



# A History of the Office of Lay Speaker in United Methodism

The office of lay speaker in The United Methodist Church, originally known as exhorter, has existed in the church almost from the beginning of Methodism. We do not know the exact time that the first exhorter began to speak, but one of the earliest references to this precursor of the office of certified lay speaker occurred in 1746, only two years after the first annual conference of Methodism, a meeting of Wesley's British Methodist preachers. In Cornwall, England, there had been active hostilities against the Methodists and lay preachers. This movement to exterminate Methodism from Cornwall resulted in a number of incidents that left the meetings of Methodists without leaders and threatened their existence. The following incident reveals that, in the earliest years of the Methodist movement in England, it was the exhorters who held the Methodist Societies together. John Simon reports that

the lay preachers were seized by constables, dragged to prison and committed to the custody of military officers and the captains of men-of-war, for the King's service. Scarcely a lay preacher was left at liberty in the whole county. But this seeming catastrophe fell out 'unto the furtherance of the gospel.' In the absence of the lay preachers, the Societies continued to meet, and their meeting suggested a remedy." (*John Wesley and the Methodist Societies*; Epworth Press, 1923; page 238)

Thomas Jackson, in his *Life of Charles Wesley*, says,

Under these circumstances a new class of labourers had been raised up, in almost every place, bearing the name of Exhorters. They did not preach, in the usual sense of that term; but held meetings for prayer, and addressed the people on the subject of religion, giving them requisite encouragement and admonition, and calling "them that were without" to repentance. In this he [Charles Wesley] saw the hand of God, raising up instruments to carry on his own work; the Exhorters being generally men of superior sense, and of unquestionable piety. By the labours of these men the Societies were kept together. . . . Thus the work was carried on, in despite of opposition, till persecutors themselves, if not convinced, saw their efforts to be hopeless, and agreed to "refrain from these men, and let them alone."

Charles Wesley noted in his Journal (April 30, 1746) on his way to the conference in Bristol that he had "conferred with several who have tasted the love of Christ, mostly under the preaching or prayers of our lay-helpers. How can anyone dare deny that they are sent of God? O that all who have the outward call, were as inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to preach!"

In the British Conference of 1746, we find the reference to the office of exhorter, along with a reference to the origin of what now has become the lay speaker's certificate that gives *permission* to preach or evangelize in United Methodist pulpits. In addition, there is recorded a requirement for an annual renewal of the certification, still a requirement in modern provisions of the *Book of Discipline*. In his "Minutes of Several Conversations," John Wesley records that the Methodist Conference declared, "Let none exhort in any of our societies, without a note of permission from the Assistant. Let every Exhorter take care to have this renewed yearly; and let every Assistant insist upon it."

So, by 1746 we can see that the exhorters had become recognized as a strong force in the existence of the Methodist Societies in England. We hazard to say that not many lay offices of the modern United Methodist Church can trace their origins to sanctions issued directly by John Wesley in the earliest days of Methodism!

Wesley, like most of the clergy in his day, was wary of allowing laypeople to speak in public about the concerns of God and the church or allowing any unordained person to interpret the Scriptures in public. Perhaps he recalled the time when his father (Samuel Wesley) was asked to tell his mother (Susanna Wesley) that she should stop her practice of teaching and reading the Bible to a rather large group of people in the parsonage while her husband Samuel was out of town. Although Susanna Wesley did not succumb to the pressures of her husband or the curate of the church, John Wesley knew that such interpretation of Scripture was not allowed laypeople.

But John Wesley was able to overcome his feelings. In a letter written in 1756 he wrote:

My principle (frequently declared) is this, "I submit to every ordinance of man, wherever I do not conceive there is an absolute necessity for acting contrary to it." Consistently with this, I do tolerate lay preaching, because I conceive there is an absolute necessity for it; inasmuch as were it not, thousands of souls would perish everlastingly.

Although John Wesley did allow his lay preachers to preach, he guarded even that level of ministry with the office of exhorters. This office was originally considered to be a step on the way to becoming a lay preacher. But even the exhorters (as was noted earlier) were required to have a note of recommendation, which was renewed yearly, from the Assistant over them.

