

A Brief History of the Office of Lay Speaker in the United Methodist Church (and Its Predecessor Bodies)

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Exhorter was the original term for what we now know as lay speaker in The United Methodist Church. This office has existed in the church almost from the beginning of Methodism. In the British Conference of 1746 -- two years after John Wesley held his first conference -- the following direction was given: "Let none exhort in any of our Societies without a note of recommendation from the Assistant. Let every Exhorter see that this be renewed yearly. Let every Assistant rigorously insist upon this." Then, in 1770, we find this record: "That each Assistant may know the Exhorters in his circuit, let each give his successor a list of them."

The truth is, Wesley, who undoubtedly wrote those instructions, was wary of allowing laymen any ministerial prerogatives unless they proved worthy of them. He did let his assistants preach. Nevertheless, he continued to guard the Sacrament and Ordinances of the church, and kept them beyond the reach of any but ordained men until his very last years -- and then only under special circumstances. The clergy of the church -- and Wesley was one of them -- had an instinctive aversion to allowing any lay person to "speak in public concerning the things of God," or for any unordained person to interpret the Scriptures in public. It may be recalled how Samuel Wesley (John's father) reproved his wife, Susanna, because she undertook to teach the Bible to a rather large group within her own parsonage. Such an assumption of public "scriptural interpretation" was not allowed lay people. While John Wesley did from an early date let his "lay preachers" preach, he guarded even that grade of the ministry "by a preliminary grade or status composed of exhorters," each of whom had to have a note of recommendation -- which had to be renewed yearly -- from the "assistant" over him. "Exhorter" was considered to be a step on the way to lay preacher.

The earliest references to the precursor of the office of Certified Lay Speaker, namely the "exhorter," occurred only two years after the first conference of Methodism which was held in 1744. In Cornwall, there had been active hostilities against the Methodists and lay preachers which resulted in a number of incidents in which their meetings seemed to be potentially leaderless. The following incident reveals that, in the earliest years of the Methodist movement in England, it was the "exhorter" (who was later to become the Certified Lay Speaker within The United Methodist Church in the U.S.), who held the Methodist Societies together.

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 country. 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. Speaking of this critical time, 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 'exhorter.' 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 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'" [Jackson, 1841, p. 444]. It is difficult to discover the exact time when the first "exhorter" began his work, but in 1746 the "exhorters" seem to have attained a recognized position in the Methodist Societies in Cornwall (Simon, 1923, pp.238-39).

Following up on this report by Charles Wesley, on Thursday, July 9, 1747, John Wesley met the stewards of all the Societies in Cornwall, and, inquired what exhorters there were in each society; whether they had gifts meet (sic) for the work; whether their lives were eminently holy and whether there appeared any fruit of their labour. I found, upon the whole; (1) That there were no less (sic) 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. (5) 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 (Garlow, 199, pp. 209-10).

In the British Conference of 1746, we find the reference to the office within Methodism, and the origin of what now has become the Lay Speaker's Certificate which gives permission to preach or evangelize in United Methodist pulpits as contained in modern provisions of the Discipline, as well as the requirement for annual renewal of the same. We hazard to say that there are not many lay offices of the modern United Methodist Church that can trace their origins to sanctions issued directly by John Wesley in 1746! Wesley states:

Let none exhort in any of our Societies without a note of recommendation from the Assistant. Let every Exhorter see that this be renewed yearly (quoted by Harmon, 1974, p. 821).

Although Davies and Rupp state that sometimes the term "exhorter" was used synonymously with "local preacher," they cite an early exhorter, Howell Harris, who "humbly declared before the 1763 Conference 'I could never call myself a preacher, but an exhorter, my gifts being so'" (Davies and Rupp, p. 327). Garlow states that the difference between an exhorter and a lay preacher was that they lay preacher "took a text." He continues, citing a 1769 letter from Wesley:

“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” (Telford, 1931, V, p. 130). By 1770 the phrase “take a text” was synonymous with becoming a lay preacher. When a person became a lay preacher, he then ceased “exhorting.” Exhorting simply consisted of “reproving sin, pleading with sinners to flee from wrath to come, describing his own experience in those matters and testifying to his present joy. The framework of the exhortation appears to have been rigid, held together by these topics ... ” (Batty, pp. 38, 40, as cited by Garlow, 1979). Frank Baker noted that in early Methodism there was a group of persons, most of them class leaders, who “gave an exhortation” to assemblies of persons larger than their small classes. The exhortations were often given on Sundays and frequently were the result of the absence caused by a delayed lay preacher (Garlow, 1979, pp. 208-09).

