and Sacrament – since 75 years also women. Since 1996, there are ordained deacons. Both are, by virtue of their office, members of the Annual Conference – part of the episkope - and members of the Order of the Ordained. In addition, the Book of Discipline recognizes terms for ministry such as: „provisional members, extraordinary members (i.e. of conference), local

pastors, localized pastors, lay missionaries, lay servants, lay speakers. And regarding episkope you'll find under the header "Superintendency" bishops and superintendents.

However, observations over the past few years show that this abundance is not enough. Our church leaders are very inventive when it comes to creating new titles and terms, and they demonstrate great flexibility when it comes to employment issues. Is that traditioned innovation or is it just betrayal of tradition?

This illustrates how strongly market conditions and the social context influence these issues: We are no longer in an employer market, but in an employee market. As everywhere, we are experiencing a shortage of students and candidates, as well as an increase in candidates seeking a second career in the church in higher age. There is also an increasing number of immigrant applicants from international Methodism. In the 1980s and 1990s—when there was a surplus of theologians—a good number of applicants coming from a Lutheran / Reformed background could be hired. Today, Methodist pastors easily switch to a more lucrative pastoral position in one of the former State Churches. These are the two faces of mutual recognition of ministries. In their place, people with less traditional training or committed laypeople often step in.

This changes things: Years ago, the church could easily impose its conditions and its definitions of ministry on applicants. Today, it's the other way round: candidates define what they see as their calling—and the church seeks or creates a place for them, where they could live out their ideas. And if it does not they are off very quickly. They have many options. I'm talking about Germany, but I think this is the case throughout Europe.

I should mention that the UM-Churches in Europe are not simply autonomous. The legislative body is the General Conference, which represents Methodists from four continents. It is nearly impossible to establish an order of ministry that applies equally to Africa, Tennessee, New York, Hungary, and Norway, with the promise that every ordained minister can claim the right to serve as a pastor in every other country.

Therefore, for like 50 years, the General Conference has established a study group every quadrennium to provide guidance on matters of ministry—I had the privilege of serving on one such group for the last period. Yet the recommendations have rarely found their way into legislation. Like a Gordian knot, many of the discussed issues revolve around the question of the sacramental authority. That unordained men and women may preach is one of the axioms of the Methodist movement. No ordination is required for this. But may they also administer

the sacraments? Observations show that in the U.S. today, approximately 70% of Methodist Communion services are “conducted” by the unordained. This is due to the trend of fewer and fewer ordained elders. An ordained elder would be known by three characteristics: fully educated, full-time, and itinerant—fully mobile locally. Typically Methodist! This is not very attractive. So many tend toward the local pastor, with part-time hours, shorter training, and no transfers. But without them, the widespread provision of Holy Communion could not be maintained at all. The solution was found in a concept of licensing, i.e., a temporary conferral of sacramental authority. This, in turn, leads to feelings of envy among the ordained, who view this authority as their only remaining privilege, - and possibly to theological aporias: What, then, is the point of ordination?

For this reason, the Study Group lately focused on a theology of ordination. It identified this as the core point for many questions around ministry, bishops, and the ministry of all baptized. A paper called “A Sacred Trust” was completed in 2019 for the 2020 General Conference. Unfortunately, it then fell victim to the General Conference’s four-year postponement due to the pandemic and the all-encompassing discussion about homosexuality. It has received little attention so far.

I want to show you at least the definition: “Ordination is a visible and outward sign of the sacred trust of clergy leadership. It is a gift of God, given to Christ’s church through the power of the Holy Spirit. As a holy act of the Church universal it empowers clergy, who manifest an inward and spiritual grace, to represent the divine initiative at work in the community through the life of apostolic ministry. It bears witness to the mission of God at work in the world as a sacramental offering, rooted in our common baptism and one Table.”

Let me highlight four points:

- Ordination is a gift to a Church which asks and prays and has the need for leadership.
- Ordination is sacramental without being a sacrament.
- Ordination discerns a clergy from laity. The church needs leadership. But all ministry is representative.
- The focus lies on the act of ordination, which transfers somebody into a new status within the community. It is emblematic and effective at once.

As a consequence, the paper's proposal is to ordain everyone who presides over the Eucharist Table and get rid of the practice of licensing.

For me personally, however, this conclusion is too narrow, because it ultimately reduces ordination to the aspect of giving the sacramental authority. This leaves unclear what "presiding" at the Table actually means, given that many people participate actively in it. It would be a narrow understanding to say that ordained ministers must do "everything" alone, just as it would be wrong to say that they must speak certain phrases or simply be present.

If we could learn to see sacramental authority not as an individual privilege, but as a collegial responsibility of the order of Elders, that would change our perspective. It would be deeply grounded in the mission of the Church to spread the Gospel in word and sacrament. The order of Elders in common would be responsible for the administration of the Sacraments. And the goal would not be to administer it exclusive, restrictive, but inclusive: Invite as many people as possible to the Table. Elders could share the duty with others, they can authorize and empower others, to lead congregations in the Communion Service, without losing their authority. Because this is their authority: to facilitate Communion. This would be totally Wesleyan, not to restrict the Sacrament to few, but offer it - for all.

Martyria (word), leiturgia (sacrament), diakonia (service), and koinonia (life as a community) are the calling of all Christians. In order for the Church to remain faithful to its mission, it needs leadership in all these areas. It must ensure that it remains apostolic in its proclamation, catholic (inclusive) in its liturgy, holy (transformative) in its action, and one in its fellowship. Leadership is servant leadership. Leadership can be exercised collegially and personally. This can be regulated differently in different churches. These four areas are traditionally carried out through three ministries: In almost all churches, people are ordained for ministry to the Word and the Sacrament. Deacons are also frequently ordained, though not always with an accent on diaconal ministry, as we understand the Methodist diaconate (which has become important to me in my professional life in a diaconal institution). Whether a separate ministry like bishops is needed as a ministry to unity is regulated differently even among Methodists.