

It's Biblical: The Sending of Pastors



by Rev. Michael Roberts, D. Min.

The Greek word for “send” is the same word we translate as “apostle” (apostolos). An apostle is literally “one who is sent.” This word is used in various ways throughout the Bible. For example, Jesus used the word to describe himself and his mission. We read, “As you (God) have sent me, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18. See also John 20:21). Jesus affirmed over and over again that he was sent by God. By his authority, as one sent, Jesus also called the first twelve, and sent them out to do the work of ministry (Matthew 10:5; Mark 1:16; Luke 10:1-2). A casual reading of the New Testament might suggest that this term “apostle” is limited to these twelve, but this is not the case. Throughout the New Testament this same word describes others as well: Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Andronicus, Junias and many others. The word is used throughout the scriptures to designate all persons who continue the mission that was originally given to the first apostles, through the one whom God sent into the world, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The word “sent” is the dominant word in the Bible to describe how persons move from place to place with the message of the gospel. Rarely, does someone set out on their own, or go because a group or congregation calls them. Throughout the New Testament we see persons who are sent forth, with the prayers, blessings, and commission of a particular person, group, or church. For example, the apostles sent Peter and John to Samaria (Acts 8:14). The believers in Caesarea sent Paul to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22). The Church at Antioch, after fasting and prayer, sent Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:3). After much debate and discussion, the church at Jerusalem sent Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas out to the Gentile world (Acts 15). Later Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia (Acts 19:22). These are only a few examples of how persons were able to go forth into ministry with the blessing and authority of those who sent them.

In the Letters of the New Testament, we see this same understanding over and over again. We read, for example, how are they to proclaim him (Christ) unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Rom 10:15). We hear of instances where Paul sent Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, Prisca and Aquila. (Rom 16:3-4; I Cor 4:17; II Cor 12:17; Col 4:8). In one wonderful passage we read, “We sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith” (I Thess 3:2). In another key passage, Paul calls upon the church at Rome to receive the one whom he has sent: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe...so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. (Rom 16:1-2).

As United Methodists, we believe that this biblical model of sending pastors, to congregation is the most faithful and effective way to spread the gospel, create accountability, provide support, and assure the presence of a pastoral leader in every congregation. The system of

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“sending” pastors (called the itinerant system) enables us to be faithful to our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. Because the pastor is not “hired” by the local church, she/he is free to serve God, follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and provide servant leadership to the congregation. Quoting our Book of Discipline, pastors are sent “to preach and teach the word of God, administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to order the life of the Church for mission and ministry.” In fulfilling this mission, the pastor is accountable first to the God who called them and then to the authorities of the church who commissioned and ordained them. This system helps to create a framework for effectiveness and growth, not only for the individuals involved, but for the church as a whole (See Titus 1:5f).

This system also helps to assure a certain amount of faithfulness to the historic doctrines of the church and to the values and standards of the church. In this way we are able to continue the “apostolic tradition,” which is the passing of the Christian faith from one person to the next and from one generation to another.

Every year there is a consultation process with pastors and congregation. Through this process, persons are able to share their desires of hopes for ministry and pastoral leadership. Only after this process are appointments made in the attempt to match the gifts, graces, and needs of the pastors with the gifts, graces, and needs of the congregations. While the system is not always perfect, we do place a firm trust in the Holy Spirit to be involved in the process and to help us all to be faithful and effective in ministry. This is the biblical way.

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