Bucke (1964) sums up the role of the laity in another way:

In terms of the ministry, however, the prime emphasis should be placed on what Abel Stevens called the “auxiliary orders.” Behind the local preachers stands another, almost forgotten, army of exhorters and class leaders. Nathan Bangs tied all the ministries together in his scholarly account of Methodism, *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.” When an influential local exhorter could stand up after the preacher's sermon and make direct application to the needs of his own people, the effect of the preaching was doubled. When class leaders could continue day by day the discipline of raising up a holy people, a new sort of church emerges -- a church of ministers (p. 474).

Later, we find the roots of what has become the listing of Certified Lay Speakers annually in Annual Conference Journals:

... in 1770, we find this record -- “That each Assistant may know the Exhorters in his circuit, let each give his successor a list of them” (Harmon, p. 821).

At the Conference held at Asbury's retreat in Kent County, Delaware, beginning April 28, 1779, a new rule was recorded in the Minutes stating that “every Exhorter and Local Preacher should go by the directions of the assistants where, and only where, they shall appoint” (Barclay, 1949, p. 63). On April 24, 1780, when the northern Conference met in Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, the following action was recorded, “(10.) That every Local Preacher and Exhorter should have a license, to be renewed quarterly, after examination, and that none should be 'presumed to speak in public,' without a license” (Barclay, 1949, p. 66).

At the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States in 1784, this office was recognized, 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 persons likely to be called to the 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. The exhorter role also furnished a sort of probation to the ministry.

The office of exhorter in the Methodist Episcopal Church in America officially began with the completion of the 1784 Christmas Conference at the Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore. However, it is obvious that persons were already filling that role in the societies and on the circuits. One concern of the 1784 historic Christmas Conference (which was all clergy) was the issue of 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 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 Traveling-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.

The office of exhorter in the British Methodist Church ceased to exist sometime after 1784. There is not now a comparable office of lay speaker in the British Conference. Early exhorters in the American church were used to “exhort” the people to follow God's Word and to live exemplary lives. They would often “exhort” the people to action after

the appointed clergy had “preached” the sermon.

In American Methodism, an example of the licensing of Exhorters occurs in the 1840 Discipline provisions falling under duties of preachers:

Section X, No. 13. 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 (Discipline, 1840, p. 48).

Exhorter was a term applied to a lay officer in the Methodist Churches and societies. The exhorter was constituted by the recommendation of the class of which he was a member, or by the leaders' and stewards' meeting of the circuit or station. The exhorter was licensed by the preacher in charge. The duties and privileges of an exhorter were to hold meetings for prayer and exhortation whenever an opportunity was afforded, subject to the direction of the preacher in charge; to attend all the sessions of the Quarterly Conference and the District Conference, and to be subject to an annual examination of character in the Quarterly or District Conference and the renewal of license annually by the presiding elder or preacher having charge, if approved by the Quarterly 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 Exorters

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

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 of the 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 of the 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.”

The office of Exhorter continued in both The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. These exhorters were 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 two new churches were being opened daily. Many of those churches saw the Circuit Rider only once every month or so. The lay preachers and exhorters 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 (they visited the sick, visited newcomers to the community, and “tended the flock”.)

“No Silent Pulpits” were the marching words of the exhorter movement. Every pulpit filled every Sunday was the goal. With the “traveling preacher” or “circuit rider” responsible for large geographic areas with many stations, this was an awesome task. But the exhorters proved worthy of that calling.

