

Making Mission-Field Appointments

A Monograph

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Introduction

United Methodist preachers and laity, rightfully so, yearn to understand how and why the cabinet decides “who serves where.” Over the last fifteen years, I, Bishop Huie, have served on cabinets in three conferences (one as a superintendent and two as a bishop). I’ve engaged in dozens of conversations about appointment-making with bishops and superintendents nationally and internationally. In my experience, the Cabinet’s values, criteria, assessment processes, and rationale for decisions are rarely disclosed publicly.

Pastors, seeking to discern “how” and “why,” review a season’s appointment-making. It is usually around the coffee pot. Certain themes frequently emerge – regardless of the conference. “It’s about who you know.” “It’s about taking care of pastors.” “It’s about paying your apportionments, and keeping everybody happy.” “It’s about not rocking the boat.”

Laity often express gratefulness if their first impressions of a new pastor are positive. They express disappointment when those first impressions are negative. No longer does all their information about the pastor come from the superintendent. They will have had conversations with laity in previous churches before the new pastor unpacks the moving van. Occasionally they know more about their new pastor than the superintendent. They check the internet. In the absence of clear communication, they increasingly express distrust, doubt and suspicion about the appointment process.

Sometimes superintendents have offered encouraging, clarifying words of “wisdom.” I (Richard) recall a personal memory of this sort. During the 1980’s, a very highly respected district superintendent shared his personal philosophy for making appointments. He said, “Happy preachers make happy churches.” At the time those simple words reflected the Texas Conference covenant life of ministry. For the last decades of the twentieth century, I, and probably many others, internalized that saying as it helped shape perceived roles in the church.

Now, as a superintendent in the dawn of a new century, one which coincides with a season of transformation in the Texas Conference, I understand those words differently. I now perceive the saying as an insightful philosophy embedded in the norms and values of that day. The logic seems self-evident: if the role as superintendent is to keep churches happy, then the focus is placing ministers where

their happiness becomes the chief ingredient for the happiness of the congregants.

The preachers' happiness, everyone intuitively understood, resulted from climbing the ladder of success to ever higher salaries in increasingly larger churches. The conference-wide assumption, ultimately, was that happiness would prevent difficulties. The value for increased compensation fostered behavior within the system that did help preachers attain upwardly mobility.

The problem was this system did not reinforce behavior to "create vibrant, growing congregations changing lives and reshaping futures for Jesus Christ."¹ Happiness embodies a different value. Upward mobility represents a different norm. The behavior shaped by that value and that norm will not necessarily serve this new vision for the Texas Annual Conference. Part of today's challenge is to revisit those unspoken "rules" and observed behaviors which undergirded the norms and values of past eras and then to offer a pathway forward. .

We also note that growing churches with an outward focused, missional spirit are in the minority. Inwardly focused churches are common. Such churches typically identify congregational life as warm and caring. "We love each other," they say. But they function as closed system—regardless of the pastor.

Before we begin, a word of affirmation is in order. This conference includes many great churches and valuable institutions. The Texas Conference is also the home for outstanding clergy leaders whose ministries have world-wide significance. It is home to remarkable laity who extend the ministry of Jesus Christ both in their vocation and through specific missional projects. Anyone with knowledge of the Texas Annual Conference can easily cite instances when previous bishops and cabinets made successful missional appointment.

20th Century Appointment-Making

In the early days of Methodism, bishops appointed pastors/circuit riders to fields of service with a clear mission. In fact, this area of Texas was itself a mission field. However, over time, the United Methodist approach to appointment-making became primarily

¹ "Bound for Greater Things", called session of the Texas Annual Conference, November 19, 2008.

reactive. The motivation for appointment decisions has principally revolved around balancing a desire to maintain harmony in local churches with satisfying the needs of pastors. In essence, the value, "harmony", became the mission of the church.

Practices developed which became deeply embedded in the appointment process for the Texas Conference. We describe them as unspoken "rules." When these practices are abridged for whatever reason, pastors express concern because "the rules were changed." This list of implied practices is not exhaustive, but does reflect expectations in the minds of pastors, laity and superintendents.

