

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Whom shall we send?

What qualities should we look for in our top church leaders? That's a question all church members need to consider. Delegates who will elect bishops next month at United Methodist Jurisdictional Conferences have been considering it for months. Let's hope the UMC clergy who are offering themselves as bishop candidates considered it before deciding to run.

I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" . . .
—Isaiah 6:8

Can Jesus be our model?

For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.
—Titus 1:7-9

The Bible lists some qualifications that bishops should have. Some may reflect only the church and the culture in which they were written, but many still apply.

What about using Jesus as a model? Much of what he did is very different from what today's top church leaders do. He dressed and spoke like the ordinary people of his day. Few people recognized him as the Messiah because he didn't act like a king or even like a typical religious leader.

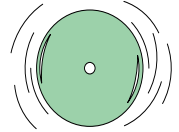
He made his most famous public appearance riding a donkey. He didn't make grand entrances wearing special clothing or brandishing traditional symbols of power.

Jesus showed his power by teaching and healing, not by using the world's ways or



Bring on the jargonometer!

At church meetings I often wish for a machine that would sound an alarm whenever a speaker used church jargon—a jargonometer, I'd call it.



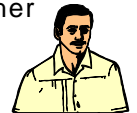
Church leaders' habit of speaking in church-insider language is part of what makes church meetings and structure seem pointless to many members and makes churches seem pointless to nonmembers. Clergy develop the jargon habit in seminary, and unfortunately it's contagious. Lay people who attend a lot of church meetings catch it quickly.



Some UMC bishop candidates' statements that I read recently were full of it. One candidate says he is good at "visioning for future ministry while allowing for modification to suit the needs of the constituency." "We must redefine our commonality," he continues. Another says he doesn't want the UMC to "devalue the process of personal faith appropriation." Another says, "Church structures should have a level of fluidity that corresponds to the relational dynamics of our faith."

"What does 'episcopal' mean?"

A use of church jargon that I hear often is saying "episcopal leader" instead of simply "bishop." This habit always reminds me of the time in a Sunday School class when I asked members' reactions to a questionnaire from a UMC agency. A question about the current UMC "episcopal initiative" brought only silence at first. Then one man spoke—a highly-educated professional who was very active in his UMC congregation. "What does 'episcopal' mean?" he asked. If a person with his education and church experience doesn't know, many other members undoubtedly don't know either.



Jargon isn't necessary

Communicating the gospel doesn't require using churchy words. If the gospel is valuable for all people, as we believe it is, it can be stated in ordinary language. If we want the world to hear the gospel and see its value, we need to express it in everyday language. That's what Jesus did. Today's church leaders need to copy him in that way as in many others.

by holding an office in a religious institution. He broke rules. He violated a lot of the religious and cultural traditions that people considered essential. He boldly did what he knew God's will required, yet he didn't try to force others to do it. He left his hearers with the choice of whether to obey or not.



Could today's top church officeholders function like this? Probably not. Many requirements of bishops' jobs keep bishops from being able to copy Jesus. He didn't have to take part in church meetings or lawsuits. He didn't appoint pastors to church congregations. His role simply wasn't an institutional one. Operating outside of religious and secular institutions was essential for him. A crucial question for us, then, and for our church leaders, is whether they should function like Jesus in any way, and if so, in what way.

What should we expect?

As a delegate to one of next month's UMC conferences that will elect bishops, I've taken part in interviews of candidates and read their statements. It's interesting to see what skills and traits they think bishops need, all of which all the candidates claim to have. When I consider their claims, the Bible's words, and the church's requirements, I wonder what traits and abilities we should expect from bishops. I also wonder if anyone with the ideal characteristics could get elected.



Lead by example?

Several candidates say they wouldn't ask others to do anything they wouldn't do themselves. I'm not sure that's wise. I know that a leader must set an example rather than just give orders, but when does

this conflict with our belief that every Christian has specific gifts and callings? Isn't it sometimes appropriate for a leader to ask another person to do something that is that person's calling but not the leader's, or that requires gifts and talents the other person has but the leader doesn't have?

Celebrate worthwhile accomplishments?

That's important, but only if it doesn't mean refusing to acknowledge the church's shortcomings and sins and to work openly toward eliminating them.



Visit every UM congregation in the area?

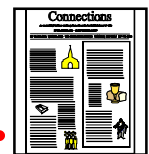
This can help close the gap between church hierarchy and local churches. It can also help bishops see what needs doing, better than merely having others tell them. Whether these visits accomplish that, however, depends on what the bishops do when they visit.

