



Featured: Lay servant ministry continues tradition



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Johnnie Draughon leads a training session in the Virginia Conference.

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Lay servant ministry continues tradition

Erik Alsgaard

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Ed. Note: *Sunday, Oct. 19 is Laity Sunday throughout The United Methodist Church. It is a time for celebrating the call to ministry of all laity. Together, laity and clergy, serving in many venues, work together to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*

Once upon a time, in the not-so-distant past, a layperson's certified ministry in The United Methodist Church was limited to preaching for the pastor, maybe once or twice per year. That was odd, considering the Methodist movement in the United States was mainly lay-driven when it began about 250 years ago.

Today, the church may be finding its future in its past. Laity now have many more options for ministry within the church than filling pulpits when pastors are on vacation.

The office now called a "lay servant" has evolved to where people are trained and certified in a wide variety of ministries. Their roles range from visiting shut-ins and hospital patients to delivering meals and playing music in worship; from convening a committee to leading an outreach project locally or halfway around the world; from leading Bible study or assisting with the sacraments to — yes — preaching from the pulpit.

"Prior to the 2012 General Conference, it became apparent that we were losing a number of people that might pursue certification as a lay speaker because they had no desire to preach," says Jodi Cataldo, director of laity in leadership at the General Board of Discipleship. "Because we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world as servants in leadership, the term 'lay servant' was appropriate to the calling."

However, the door remains open for those laity interested only in preaching. These would become lay speakers, Cataldo says. They, too, are trained and certified.

In addition to changing the general category from lay speaker to lay servant, General Conference added a new category specifically for lay speaking. "This category of ministry is for those who are specifically called to the preaching ministry," Cataldo explains. "The process is more intensive than that of the certified lay servant."

She points out that while the certified lay servant can provide a preaching ministry, if a person wants to be endorsed and certified as a lay speaker for the specific ministry of filling pulpits, he or she should choose this category.

This is the route Johnnie Draughon chose years ago. It was the only option available. Draughon, director of lay servant ministries in the Virginia Annual Conference, shared his journey.

In the 1990s, Draughon served as a lay speaker.

"I was adamantly against changing the name" to lay servant, he says. "Being able to share the Gospel from the pulpit was our calling and our name."

In 2002, Draughon was asked to serve as the Norfolk District director of lay speaking, which he did for the next seven years. During that time, he says, he came to see that the calling was broader than filling pulpits.

"Our lay speakers were leading in worship, teaching, leading small groups, organizing mission trips," he says. "The list was endless."

Draughon also met "a large number" of people who would not avail themselves of training opportunities because they were afraid to fill a pulpit and had no desire to preach.

"Quite honestly, I also heard some of our lay speakers deliver sermons that caused me to question their calling as lay speakers," he says.

Through it all, he began to appreciate the broader scope of ministries available through the certified lay speaker program.

In 2009, after being asked to serve in his current position as conference director, he and a colleague began to work toward opening their training to all laity. In the first year, 40 students who were not in the lay speaking program attended the "Lay Servant Academy" in Virginia.

"I believe that the primary role of the lay servant is to serve the local church, district and conference in any capacity they feel the Holy Spirit is leading them," Draughon says.

To become a lay servant, Draughon notes, a person must first complete the Basic Lay Servant course, which helps people explore their calls to service.

Once that step is completed, the candidates must request, through their local churches/charge conferences, recognition as a "local lay servant." Upon completion of any advanced lay servant course — and there are around 30 available through the Board of Discipleship — a candidate again applies to his or her local church/charge conference to become a certified lay servant.

What sets the certified people apart from others doing the same tasks is their desire to seek more training, Draughon

says. "They want to be more effective in leading, caring and communication. With that desire to learn comes a deeper level of commitment to serve. The more passion a servant leader demonstrates towards the ministries they serve, the more they inspire others to greater service."

Certified lay servants who want to qualify as lay speakers "must complete an additional 50 hours of training and be reevaluated," Draughon says.

"I believe there is no other program within The United Methodist Church that has the ability to engage, equip and empower our laity as effectively as the (certified lay servant) program," he adds.

Or, as Cataldo notes, "It takes a disciple to make a disciple, and lay servant ministries equip and empower laity to be engaged in disciple-making."

The Rev. Erik Alsgaard is editor of the UMConnection, a publication of the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference.

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