- **The reward system is based on salary and/or prestige (usually related to church size).**
- **A preacher moves up the salary ladder, incrementally.**
- **Professional advancement is a matter of tenure.**
- **The system must seek to be fair to the preacher first, and then to churches.** ("Must move" appointments pacify congregations, but aim at taking care of the preacher.)
- **Conflict is resolved by moves.** This unspoken rule is further complicated because there has not been an operating distinction between conflict and discord.
- **The superintendent represents his/her district preachers and churches, and expedites moves for preachers by 'accentuating the positive.'**

The net result is an appointment-making process designed to support a denominational system which serves ministers well. Unfortunately, little thought is given to missional expectations or accountability of either pastors or congregations. For example, beyond certain special situations where a church is embarking on a construction project, when would a superintendent express his or her hopes in the ministry of a newly appointed pastor or the congregation? When would he/she hold a pastor or congregation accountable for inappropriate behavior short of misconduct? The answer has been, rarely.

The system has not been driven by goals, objectives and assessments. The process has not been aimed toward fostering disciple-making ministry. Instead the system has historically been designed to make appointments for the well-being of parish ministers. This awareness is reflected in seven observations.

First, **the bishop and appointive cabinet are tools to be used by clergy and congregations in their search for satisfaction rather than conversation and decision making partners focused on mission.**

Second, **the process is driven by “who you know.”** Typically, who is known, how they are known, and/or how they can be presented by a superintendent to the cabinet determines the range of possibilities of their next appointment. A pastor tries to make certain his/her superintendent knows only their successes – not their anxieties, mistakes or failures. Consequently taking risks on behalf of mission is discouraged.

Third, **each rundown² is treated separately, in a linear manner, by the cabinet.** Rundowns begin with openings created by retirement, death, or an exit from parish ministry. This linear method, handled separately, is intended to build a sense of fairness for preachers in the system. In fact, this approach limits the ability to consider multiple possibilities for any preacher already placed in an earlier rundown.

Fourth, **“must moves” must be resolved.** Ideally, “must moves” can be built into rundowns. If not, the Cabinet determines round robin³ possibilities. At the end of the appointment season, however, all “must moves” will be resolved. While during the inventory some pastors will have been identified as having served with distinction (or merit), and these “merit” move possibilities may be mentioned or observed, this system is largely driven by “must moves”.

Fifth, **data is not a factor in appointments.** A pastor can be rewarded with “better” churches even when they have never grown a church in any measurable sense. The comment of a bishop in another conference would be apropos for the Texas Conference . . . “The conference is full of preachers who, while being ever rewarded with appointments to better churches, have long careers with never actually growing a church.”

Sixth, **each superintendent functions separately as an agent for their district preachers.** Conversely, because of pressure

² A rundown is a series of interrelated moves. Pastor A retires...Pastor B moves to the church pastor A vacated...Pastor C moves to the church pastor B vacated...and so on.

³ A round robin series of moves is not linear, but circular. Pastors A, B and C, serve churches D, E, and F respectively. In this series A moves to church E, B moves to church F and C moves to church D.

to meet denominational expectations for apportionment payments, and to have “happy” churches, Superintendents will tend to work the system for the betterment of their preachers and their churches with less concern for other districts in the conference.

The seventh observation would be best categorized as a major working presupposition. **All clergy have the will and capacity to lead congregations in healthy ways, and all congregations are entitled to the personal resource of an appointed clergy person who is a good leader.** In Gil Rendle’s words, this would be an example of the tyranny of all. That is, the system is supposed to function to satisfy and/or make all clergy and all congregations happy. This approach does not deal with ineffective clergy, and does not address unrealistic expectations among congregations.

These observations lead to the conclusion that the Texas Conference appointment-making system at the turn of the century primarily served preachers, thus fostering loyalty toward the conference among clergy. The question to be answered was whether this system could serve well in a time of paradigm shift.