On July 9, 1747, John Wesley met with the stewards of the Societies in Cornwall. He asked what exhorters there were in each society and examined their gifts for doing the work of an exhorter. After determining whether their lives were known to be holy and if there seemed to be any fruit coming from their labors, Wesley wrote:

I found, upon the whole, 1. That there were no less than eighteen Exhorters in the county. 2. That three of these had no gifts at all for the work, neither natural nor supernatural. 3. That a fourth had neither gifts nor grace; but was a dull, empty, self-conceited man. 4. That a fifth had considerable gifts, but had evidently made shipwreck of the grace of God: These therefore I determined immediately to set aside, and advise our societies not to hear them. 6. [sic] That J. B., A. L., and J. W. had gifts and grace, and had been much blessed in the work. Lastly, that the rest might be helpful when there was no Preacher in their own or the neighbouring societies, provided they would take no step without the advice of those who had more experience than themselves.

Although sometimes the term *exhorter* was used synonymously with the term *local preacher*, many of the early Methodists saw a clear distinction between the two. One perceived difference between an exhorter and a lay preacher was that the lay preacher "took a text." A 1769 letter from Wesley to one Sarah Crosby, who was concerned that she not be reproached for being a preacher, said, "You may properly enough intermix short exhortations with prayer; but keep as far from what is called preaching as you can: Therefore never take a text; never speak in a continued discourse, without some break, about four or five minutes."

So if exhorters did not take a text, what did they do? Exhortation followed a fairly strict standard format. Exhorters reprov'd sin, called for sinners to flee from the wrath to come, told of their own experience with overcoming sin, and proclaimed the joy that had now come because of their experience.

Exhorters usually spoke in their own class meetings. But there were also exhorters who spoke to larger groups of people, frequently when the travelling preacher was delayed and did not arrive at the time for the service to begin. Nathan Bangs noted the usefulness of delegating such work in *An Original Church of Christ*: "This method of propagating these doctrines and enforcing

these rules, by an itinerant ministry, with all those auxiliaries afforded us by class leaders, stewards, exhorters, and local preachers, is admirably adapted to give a diffusive spread to the gospel of God our Saviour, and to build up the people in holy living."

Later, we find what may be the roots of what has become the listing of certified lay speakers yearly in Annual Conference Journals. At the 1770 Conference, this decision was made: "That each Assistant may know the Exhorters in his circuit, let each give his successor a list of them."

By 1778 the term *exhorter* appeared often without explanation. We can assume that the office of exhorter was a commonly known part of the Methodist working system by this time and no explanation was needed. At the Conference held at Kent County, Delaware, beginning April 28, 1779, a rule recorded in the *Minutes* states that "every exhorter and local preacher [should] go by the directions of the assistants where, and only where, they shall appoint." On April 24, 1780, when the northern Conference met in Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, Question 10 noted that every local preacher and exhorter should have a license, to be renewed quarterly, after examination, and that none should "presume to speak in public without taking a note."

It is clear that people were already filling the role of exhorter in the societies and on the circuits before the beginning of the 1784 Christmas Conference at the Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore. It was at that conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, however, that the office of exhorter officially began in America. The office of exhorter was recognized at the conference, and the same requirements continued from the British Conference. In the earlier history of the church this office was found to be very useful, both in forming and building the early American church and in developing the talents of people likely to be called to the ordained ministry. Where there was a scarcity of ministers, the exhorter often did important service, in cities as well as in more rural parts of the church. Serving as an exhorter sometimes served as a sort of probation to the ministry.

One concern of the 1784 historic Christmas Conference (which was all clergy) was who would be responsible for the circuits while all the preachers were in Baltimore and at future conferences. The following excerpt from that first *Discipline* reflects that the local preachers and exhorters were to fill in "according to the plan of the Circuit."

## SECTION XVII.

How to provide for the Circuits in the Time of Conference, and to preserve and increase the work of God.

**Quest. 1.** What can be done to supply the circuits, during the sitting of the Conference?

**Answ. 1.** Let all the Appointments stand according to the plan of the circuit.

**2.** Engage as many local Preachers and Exhorters as will supply them; and let them be paid for their time in proportion to the salary of the Travelling-Preachers.

**3.** If Preachers and Exhorters cannot attend, let some person of ability be appointed in every society to sing, pray, and read one of Mr. Wesley's sermons.

**4.** And if that cannot be done, let there be prayer-meetings.

**5.** Wherever you can, in large societies, appoint prayer-meetings.

Lastly, let a fast be published at every quarterly meeting for the Friday following; and a memorandum of it be written on all the class-papers. Also be active in dispersing the books among the people.

**Ans. 1.** The Quarterly Conference shall have authority to license proper persons to exhort, and to renew their licenses annually, when, in its judgment, their gifts, grace, and usefulness will warrant it.

**Ans. 2.** No person shall be licensed to exhort without the recommendation of the Church of which he is a member, or of the leaders'-meeting of the charge to which he belongs; nor shall any license be valid unless signed by the President of the Conference.

