

Extension Ministry in The United Methodist Church: An Ecclesial Movement of Grace in the World

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Abstract: In this opinion brief we offer a framework to discuss the connection between extension ministers' calling and the nature and mission of the United Methodist Church. We focused on primary theological sources, including Wesley's sermons and various written works. We suggest that the **Instituted Means of Grace and ordinances of God** function as **ecclesial orienting traditions**, connecting the church to the world and the world to the church through extension ministers, thereby embodying Christ's love and justice in action.

Key Words: Extension ministry, Licensed and Ordained Ministry, Clergy, Appointment, Itinerancy, Connectionalism, Means of Grace, Ecclesia

Introduction

Extension ministry in The United Methodist Church is a vital expression of our connectionalism. It is through our connectional church that United Methodists fellowship with one another and with the Holy Spirit in mutual accountability, shared mission, and cooperative ministry. Accordingly, the work of the extension minister is equally bound to the polity and theology of the United Methodist Church as those ministers appointed to local congregations (¶343.1). While extension ministry has traditionally been associated with elders, The United Methodist Church increasingly recognizes the diverse ways in which deacons, local pastors, and associate members serve beyond local congregations.¹

Extension ministry is **not a deviation** from Methodist tradition but a **faithful continuation** of Wesley's itinerant, connectional, and missional spirit. The foundation of extension ministry lies in a **theological understanding of the Church as a body that is both gathered and sent** - not confined to a single congregation but dynamically spread throughout the world. From the days of Wesley, itinerant preachers were charged with serving beyond local parish settings, embodying an evangelistic and missional approach that moved the message of the gospel to places where people gathered, worked, and shared life. Extension ministries are **specific and specialized appointments** within The United Methodist Church, requiring the same **standards of accountability, evaluation, and connection** as congregational appointments.

Extension ministers across the connection are appointed to "settings beyond the local United Methodist Church in the witness and service of Christ's love and justice" (¶343.1). While these appointments may not seem normative for our local church context, it is those serving in extension ministries who embody the spirit of John Wesley, who ministered beyond the local church as an educator, publisher, missionary, administrator, and chaplain (Richey, 2008). To that end, the ministerial calling is an ecclesial one that, through our United Methodist connectionalism, orients the work of ministry to and through our traditions of the Means of Grace and the Sacraments in an ever expanding expression of the kingdom of God. Extension ministers, in fact all ministers, are equally yoked to these United Methodist traditions of Ordinary and Primary Means of Grace (Wesley, 1739, 1743, 1766, 1788).

¹ *The Book of Discipline* provides an organizational outline for the nature and role of the extension minister. For an overview of the provisions for extension ministers in the BOD, refer to Appendix A at the end of this document.

Theological Foundations for Extension Ministers

Our United Methodist traditions are grounded in historical practices that emerged out of the Methodist movement within the Anglican Church. Among these, we discern from Wesley's sermons, letters, and various publications foundational traditions to the Methodist movement and our Wesleyan theology. They are the Means of Grace and ordinances of God. Wesley named the Means of Grace as those directly commanded by Christ. These are prayer, searching the scriptures, and the sacraments (1739, 1756). The ordinances of God are those traditions found throughout Wesley's writings that are beneficial for Christian growth (Wesley, 1743, 1766, 1787, 1788). These include, among many, practices such as fasting and fellowship as well as conative commitments to works of mercy and social holiness (1786).

These practices are not merely historical artifacts or personal disciplines—they form the spiritual nexus of a life shaped by grace. In Wesley's view, they are not ends in themselves, but conduits through which God's love is known and shared (Wesley, 1746). They shape the inward life of the believer while also orienting us toward the world in acts of mercy, justice, and compassion. From its inception, the Methodist movement sought to hold together personal piety and social holiness as mutually reinforcing aspects of faithful living.

The dynamic interplay between personal piety and social holiness is especially instructive for extension ministers who serve in contexts beyond the traditional congregational setting. In such spaces, where the rhythms of church life are less visible or consistent, the Means of Grace and ordinances of God offer theological grounding and spiritual sustenance. They nurture the inward life of holiness while anchoring outward ministry in a Wesleyan vision that holds together devotion to God and compassion for neighbor—equipping clergy to embody Christ's presence in diverse and often complex settings.