I wish bishops would sometimes visit with no advance notice, to see what happens on ordinary Sunday mornings and in routine church meetings, and to hear from members who aren't church officeholders. As one layman says, "If I were a bishop I'd spend some time being wallpaper, traveling incognito through worship services and church meetings." Being incognito probably wouldn't be possible in small churches, but it would in large ones, and visiting unannounced could be done anywhere.



Another layperson reveals a related concern. "I can't say how many conference and district functions I've attended," she says, "where the Cabinet sat together in a tight little knot. If I were a bishop attending these meetings, I'd sit with a lay person or pastor I didn't know well, to get to know that person better, and I'd urge my Cabinet members to do that too."

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

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■ **Be collegial?**

Collegiality has become a buzzword in the UMC to such an extent that I'd almost welcome a candidate who admitted he or she would not be collegial as bishop.

Expecting collegiality seems unrealistic. Treating everyone as colleagues seems admirably humble, but a bishop has authority that no one else in the church has. He or she can't be merely a colleague.

How can bishops make their legitimate authority clear, and yet avoid becoming arrogant and creating an inappropriate distance between themselves and others? I'm not sure. I wish bishops would insist that the people who know them call them by their first name instead of "bishop." I'd like to see them stop wearing elaborate robes and carrying symbols of power in worship services. I wish they'd use their local-church visits to challenge and inspire members, instead of making ceremonial appearances at church-building dedications. However, I may be failing to appreciate something important that ceremonies, visible symbols, and titles furnish.



■ **Be above reproach?**

It's hard to know how much weight to give to this part of the Bible's prescription for bishops (1 Timothy 3:2). It seems unrealistic. The church doesn't have any perfect people to choose from, so we can't expect to have any as bishops. Besides, when we try to define what being a perfect person requires, we

very quickly get beyond God's requirements and into mere customs and personal preferences. "Married only once" is probably unrealistic, too, in a church that permits divorce.



■ **Communicate convincingly**

This requires speaking and writing in words that hearers don't have to be church insiders to understand. It also requires skill in composing and delivering sermons and other speeches, and in speaking informally to church members and nonmembers. And in my view, effective communication by all clergy, including bishops, requires avoiding language about lay Christians that seems condescending. I want to scream and run from the room every time I

hear a clergy person call lay people "folk." It sounds like a king referring to the ignorant peasants.

■ **Make effective pastoral appointments**

This is crucial in connectional churches like the UMC because the pastor's effectiveness has great influence on a congregation's life, and bishops have total authority in assigning pastors. A bishop needs to find ways to keep ineffective pastors from being inflicted on congregations, and this shouldn't be by moving them to higher-level jobs or to one unsuspecting congregation after another. A bishop needs to require pastors to keep improving their skills in specific ways, such as preaching and relating to church volunteers and staff members. Giving pastors continuing-education credit for merely attending whatever programs happen to appeal to them doesn't serve this purpose.



Bishops also need to remember that, as one candidate said, "clergy are called to serve churches. Churches are not called to serve clergy." The UMC theoretically doesn't let congregations or clergy veto appointments, but in practice lay members often see bishops letting clergy refuse appointments whose salary or location doesn't suit their wishes.

■ **Be brave**

When a pastor is saying what needs saying, a bishop needs to be brave enough to leave the pastor in that appointment even if the congregation doesn't like hearing what the pastor is saying. Bishops need to say what they believe God wants said, too—not just what will avoid criticism and conflict. Unlike other clergy, UMC bishops are accountable only to God. This makes them uniquely free from the fear of being demoted if people don't like what they say.

■ **Listen to the critics and questioners**

Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez has said "those who change the course of history are usually those who pose a new set of questions rather than those who offer solutions." I suspect he's right, and the needed questions often come from outsiders rather than insiders. It's hard for insiders to see when the status quo, which provides their leadership positions, needs changing. Parker Palmer reminds us



of the “dangerous delusion that leaders too often indulge: that our efforts are always well intended, our power is always benign, and the problem is always in those difficult people whom we are trying to lead!” It’s often those difficult people who are asking the questions our churches need to ask.



A noble task

For bishops to copy Jesus in every way, while being human and having a role that’s very different from his, is as inappropriate as it is impossible. Yet Jesus’s fearless proclamation of God’s will is un-

doubtedly important for bishops to copy. So are his ability to communicate the gospel effectively in everyday language, and his willingness to associate with people outside his inner circle. His refusal to observe and preserve religious traditions that contradict God’s will is also important for bishops to copy. Because their role is different from Jesus’s, however, bishops need other traits and skills too.

Whatever we think those may be, one part of the Bible’s description is important for us to remember when we choose bishops—“Whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task.”

Barbara



The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every

way—for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

—1 Timothy 3:1-7