¶ **84. Ques 2.** What are the duties of an exhorter?

**Ans.** To hold meetings for prayer and exhortation whenever opportunity is afforded, subject to the direction of the preacher in charge.

¶ **85. Ques 3.** What further directions are given concerning exhorters?

**Ans. 1.** Let every exhorter diligently exercise the functions of his office, without assuming those of a preacher.

**Ans. 2.** Every exhorter, by virtue of his office, shall be a member of the Quarterly Conference of the charge to which he belongs; but in all other respects he shall be dealt with as a private member of the Church.

**Ans. 3.** When an exhorter removes from one circuit, station, or mission, to another, he shall not be recognized as such, unless he obtain a certificate of his official character from the Presiding Elder of the District, or the preacher to whose charge he belongs at the time of his removal.

The words from the early *Disciplines* make it clear that the functions of the office were those of "hold[ing] meetings for prayer and exhortation whenever opportunity is afforded, subject to the direction of the preacher in charge." It was also clear that those holding this office were lay members of their local church and were warned not to assume the office of a preacher; the words used were: "Let every exhorter diligently exercise the functions of his office, without assuming those of a preacher."

These exhorters were very important and vital to the westward movement of the church. At one time in the late 1800s the cry was "two a day"; the Methodist movement was growing so rapidly that some people intended to open two new churches every day. Many of these churches only saw the circuit rider once every month or so. It was the lay preachers and exhorters who kept the fires of the Holy Spirit glowing in those small villages and communities from day to day. Exhorters did the work of ministry with the people in their churches (that is, they visited the sick, visited newcomers to the community, "tended the flock," and so forth). With the traveling preacher or circuit rider responsible for large geographic areas with many stations, it was an awesome task to fill every pulpit every Sunday, but the exhorters proved worthy of that calling.

There are many anecdotal stories surrounding the office of lay exhorter. One such bit of trivia is that on December 19, 1920, the C. C. Hancock Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, issued a Certificate of Church Membership and an Exhorter's License to one Aimee Semple McPherson. The Exhorter's License was signed by the pastor, the Secretary of the Quarterly Conference, and all of the Church Trustees. Aimee Semple McPherson was later to become a world-famous faith-healing evangelist in California, where she established the Four-Square Gospel Church, still in existence today.

At the historic Uniting Conference of 1939, The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were again one. They united with The Methodist Protestant Church, and these three former unions met for the first time as The Methodist Church at the first General Conference of The Methodist Church in 1940. Here is an excerpt about exhorters quoted from the *Discipline* of that historic conference:

To license proper persons to exhort and to inquire annually into the gifts, labors, and usefulness of each Exhorter on the Circuit, Station, or Mission. Exhorters shall be constituted by the recommendation of the Official Board of the Church of which they are members and licensed by the Quarterly Conference, the license to be signed by the President of the Quarterly Conference. The duties of an Exhorter are to hold meetings for prayer and exhortation whenever opportunity is afforded, subject to the direction of the Pastor; to attend all the sessions of the District and Quarterly Conferences, and to present a written report to the same. An Exhorter shall be subject to an Annual Examination of character in the Quarterly Conference, and a renewal of license, to be signed by the President thereof. (¶ 532.7)

So the office continued in The Methodist Church, much as it had in the former churches. One new facet is noted: one of the duties of the exhorter is "to present a written report." The Methodist Church was now at its peak in membership and was still growing, although not now at the pace of "two a day."

Although more and more traveling preachers were now located, that is, serving one-station charges, there were still many churches on circuits. The need for dedicated laypeople to fill pulpits was still very great. Sometime between the 1944 and 1948 General Conferences, the office of lay speaker began to emerge. The 1944 *Discipline* only mentioned the office of exhorter. The 1948 *Discipline* lists both exhorter and lay speaker in the same paragraph. Here is the text of that paragraph, the first formal recognition of the office of lay speaker:

¶ **150.** The Quarterly Conference shall:

[EXHORTER]

**3.** License proper persons to exhort, and inquire annually into the gifts, labors, and usefulness of each exhorter on the circuit, station, or mission. **Exhorters** shall be constituted by the recommendation of the Official Board or Board of Stewards of the church of which they are members and licensed by the Quarterly Conference, the license to be signed by the president of the Quarterly Conference. The duties of an exhorter are to hold meetings for prayer and exhortation whenever opportunity is afforded, subject to the direction of the pastor; to attend all the sessions of the District and Quarterly Conferences; and to present a written report to the same. An exhorter shall be subject to an annual examination of character in the Quarterly Conference, and a renewal of license, to be signed by the president thereof.