Embracing a New Direction for the Texas Conference

The 21st century brings unprecedented challenges and unprecedented opportunities to the United Methodist Church and to the Texas Annual Conference. Demographic changes are re-shaping cities, towns and neighborhoods. The growth of secularism is resulting in a diminished sense of importance for the church, and participation was declining in a majority of congregations. New technologies are re-shaping communication at a blinding speed. As a result, long-established patterns of church leadership are increasingly viewed as irrelevant.

Simultaneously, there is an unparalleled hunger for God. Persons from diverse cultures are engaging in spiritual quests. Reputable research indicates a new readiness to hear the Christian message. A fresh urgency about making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is being voiced in United Methodist congregations. A desire to become more nimble and flexible in our leadership processes is expressed by clergy and laity alike.

Following the Bishop’s visits to every charge, district gatherings, newspaper articles and countless individual conversations, the Texas Conference convened in a called session on November 19, 2005.

“Vibrant, growing congregations changing lives and re-shaping futures for Jesus Christ” became the vision.⁴ “Equipping congregations to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” became the mission.⁵ “Spirit-led, excellence, fruitfulness and accountability” became key drivers.⁶ Conference structure was re-organized around clergy excellence, congregational excellence, missional excellence and connectional resources. The number of districts was reduced from twelve to nine.

In June 2006, the conference adopted the final reorganization plan and re-staffing changes were made. The Center for Congregational Excellence was mandated to develop within 90 days a plan for starting new churches and for transformation of existing churches. The Center for Clergy Excellence was mandated to develop a plan for recruiting and resourcing “gifted, young, diverse pastors.” The Assistant to the Bishop developed an assessment and accountability process for every group. The Center for Connectional Resources implemented a major re-alignment of the budget.

The conference adopted measurable “evidences of fruitfulness” in four areas; worship attendance, professions of faith, mission involvement, and apportionments. Implementing our vision, mission, core beliefs and key drivers is an on-going process.

With strong focus on excellence and fruitfulness for pastors and congregations as well as more churches per district, re-imagining the role and function of the district superintendent and the cabinet quickly became an essential dimension of the comprehensive map. The leadership team envisioned that, in consultation with the newly-formed centers of excellence, superintendents would shift their energies from conflict management and supporting conference meetings to resourcing congregations and pastors. Such a paradigm shift required that the cabinet “go back to zero” in re-thinking both the role of the superintendent and the process of appointment-making.

“Returning to Zero”

In preparing for the appointment season of 2007, the cabinet agreed that our old model of appointment-making had become a significant deterrent to “vibrant, growing congregations changing lives

⁴ “Bound for Greater Things”, November 19, 2005 called session of the Texas Annual Conference.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

and re-shaping futures for Jesus Christ." Our evaluation of the 2006 appointment process revealed that, despite our best intentions, we were continuing to give priority to "must moves" and "problems to be solved." When we finally turned to "high potential churches" and "high potential pastors," there were few appropriate appointments options remaining.

Moreover, we had begun to see a modest increase in gifted, young, diverse pastors. Such pastors are potentially the conference's great resource both because of their gifts and because of the number of years they can serve. In the transition from seminary to parish, they would benefit from expanded opportunities to learn the work of ministry by serving in "vibrant, fruitful congregations" and observing excellent senior pastors at work. They need preaching opportunities and good mentoring. Under the old model, incoming seminarians were considered at the end of the appointment process.

Discovering the Mission Field

In a series of conversations around the question "who is our client," the cabinet (center directors and superintendents) and bishop finally experienced one of those "a-ha" moments. **We realized that our client was neither the pastor nor the congregation, but rather the mission field.**

God was leading us to deploy pastors, not to make people who were already living a life of faith happy, but rather to reach persons living in our neighborhoods, communities and cities that were not a part of a community of faith. God was inviting us to appoint pastors who would lead congregations to reach out to people who had not yet heard the gospel, many of whom are young, of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, poor and/or underserved. **Understanding the mission field as our primary client was a dramatic shift in our approach.**

No one on the cabinet, including the bishop, knew how to make appointments with the mission field as the primary client. The old mental frameworks in our heads and the expectations of pastors and congregations were major obstacles to change. We knew we needed to learn. Our reading, writing and conversation with outside people and groups intensified.