Many anecdotal stories surround the office of lay exhorter. One bit of trivia that surfaced recently: On December 19, 1920, the C. C. Hancock Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, 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 by all the Church Trustees. Aimee Semple McPherson later became a world-famous faith-healing evangelist in California. There she established the Four-Square Gospel Church, which is still in existence today.

The term lay speaker made its appearance in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (before the union) with the emergence of the General Board of Lay Activities in 1922. The local church Board of Lay Activities was composed of a number of officers, including Lay Speakers' committees. Responsibilities of the Lay Speakers were given by

the General Board of Lay Activities in the August 31, 1934, issue of the Christian Advocate.

1. We urge that every Board of Stewards have a Committee on Lay Speaking, and, that this committee, in cooperation with the pastor, formulate and carry forward a systematic program of lay speaking on the objectives our General Council has outlined. Adult class sessions, midweek services, and preaching services offer weekly opportunity for three-minute speeches and occasional opportunity for full programs. A wise pastor and a good committee can make this work exceedingly helpful.
2. Our district lay leader has no greater duty and opportunity than to cooperate with his presiding elder and associate and charge lay leaders in working out a program of lay speaking so as to provide an evangelistic service in every rural church every Sunday. We call upon the district lay leaders to do this fine job.

At the historic 1940 General Conference of The Methodist Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South were again one. The following is an excerpt from the Discipline of that historic conference:

Paragraph 532.7: 7. 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.

So the office continued in The Methodist Church, much as it had in the two former churches. One new facet is noted: Among 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” and serving “one-station charges,” there were still many churches on “circuits.” The need for dedicated laypersons to fill pulpits was still very great.

Sometime between the 1944 and the 1948 General Conferences, the office of lay speaker began to emerge. The 1944 Discipline only mentioned the office of exhorter. The 1948 Discipline contains both Exhorter and Lay Speaker in the same paragraph. Here is the text of that paragraph:

¶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.

In the 1948 Discipline, 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 “Certified” Lay Speaker continued in the Discipline, with virtually the same wording until the 1992 General Conference, when two very significant milestones in the office were initiated.

The first was the expansion of the understanding of the role and function of the lay speaker. A lay speaker was now to witness to her/his Christian faith by serving in the following “areas of ministry”: communication, church and community leadership, and caregiving ministries. No longer was it just assuring that there were “no silent 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 established that emphasized Lay Speaking Ministries 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. There was the local church lay speaker and the certified lay speaker. It is ironic that at that same 1992 General Conference there was legislation presented that would establish one order of ordained ministry; however, it did not pass. The local church lay speaker

was required to complete only the basic course; while the certified lay speaker was expected to complete the basic course and an advanced course in each three-year period. Local church lay speakers were to serve only in their local church. Section X of the 1992 Discipline follows:

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 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.

To take initiative in giving leadership, assistance, and support to the program emphases of the Church.

To lead meetings for prayer, training, study, and discussion when requested by the pastor, district superintendent, or Committee on Lay Speaking.

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.

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 a local church or certified lay speaker.

¶ 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:

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. 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:

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.

Completed both basic and one advanced training courses for lay speaking.

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:

Requested in writing the renewal of certification.

Submitted an annual report to the Charge Conference and the Committee on Lay Speaking, giving evidence of the satisfactory performance of lay speaking service.

Been recommended for renewal by the pastor and the Administrative Council or Administrative Board or Charge Conference.

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.

The 1996 General Conference did not change any of the legislation. However there were numerous petitions submitted to that General Conference to change the name of the program and the name of the office. The term "lay speaker" no longer described the new thrust of the program.

The legislative committee that received those petitions struggled several hours and kept coming back to the same name -- lay speaker. That legislative committee has asked the General Board of Discipleship and its affiliate organization -- The National Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders -- to spend the 1997-2000 quadrennium receiving input and exploring all areas to come up with a new name for the program and for the office. Also included in that four-year study are the conference and district directors of lay speaking.

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

The program will continue to grow as long as laypersons are called to go out from their workplaces and homes to reach and touch persons 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.

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