In sermons like *The More Excellent Way*, *On Conscience*, and *The Way to the Kingdom*, Wesley consistently emphasized the importance of the love of God and neighbor as a necessary condition of the heart. The outward practice of any Means of Grace and ordinances of God could never become the central focus of the Methodist movement. In the context of the extension minister, the call to “witness and service of Christ’s love and justice” (¶343.1) is mediated by these means and ordinances that bind us together in the body of Christ and by grace enable and empower all of God’s people to true religion and the reorientation of the heart (Wesley, 1742, 1750). And it is the witness and service of the extension minister, “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers [called] to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11-12, NRSVUE).

The Extension Minister and The Ordinances of God

In reflecting on the vocation of those who serve beyond the traditional parish, we are called to hold together the practical theology of our Wesleyan heritage and the organizational life of The United Methodist Church. The ordinances of God provide a rich theological lens through which to view the work of extension ministers. These ordinances are not supplemental practices or ecclesial accessories—they are grace-filled rhythms that shape the inward life and propel the Church outward in mission. To explore

this further, we turn to two of Wesley's sermons: "*The Ministerial Office*" and "*Of the Church*." In *The Ministerial Office*, Wesley distinguishes between the sacramental role of the priest and the prophetic role of the preacher, affirming both as essential to the life of the Church. For extension ministers—whose work often encompasses word, service, and leadership in varied contexts—this distinction helps clarify their calling. It is not a departure from ecclesial ministry, but a continuation of Christ's work in settings that may not resemble the gathered church yet are integral to its witness.

In *Of the Church*, Wesley challenges narrow, sectarian definitions of the Church and instead offers a vision of a universal ecclesia—united not by uniform structures, but by shared worship, holy living, and love of God and neighbor (c. 1750a, c. 1750b, 1785). He writes:

"The catholic or universal Church is, all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be 'one body,' united by 'one spirit;' having 'one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all'" (1785).

This vision holds deep significance for extension ministers, whose appointments may cross institutional, geographic, and perhaps denominational boundaries. Though their settings may fall outside the rhythms of congregational life, they remain fully embedded in the universal Church and participate in its mission to bear witness to Christ's love and justice.

Wesley's teaching on the ordinances of God—those practices not directly instituted by Christ but commended for their ability to form and sustain Christian life—offers a framework of spiritual depth and practical application for clergy serving in extension settings. Among these ordinances, fasting, fellowship, works of mercy, and social holiness stand out as particularly resonant.

- **Fasting and Fellowship:** For Wesley, fasting was a practice of humility and attentiveness—an act that quieted the self in order to listen more fully to the Spirit. For extension ministers, who often carry heavy responsibilities and navigate complex institutional dynamics, fasting can be a means of spiritual recalibration. Paired with intentional fellowship—such as class meetings, covenant groups, and peer accountability—this ordinance offers renewal through rhythms of shared prayer, mutual care, and spiritual friendship. Even when extension ministers serve in isolated or non-congregational settings, these practices affirm their connection to the body of Christ and the work of the Spirit through it.
- **Works of Mercy:** Wesley called Christians to visit the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and show compassion to the stranger—not as optional acts of service but as essential embodiments of holiness. That is to say that Works of Mercy are outward signs of the inward change of the human heart which now takes joy in obedience to Christ (Wesley, 1750). For extension ministers serving in hospitals, prisons, schools, advocacy centers, and across the public square, these works are not peripheral—they are central (Wesley, 1786, 1787). When grounded in grace and offered in love, they become sacraments of presence: tangible signs of God's mercy in places the Church might not otherwise reach (Wesley, 1787).

- **Social Holiness:** Wesley's oft-quoted phrase, "There is no holiness but social holiness," affirms that discipleship is inherently relational. Social holiness is about life together in community, yes—but it is also about participating in God's redemptive work for the transformation of the world (Wesley, 1742, 1785). Extension ministers embody this when they speak truth with courage, advocate for justice, and serve as spiritual leaders within systems that shape human flourishing. Their ministry reflects a Christ-centered vision of renewal—not only through personal witness, but also through structural transformation. In this way, they extend the mission of the Church beyond its gathered spaces and into the very heart of society.

The ordinances of God, as practiced and proclaimed by Wesley, are not abstract ideals. They are deeply formational for clergy whose appointments demand spiritual resilience, vocational clarity, and missional imagination. Fasting, fellowship, works of mercy, and social holiness offer a lived theology—a way of being—that sustains extension ministers in faithfulness to their calling and communion with the universal Church. In this light, the ordinances of God do not merely support extension ministry. In their diverse and unique intimations, they constitute the depth and breadth of its nature.