In February 2007, the cabinet declared to itself, **"While the superintendent is responsible for making good matches**

between pastors and churches, in order to fulfill the mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ, the superintendent's primary responsibility is to make appointments which enhance ministry within the mission field. The mission field is understood as the overall context for ministry. It may be the setting within which a local church ministers. The mission field may be a population in and around the local church's community which is not being reached. It may be also be a population that does not have a United Methodist congregation in the vicinity. This perception challenges pastors and congregations to be outward focused, not inward. It encourages risk-taking on behalf of mission.

In support of this central decision to maintain focus on the mission field, the Cabinet developed two principles to guide decisions based on desired outcomes. First, **clergy deployment will be based on data rather than "who you know"**. The data guiding decisions will be a combination of quantitative and experiential measures. That is, while the church needs to continue to learn to measure the performance of its leaders with quantitative tools, there must also remain space for the intuitive "practiced wisdom" of bishop and cabinet. Second, **superintendents will be intentional in identifying and giving priority attention to deployment where clergy and/or congregations evidence either high performance or high potential.**

The cabinet also confirmed principles that helped clarify desired outcomes relative to culture shifts within conference relations.

- **The work of a superintendent needs to become more connectional and less "silo" or "fiefdom."**
- **The superintendent will aim to foster collegiality and trust with pastors and congregations.**
- **The hope is to create a climate of kingdom building rather than maintenance and repair.**
- **System change will lead the conference from a culture of blame to a culture of kingdom building . . . marked by problem solving, risk taking and possibility building.**
- **Open itinerancy will be a direct product for the placement of pastors in relation to needs of the mission field.**

Finally, the cabinet established principles which sought to develop a system for making appointments in support of the newly adopted vision and mission.

- **The system will reflect evidences of fruitfulness.⁷**
- **The system will align with the mission and vision of the Texas Annual Conference.**
- **The system will encourage longer tenure for pastors.**
- **The system will support the Conference's Clergy Effectiveness⁸ Program, including dealing constructively with people not fit for ministry leadership.**

The last segment of this monograph seeks to apply the implications of these changes to the appointment-making process. We seek your insights and suggestions as we live into Christ's mission of disciple-making.

Living into our Common Mission

Over the past three years there has been an ongoing process of commitment to strengthen how and why we as bishop and cabinet make decisions for the deployment of pastors. It has been a time for "going back to zero" and striving to make appointments with relation to the mission field. In a real sense, it has been a season to test new approaches for the appointment-making process.

The changes we developed embraced an understanding that our ecclesiological practices flow from our missional imperative of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The driving force of that mission is reflected even in the ordering of our Book of Discipline. That ordering reflects our intent that the way we "do church" is to grow out of our mission. We believe that our tradition can point the way to our future. At the beginning of a new century, it is clear that a church responsible to and for this new age will focus on missional rather than bureaucratic ends. Bureaucracies (including our local churches) order themselves to attract people. Missional organizations extend themselves outward.

Consequently, we structured a new appointment process driven by the priorities of the mission field rather than only the needs of the local church and our pastors. This approach will confirm shifts in priorities which are affirmed by the Cabinet. These shifts may be summarized as follows:

⁷ The evidences of fruitfulness are conference affirmed quantitative measures which reflect church vitality.

⁸ The Texas Conference has adopted a Clergy Effectiveness document which establishes both a standard of expectations for clergy effectiveness and remedial steps to encourage growth or exit programs.

FROM	TO
Client is the preacher	Client is the mission field
Concern is local churches	Balanced concern between local churches and the conference
Resource is the "salary sheet"	Resource is pastors
Starting point is openings	Starting point is opportunities
Focus is solving problems	Focus is making disciples

Inventory

The desired outcome of making better clergy/church matches begins with the inventory process.

The Texas Annual Conference has affirmed a common mission and vision that will be lived out in nine distinct geographic regions. To strategically deploy clergy talent to meet regional challenges, the starting point for inventory needs to be a presentation from each superintendent of the missional strategy of their respective district.