[LAY SPEAKER]

**4.** Certify proper persons to serve as **lay speakers**, and inquire annually into the gifts, labors, and usefulness of lay speakers on the circuit, station, or mission. Lay speakers shall be constituted by the Official Board or Board of Stewards of the church of which they are members and certified by the Quarterly Conference, the certificate to be signed by the president of the Quarterly Conference. The duties of a lay speaker are to conduct services of worship, to hold meetings for prayer and exhortation whenever opportunity is afforded, subject to the direction of the pastor, to attend all the sessions of the District and Quarterly Conferences, and to present a written report to the same. A lay speaker shall be subject to an annual examination of character in the Quarterly Conference, and a renewal of certificate, to be signed by the president thereof.

Thus both the office of lay speaker and that of exhorter were included among the responsibilities of the Quarterly Conference. The provisions were identical for exhorters and lay speakers except for the language of licensure for exhorters and certification for lay speakers and the additional privilege of lay speakers "to conduct services of worship."

The *Discipline* of the 1952 General Conference was the last one in which both exhorter and lay speaker appeared. The 1956 *Discipline* contained only the office of lay speaker. In the index to that *Discipline* the term *Exhorter* appeared; however, after it appeared the words "See Lay speaker."

The office of certified lay speaker continued in the *Discipline* with virtually the same wording until the

In American Methodism, an example of the licensing of Exhorters occurs in the 1840 *Discipline* (Section 10, No. 13), falling under the duties of preachers:

To license such persons as he may judge proper to officiate as exhorters in the Church, provided no person shall be so licensed without the consent of the leaders' meeting, or of the class of which he is a member, where no leaders' meeting is held; and the exhorters so authorized shall be subject to the annual examination of character in the quarterly meeting conference, and have their license annually renewed by the presiding elder, or the preacher having the charge, if approved by the quarterly meeting conference.

An exhorter was first chosen by the recommendation of the class of which he was a member, or of the leaders' and stewards' meeting of the circuit or station. The exhorter was then licensed by the preacher in charge, under whose direction he served. The duties and privileges of an exhorter were to hold meetings for prayer and exhortation whenever an opportunity arose, to attend all the sessions of the Quarterly Conference and the District Conference of which he was a member, and to be subject to an annual examination of character. An exhorter's license was renewed by the Quarterly or District Conference.

With the coming of the Civil War and the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the work of the exhorter continued in both the Northern and Southern churches. The following is an excerpt from the 1887 *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South:

SECTION XIII

OF EXHORTERS.

¶ **83. Ques 1.** What directions are given concerning the licensing of persons to exhort?

1992 General Conference, when two very significant milestones in the office were initiated. The first was expansion of the understanding of the role and function of the lay speaker.

A lay speaker was now to witness to her or his Christian faith by serving in the following areas of ministry: “spoken communication, church and community leadership, and care-giving ministries.” No longer was it just a matter of assuring that there were no empty pulpits. Lay speakers were to be in ministry in virtually every facet of the life of the church, especially those that touched other people’s lives. A new lay speaking logo was introduced. The new logo emphasized Lay Speaking Ministry and the three significant areas of that ministry: caring, leading, and communicating.



The second new thrust was that there were now two offices, or levels, of lay speaking: the local church lay speaker and the certified lay speaker. The local church lay speaker was only required to complete the basic course (§ 279.1b), while the certified lay speaker was expected to complete the basic course plus at least one advanced course every three years (§ 280.1b, 3d). A local church lay speaker was only to serve in his or her local church. But a certified lay speaker was given the added responsibility of serving in other local churches and in the district and conference. Read Section 10 of the 1992 *Discipline*:

**SECTION X. LAY SPEAKING MINISTRY.**

**¶ 278. LAY SPEAKING**

1. A **lay speaker** (local church or certified) is a member of a local church or charge who is ready and desirous to serve the Church and who is well informed on the Scriptures and the doctrine, heritage, organization, and life of The United Methodist Church and who has received specific training to develop skills in witnessing to the Christian faith through spoken communication, church and community leadership, and care-giving ministries. An applicant must be active in the support of the local church or charge.

2. Lay speakers are to serve the local church or charge (or beyond the local church or charge) in any way in which their witness or leadership and service inspires the laity to deeper commitment to Christ and more effective discipleship,

including the interpretation of the Scriptures, doctrine, organization, and ministries of the Church.

3. Through continued study and training a lay speaker should prepare to undertake one or more of the following functions, giving primary attention to service within the local church or charge.