The Extension Minister and The Means of Grace

In the life of the Church, the Instituted Means of Grace are those practices which Christ himself ordained and through which God ordinarily conveys grace. For John Wesley, these included prayer, searching the Scriptures, baptism, and the Lord's Supper (Wesley, 1739; 1746). These means are not simply tools for personal devotion—they are divine appointments that nourish the soul, build up the Church, and extend God's redemptive and creative work in the world.

In many ways, the extension minister serves as connective tissue between the gathered Church and the world into which they are sent. While extension ministry may occur in non-traditional settings—such as hospitals, prisons, universities, military bases, nonprofit organizations, or denominational leadership—these ministers remain bearers of the Means of Grace, entrusted with ensuring that the life-giving practices that mediate God's grace are not confined to sanctuaries but are embodied wherever the Church is present through its people (Acts 2; Eph. 4).

Wesley emphasized that these means were not ends in themselves, but the ordinary channels through which believers are drawn into deeper communion with God and neighbor. For extension ministers, they offer not only a spiritual foundation but also an ecclesial mandate: to keep the life of grace flowing wherever they are appointed, even in places far removed from the rhythms of weekly worship.

- **Prayer:** Wesley taught that prayer is "the grand means of drawing near to God" (The Means of Grace, §II.1). For extension ministers, who often navigate complex, secular, or emotionally charged environments, prayer becomes both an anchor and an act of resistance—resistance against despair, burnout, and the temptation to self-reliant idolatry. In intercessory prayer, they lift up the brokenness of the world. In contemplative prayer, they are renewed by the Spirit. In public, they serve as poets, orienting people to the presence of something *More* and *Possible* in

hospital rooms, board meetings, classrooms, and city halls. Prayer is the means through which extension ministers abide in Christ as they bear “witness and service of Christ’s love and justice into the world” (¶343.1).

- Searching the Scriptures: Wesley viewed Scripture as the “most excellent means” of knowing and loving God. He called Christians to search, not merely read, the Word—reflecting a posture of spiritual hunger and humble attentiveness (Wesley, 1739). For extension ministers, whose lives are different from the structured study rhythms of a teaching ministry or lectionary calendar, the intentional searching of Scripture provides ongoing discernment and theological clarity. Whether addressing injustice, offering care to the afflicted, or leading with integrity, extension ministers are called to be grounded in Scripture as the primary authority by which they interpret the world and lead others toward the supreme revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ.
- Baptism: In *A Treatise on Baptism*, Wesley upholds baptism as “the initiatory sacrament, which admits us into the Church, and into all the privileges of it.” It is a visible sign of invisible grace, marking us as part of Christ’s body. For the extension minister, baptism reminds us that all ministry is grounded in our collective commitment to and reliance upon the work of the Holy Spirit that binds Christ’s church together as one body in ministry and service to the world. Even when serving in settings where it feels as though Spirit has withdrawn or the experience of suffering and loss overwhelms the senses, the extension minister carries the reality of an identity in Christ, covenanted in grace by water and the Spirit into every space. This sacramental imagination shapes how they see others: not as clients, employees, or students—but as people made in the image of God, invited into covenantal community, and restored by grace. Extension ministers serve as bearers of baptismal grace, nurturing that identity in themselves and in others.
- The Lord’s Supper: In *The Duty of Constant Communion*, Wesley argued that the frequent reception of the Eucharist was not only a means of receiving grace but a necessary part of Christian life. “It is the duty of every Christian,” he wrote, “to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can.” For those in extension ministry—particularly ordained elders who retain sacramental authority—the call to share in the body and blood of Christ remains central. Even if celebration of the Lord’s Supper is not regular in their ministry setting, they remain Eucharistic people, shaped by the memory of Christ’s self-giving love and called to embody it in their own acts of hospitality, justice, and compassion. Moreover, when the opportunity arises to celebrate communion—be it in a hospital chapel, around a bedside, in a prison cell, or with a small group of students—the act becomes a powerful sign that the Church is fully present, even in the margins.

The Means of Grace are not confined to the altar rail or the pew—they are lived out in the world, through ministers who carry with them the signs, rhythms, and reality of God’s grace. For extension ministers, these means are not always practiced in conventional settings, but they remain the beating heart of their spiritual life and public vocation. They pray without ceasing, search the Scriptures

for guidance, carry the covenant of baptism into every relationship, and live Eucharistically in a world longing for the real presence of Christ.