To attain a broad overview of the whole conference, each superintendent prepares a written document that addresses the following:

- What are the distinct historical, economic and demographic realities of the district?
- What past missional strategies are important?
- What are the missional opportunities?
- What are the missional challenges of the district?
- What are the district's immediate priorities?

The presentation will reflect the superintendent's perception of the needs of the district and will, in essence, form a base line for working together in subsequent years.

The inventory also includes three types of assessment: **high potential churches** (churches marked with potential growth of 10-20% annually); **high potential pastors** (those having gifts for ministry but are either young in ministry or have never been strategically appointed); and **high producing pastors** (pastors utilizing their gifts in significant ways for the betterment of the congregation or conference).

strategic churches (these churches are neither large nor fast-growing, but they exist in a specific mission field; examples are hub churches, county-seat town churches, certain inner city churches.)

The cabinet has eliminated the traditional categories (Remain, Either move or remain, Move, Must Move, Open). Instead, each superintendent identifies churches and pastors with critical needs. Also, all pastors for whom there are questions regarding their effectiveness in ministry have their ministry reviewed and assessed in relation to their ongoing appointment status.

Finally, all new church start pastors are reviewed for continued effectiveness in their mission fields and assessed for the best ongoing utilization of their pastoral gifts.

Appointment Process

If the Texas Conference were described as a live oak tree, the trunk and the largest of the branches would be our large churches. They provide resources and leadership which nourish, support and strengthen the whole conference. For that reason, we understand that the appointment of a senior pastor for a church worshipping over 1,000 per Sunday is best accomplished with the direct leadership of the bishop. An appointment of a senior pastor for a church worshipping 500 to 1,000 each Sunday would be best served by the direct attention of the entire Cabinet. As a practice the cabinet deals directly with every full-time church.

Placement Process

The desired outcome of encouraging longer tenures where relationships between pastor and congregation sustains ministry begins with the placement process.

Minimum tenure expectations should be communicated to the pastor and the SPRC at the time of placement. Linked to worship attendance, we encourage the following:

- Less than 100 in worship . . . 3 years
- 100 – 250 in worship . . . 4 years
- 251 – 500 in worship . . . 5 years
- 501 – 1000 in worship . . . 7 years
- 1000+ in worship . . . 10 years

In addition, where a church has been identified as strategic or high potential, this also should be communicated to the pastor and SPRC as part of the placement process. It is our hope that expressing these expectations will help the pastor and the SPRC frame their ministry in relation to the Conference Mission and Vision, and the district strategy for mission. The superintendent is also committing to ongoing guidance, coaching and communication as the tenure moves forward.

Working with Poor Matches

While these minimum tenure expectations will serve as a valuable element in encouraging healthier pastor/parish relationships, two concerns need to be recognized. First, extenuating circumstances within the life of the conference (such as retirements) may upon occasion take precedence over the desire for long tenure appointments. Second, the cabinet recognizes that situations will arise wherein there is a "poor match" between a pastor and a congregation.

There is not a single factor which could be applied to all situations we would consider a "poor match." The following is a list of potential factors, not to be judged as exhaustive, but as starting points for discussion.

- Theological...a pastor may not be a good theological match for the congregation.
- Contextual...a pastor's strengths may not be a positive match for the community the congregation serves (or seeks to serve).
- Personality...a pastor may be recognized as lacking personality traits a particular congregation needs to realize its missional priorities.
- Skill Sets...a clergy person's pastoral strengths may not be a match which will enable the congregation to realize its current missional priorities.

In the final analysis, the Superintendent has to assess whether this is truly a poor match, or whether it represents a chronic behavior of either the church or an individual pastor. For that reason, the cabinet joins the superintendent in addressing certain vital questions:

1. Does the church have a history of discord with clergy?
2. Does the church tend to project its internal discord onto pastors?

3. Does the pastor have a record of successful, healthy pastorates? If so, in what setting?
4. Is this a situation where it would be healthier in the long term (for the pastor and/or the church) to work through the “poor match” or a conflict of ideas or perceptions? Or, would a more immediate change be constructive?