- a) To take initiative in giving leadership, assistance, and support to the program emphases of the Church.
- b) To lead meetings for prayer, training, study, and discussion when requested by the pastor, district superintendent, or Committee on Lay Speaking.
- c) To conduct, or assist in conducting, services of worship, and present sermons and addresses when requested by the pastor, district superintendent, or Committee on Lay Speaking.
- d) To relate to appropriate committees and work areas in providing leadership for congregational and community life and fostering care-giving ministries.

4. Lay speaker training courses shall be those recommended by the General Board of Discipleship or alternates approved by the conference Committee on Lay Speaking. Such training should enable ministries with all language and cultural groups as appropriate.

5. It is recommended that a service of commitment be held for persons recognized as local church or certified lay speakers.

**¶ 279. LOCAL CHURCH LAY SPEAKER**

1. A candidate may be recognized as a local church lay speaker by the district or conference Committee on Lay Speaking after the candidate has:

- a) Made application in writing to the appropriate committee and has been recommended by the pastor and the Administrative Council or Administrative Board or the Charge Conference of the local church in which membership is held. The district superintendent shall be responsible for reporting the names of applicants to the appropriate committee.
  - b) Completed the basic course for lay speaking.
2. The local church lay speaker shall serve the local church in which membership is held by witness of the spoken word, vital leadership service, and care-giving ministry (see ¶ 278.3).
3. To maintain status, a report and reapplication with recommendations must be submitted annually (see ¶ 248.12).

**¶ 280. CERTIFIED LAY SPEAKER**

1. A candidate may be recognized as a certified lay speaker by the district or conference Committee on Lay Speaking after the candidate has:

- a) Made application in writing to the appropriate committee and has been recommended by the pastor and the Administrative Council or Administrative Board or the Charge Conference of the local church in which he or she holds membership.
- b) Completed both basic and one advanced training courses for lay speaking.
- c) Appeared before the appropriate committee for a review of the application and a consideration of the responsibilities of a lay speaker (see ¶ 278.2).

2. The certified lay speaker shall continue to serve the local church in the witness of the spoken word, vital leadership service, and care-giving ministry (see ¶ 278.1). In addition, the certified lay speaker may serve in the district and conference and in local churches other than the local church in which membership is held.

3. Recognition as a certified lay speaker shall be renewed annually by the district or conference Committee on Lay Speaking after the certified lay speaker has:

- a) Requested in writing the renewal of certification.
- b) Submitted an annual report to the Charge Conference and the Committee on Lay Speaking, giving evidence of the satisfactory performance of lay speaking service.
- c) Been recommended for renewal by the pastor and the Administrative Council or Administrative Board or Charge Conference.
- d) Completed at least once in every three years an advanced course for lay speakers.

**¶281. TRANSFER OF CERTIFICATION BY CERTIFIED LAY SPEAKERS.**

A certified lay speaker who moves may transfer certification to the new district upon receipt of a letter from the previous district’s Committee on Lay Speaking confirming current certification and the date of completion of the most recent advanced course taken. Further renewal of certification is in accordance with ¶ 280.

At the 1996 General Conference there were numerous petitions to change the name of the program and the name of the office. The term *lay speaker* simply no longer described the new thrust of the program. The leg-

islative committee that received those petitions struggled several hours but kept coming back to the same name—lay speaker. That legislative committee asked the General Board of Discipleship and its affiliate organization, The National Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders, to seek input from the church and to explore all areas to decide on a name for the program and for the office. The Conference and District Directors of Lay Speaking were included in that process leading to petitions for changes brought to the 2000 General Conference.

In January 2000, The Association of Annual Conference Directors of Lay Speaking Ministries was officially organized at a meeting of Conference Directors in St. Louis, MO. Then at the 2000 General Conference in May the title *lay speaker* was retained, but the name of the program was changed to Lay Speaking Ministries. This small but significant change is evident in the change made in the logo of the program. The plural name points out that lay speakers are indeed involved in many ministries beyond speaking.



In addition to the changes in the name and logo, the 2000 General Conference recognized Lay Speaking Ministries at the conference level and made the conference director of Lay Speaking Ministries a lay member of the annual conference and a member of the Conference Board of Laity.

The Lay Speaking Ministries movement continues to grow in both emphasis and ministry areas. While *speaking* is still in the name, the ministry of lay speaking now encompasses much more. In many congregations, caring ministries are now the primary area where lay speakers are found to be in ministry.

The Lay Speaking Ministries program will continue to grow as long as laypeople are called to go out from their workplaces and homes to reach and touch people in every station and need of life. Thousands of United Methodists across the church are daily engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ through lay speaking ministries of leading, caring, and communicating.