Conclusion

It must be emphasized that the Means of Grace and the ordinances of God are not discrete or competing aspects of Christian practice—they are inextricably interwoven. Together, they form the rhythm of a grace-filled life in service to Christ. In *Of the Church*, Wesley affirms that the Spirit's inner-working grace is the gift of faith wrought in us so that we may live in obedience. And in *The Law Established Through Faith* (Discourse 2), he deepens this claim: it is by faith that obedience is transformed—not into duty alone, but into joyful devotion and lived expressions of Christ's love. The extension minister, therefore, is one who is continually formed by this movement of grace: drawn inward toward holiness through prayer, Scripture, and sacrament, and sent outward through mercy, justice, and faithful witness.

Despite the many changes in our understanding of clergy itinerancy, this avant-garde spirit—the willingness to carry the Gospel beyond the familiar—remains a hallmark of United Methodism. Extension ministers embody this spirit. They serve on the front lines of God's mission: in boardrooms and classrooms, in hospital wards and prison cells, in community centers and military chapels. They represent the Church in places the gathered congregation cannot always go. As Russell E. Richey reminds us, “Who more than [extension ministers] minister beyond the local church? We carry on [Wesley's] extension work as teacher, publisher, missionary, fundraiser, administrator, and chaplain for the people called Methodist” (*Extension Ministers*, p. 17).

By embracing a broader vision of ministry, The United Methodist Church affirms the integrity of its connectional body while ensuring that its mission is faithfully embodied both within and beyond the local church. Extension ministries do not operate in isolation—they are expressions of the Church's witness in the world. They do not diminish the Church's sacramental or communal life—they extend it. Rooted in the Means of Grace and animated by the ordinances of God, the extension minister instructs and equips the Church to live into its calling: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world—in every place where God's love is needed most.

Appendix A:

The Distinct Roles of Elders, Deacons, Local Pastors, and Associate Members

Each clergy status in The United Methodist Church—**elders, deacons, local pastors, and associate members**—plays a unique and interconnected role in extending Christ’s mission.

- **Elders itinerate**, serving where the Church needs them in Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service.
- **Deacons lead** in Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice, often in specialized ministries within and beyond the local church.
- **Local pastors serve** as licensed leaders and may be appointed in extension settings with episcopal approval.
- **Associate members offer** a stable presence in both pastoral and extension ministries.

Though each calling differs, all remain accountable to their **charge and annual conferences**, ensuring their ministry remains deeply rooted in the Church’s connectional life.

Elders: Itinerant Ministers Serving in Extension Ministries

Elders are **ordained clergy** who serve in **Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service**. They are called to **itinerancy**, meaning they agree to serve wherever the bishop appoints them, including in extension ministries. This ensures that elders remain available to serve where their gifts are most needed. Elders serving in extension ministries under the discipline are equally agreeable to the apostolic call.

Additionally, Elders in extension ministries:

- Remain full participants in **the itinerant system** and may be recalled to a local church upon consultation with the bishop (*Book of Discipline*, ¶344.1).
- Are accountable to **both their annual conference and charge conference**, providing annual reports of their ministry (*Book of Discipline*, ¶344.2).
- Serve in roles such as **chaplaincy (military, healthcare, prison), theological education, nonprofit leadership, and denominational administration** (*Book of Discipline*, ¶344.1.a–d).

Charge Conference Membership: Elders must maintain **charge conference membership**, which serves as their **spiritual home and connectional anchor**. The *Book of Discipline* also reminds us that **district superintendents, due to their role, are not required to have a charge conference affiliation**. Elders in full connection, including those in extension ministries, must be available to **administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper** when requested by the district superintendent (*Book of Discipline*, ¶340.2b).

Deacons: Ministers of Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice

Deacons are **ordained clergy** called to **lead the Church in ministries of service, justice, and equipping others for ministry**. Unlike elders, deacons **do not itinerate** but remain **accountable to the annual conference**. Recent changes to *The Book of Discipline* have eliminated the **requirement for a secondary appointment**, instead requiring a **charge conference relationship** (*Book of Discipline*, ¶331). Deacons serving in extension ministries:

- May be appointed to **educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, mission agencies, and ecumenical ministries** (*Book of Discipline*, ¶343).
- Are accountable to **both their charge conference and the annual conference**, submitting annual reports.
- While not required to serve in a local congregation, deacons are expected to maintain strong relationships with churches, offering their gifts in **worship leadership, teaching, and community engagement**.

Deacons provide a **unique and essential role** in extension ministry, particularly in **social justice, community development, and education**, serving as a bridge between the Church and the world.