Conclusion: Episcopal Reflections and Analysis

As we look to the future, it is my (Bishop Huie) hope and prayer that appointment-making in the Texas Annual Conference will increasingly be characterized by the following presuppositions:

- Recognition that pastors have different capacities, desires and courage to lead congregations into the mission field.
- Recognition that congregations have different capacities, desires and courage to engage the mission field.
- Practice that clergy with both history and promise of excellence and fruitfulness will be appointed to congregations most willing to engage the mission field.

Therefore, striving for effectiveness within a new appointment process, the following patterns are being established.

First, **the bishop and appointive cabinet understand themselves to be conversation partners with pastors, congregations and center directors in making appointments based on the missional needs of the area.** We are moving from an “input driven” ministry characterized by “a place for every pastor and a pastor for every place” to an “output driven” ministry characterized by excellence and fruitfulness in the mission field.

Second, **the appointment process is data-supported.** A 20-year history on every pastor and every congregation compiled from year-end reports is one data base. A thirteen question transformation assessment (from DNA Coaching) attached to the year-end report contains additional indicators of growth and decline. Statistical information is interpreted in a written narrative by the district superintendent. Consultation with the SPRC provides written summaries of the leadership needs of the church.

Third, **rundowns for large groupings of appointments based around church size are handled concurrently.** This arrangement allows the cabinet to simultaneously consider the best

pastor for more than one church. Conversely, it allows the cabinet to simultaneously consider multiple congregations and their mission fields.

Fourth, **appointment-making should reward excellence and fruitfulness in the mission field.** Therefore, the cabinet begins the process with “high-producing pastors,” “high potential pastors,” “strategic congregations,” and “high potential congregations.” Except in special circumstances, “must moves” are considered later.

Fifth, **gifted, young, diverse pastors receive intentional consideration for a growth environment in the appointment-making process.** The cabinet searches for suitable environments for young pastors to learn congregational ministry and grow into leadership. First appointments following seminary are often made to associate positions in larger congregations if preaching opportunities are available.

Sixth, when the cabinet becomes aware of challenges with a pastor or congregation, **the superintendent is expected to be proactive** in addressing the issue. “Triads” are set up with pastors to “tell the truth in love” and develop a growth plan. Congregational intervention occurs through the Centers, third-party consultants, or interim ministers. Expectations are clarified and timelines set. Conclusions are documented and signed.

Seventh, **pastors with chronic ineffectiveness issues are dealt with, beginning with growth plans designed to encourage growth toward excellence and, when necessary, leading to exit to general ministry.**

Eighth, **the bishop and appointive cabinet want to be transparent about the purpose, process and values in the appointment process in order to invite clergy and laity to more fully engage the mission field.** While this openness is risky, it invites conversation and creates a context for the conference to hold us accountable. Further, it creates external pressure for the cabinet to become more consistent in our process. Ultimately, it is more honest and fair for pastors and congregations.

Shifts this dramatic in conference culture do not come quickly. Further, the Book of Discipline still mandates that every pastor will receive an appointment and every church will receive a pastor. **Even though we are not yet making every appointment based on this**

model, we ask the “mission field” question and acknowledge when we are violating our own principles.

Further, many of our older pastors are only a few years away from retirement. To totally shift the appointment process for so many pastors is not fair. Our projections indicate that the Texas Conference retirement “tsunami” will begin in approximately 2010 and build over the next decade as baby boomers retire. As those retirements take place, numerous openings should allow multiple placement opportunities for pastors with both history and promise of excellence and fruitfulness.

Transformation processes require adaptive change. Such change does not come easily or quickly. It requires risk-taking, courage and sacrifice. Mistakes will be made. Sin is an ever-present reality. People must deal with loss, grief and pain when “the old order passes away” even though they anticipate “the new order which is to come.” Nonetheless, grace abounds, and we are looking to a “future with hope.”

On behalf of our cabinet we invite you to engage in “holy conversation” with us. Share your dreams, reservations, and questions about what we are doing. Let us know what appointment practices you believe will equip congregations to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” To God be the glory.

We invite your experiences and responses at appointmentmaking@txcumc.org.