

Putting Clergy in Their Place

John Wesley was more revolutionary than even he knew. He began his ministry at a time when there was a rigid separation between clergy and laity. Clergy administered sacraments, preached, taught, and did pretty much everything else. In return for this specialized labor, clergy were granted an honored place in the social order. Lay people? They supported the church by paying their taxes and attending worship services, except for the “attending worship services” part.

Wesley didn't mean to change all this. He was himself the son of a clergyman, and both he and his brother Charles had been ordained. He was a part of that system. So when he began calling for all Christians to live their lives wholly for Christ, even lay people, he invited other clergy to join him. Few did. From John's perspective, he had no choice. If he wanted the message preached, he would have to send out lay people to do the preaching.

But once lay people began running the Methodist Preaching Houses preaching in the fields and on the street corners, there was no going back. Lay leadership became deeply ingrained in the Methodist psyche. Much has been made of the Methodist Circuit Riders – hard-working clergy who traveled thousands of miles, serving dozens of frontier churches – but we sometimes forget that between those clergy visits, those frontier churches operated for months on end without clergy. The amazing thing about the Circuit Rider system is not how much those dedicated clergy did; the amazing thing is how little they had to do because lay people were quietly doing it on their own.

Methodists lost sight of this heritage for a while. Perhaps we were victims of our own success. As we became one of the largest, and the most wide-spread, church in the nation, we turned to professionals to run our increasingly complex church. Clergy administered sacraments, preached, taught, and did pretty much everything else. In return for this specialized labor, clergy were granted an honored place in the social order. Lay people? Far too often, they supported the church by sending in a tax-deductible pledge and attending worship services, except for the “attending worship services” part.

I've oversimplified. In fact, the church has always had strong, committed lay people, who lived their lives wholly for Christ, and the church has never been able to function without them. In our own church, every successful new ministry we've had since I've been here has begun with an idea from a lay person and has been planned and carried out by laity. (See *Memory Café*, p. 4.) But it is true that in recent years Methodists have too often forgotten that. It's time to remember, both at the local and the conference levels – time again to celebrate the laity.

This is why we did the “Sign Up Station” in May – a reminder that our church runs on your energy and commitment. And this is why I am looking now for lay people who will serve on a Lay Circuit Team – to work with lay people from the other churches of Central Wisconsin to plan what sorts of ministries we intend to do together. The amazing thing about church should never be how much we clergy do; it should be how little the church needs us to.