Local Pastors: Licensed for Pastoral Ministry with Extension Appointments

Local pastors are **licensed clergy** who may be appointed to **extension ministries with the approval of the bishop and district superintendent** (*Book of Discipline*, ¶318). They do not have **guaranteed appointments** and must **renew their license annually**. Local pastors serving in extension ministries:

- Must **consult with the bishop and district superintendent** before seeking such an appointment (*Book of Discipline*, ¶343.3).
- Continue to be **supervised by their district committee on ordained ministry** (*Book of Discipline*, ¶318).
- Are required to **report annually** to their charge conference and district superintendent.

Associate Members: Clergy with Permanent Connection Serving in Extension Ministries

Associate members are **clergy who have completed the Course of Study** and served as local pastors for **at least four years full-time**. They may be appointed to extension ministries but do not itinerate as elders do. Associate members in extension ministries:

- Maintain their **membership in the annual conference and charge conference**.
- Are accountable to **both the bishop and the annual conference** through annual reports (*Book of Discipline*, ¶344.2).
- May serve in roles such as **chaplaincy, denominational leadership, and community-based ministries**.

Appendix B:

Guidelines for Board of Ordained Ministry: Interviewing Prospective Extension Ministers

To discern a candidate's readiness for service in extension ministry, the Board of Ordained Ministry may use the following questions and areas of focus. These are intended to explore the candidate's theology of ministry, understanding of United Methodist polity, and ongoing connection to the church.

1. Understanding of Call and Context

- Can the candidate clearly articulate their sense of call to extension ministry?
- How does the candidate understand their ministry as part of the Church's mission "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"?
- How does the candidate's appointment context embody the ministry of "witness and service of Christ's love and justice" (Book of Discipline ¶343.1)?

Sample Interview Questions:

- Describe a moment when you first sensed a call to serve beyond the local church.
- How does your current ministry setting allow you to live out the mission of the Church?
- What does "witness and service of Christ's love and justice" look like in your day-to-day work?

2. Theological Foundations

- How does the candidate integrate Wesleyan theology—especially the Means of Grace and ordinances of God—into their context?
- In what ways does the candidate's ministry reflect both personal piety and social holiness?
- How is the extension setting a continuation of Word, Service, Sacrament, and Order or Word, Service, Justice, and Compassion?

Sample Interview Questions:

- How do you understand the Means of Grace in the context of your ministry?
- What Wesleyan theological convictions guide your decision-making?
- In what ways is your ministry both formational and transformational?

3. Connection and Accountability

- How does the candidate maintain a strong connection to their **charge conference**?
 - Can they name their charge conference and describe the role it plays in their spiritual and professional life?
 - Are they actively participating in its life (i.e., annual reports, consultations, engagement with the local congregation)?
- What does accountability to the **annual conference** look like in their role?

- How do they ensure that their work is aligned with the theology, mission, and polity of The United Methodist Church?

Sample Interview Questions:

- Describe how you stay connected to your charge conference.
- How do you participate in the life of your annual conference?
- What practices or relationships keep you accountable to the United Methodist connection?

4. Sacramental and Missional Identity

- If ordained as elder, how does the candidate maintain availability for the sacraments when requested by the district superintendent?
- How do they embody the Eucharistic and Baptismal identity of the Church in a context where the sacraments may not be regularly celebrated?

Sample Interview Questions:

- In what ways do you live out a sacramental identity in your ministry?
- How do you offer or witness to the presence of the sacraments in your context?
- Have you been called upon to celebrate the sacraments in your extension setting or in connection with your DS?

5. Sustaining the Means of Grace

- What spiritual disciplines (prayer, searching the Scriptures, fasting, etc.) sustain the candidate in ministry?
- How do they nurture fellowship and accountability with others (i.e., covenant groups, peer support, etc.)?

Sample Interview Questions:

- What are the spiritual practices that sustain you in your ministry?
- Are you currently part of a spiritual formation group or peer accountability group?
- How do you maintain spiritual vitality outside of traditional church settings?

Closing Discernment

- Does the candidate demonstrate a calling that is missional, connectional, and ecclesial?
- Can the Board affirm that the candidate's ministry is an extension of the Church's sacramental, prophetic, and pastoral identity?

Sample Interview Questions:

- What does it mean to you to be both connectional and missional?
- How does your ministry express the Church's pastoral and prophetic voice?
- How do you hope to grow in your role as an extension minister in the coming years?