

Send me

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My parents' marriage began with a betrayal. My maternal grandfather was in the army, so my mom's family moved around a lot. She was shy and introverted, and she struggled to make friends and establish roots. As an adult, all she wanted was a single place to call home.

While my father went off to seminary and thought he might be ordained, he fully intended to work as a chaplain with the mentally ill. But eventually--after they were married, as my mother routinely points out--his calling shifted, and he began to work in local congregations. They'd both been raised Methodist, and so the recovering army brat found herself a preacher's wife, bound to her husband--who was bound to the itinerancy.

We tell these stories now with mock horror and melodramatic flourishes. Despite the vocational bait and switch, my parents have been happily married for 34 years. But the United Methodist Church's itinerant system has been shaping my life--for better and worse--since long before my own call to ministry asserted itself.

Each spring, our household was tense as we awaited calls from district superintendents. We were lucky: My dad never had to move very far, and his appointments were largely healthy and lengthy.

But when I told my parents I was considering ordination, the first thing my dad did was remind me how big our annual conference is. When I told them I was getting married, they immediately asked if Josh was ready for the itinerancy. My mother made sure I wasn't trying to sneak one past him--whenever we gathered for dinner, she'd ask him something like, "you sure you're up for this?"

Ordination felt a lot like getting married: a leap of faith to be together through thick and thin, a commitment requiring my best self and all the love and hope I could muster. At our wedding, a friend read the passage we'd unsubtly selected from Ruth: "[Where you go, I will go.](#)"

But of all the challenges of ministry, the itinerancy is the hardest discipline for me. I would follow my husband to the ends of the earth, and I have vowed to follow my bishop to the farthest edges of Illinois. But only one of those vows fills me unambiguously with joy and not dread.

A friend, discussing his relationship with a member of his dissertation committee, made a fitting analogy: It is strange for someone you don't know very well to have so much power over your life. This is my fear: not incompetence or ill will or politicking, but simply that our conference and districts are too big for those with the authority to change my life to know each pastor and congregation well enough to guarantee good matches.

Yet when people dismiss the itinerant system as antiquated, I think of its distinct gifts. It encourages an engaged laity, and it gives small and poor congregations a fair shot at talented leadership. It allows for a freer pulpit: clergy can speak out without fear of being silenced or ousted by a personnel committee.

Still, it's hard for me to trust in this system, to cede authority to someone else for huge changes in my life. It's hard to remember that the Holy Spirit might be at work in sending me places I would not have chosen to go.

I feel for Michael Pflieger, the Chicago Catholic priest [who was suspended by his bishop](#) after suggesting that he might refuse a new appointment (and who recently [said he'll preach elsewhere](#) if he isn't reinstated). I have sometimes hoped that if I could just be successful enough--awesome enough--I could somehow shirk the appointment system or work it to my advantage. And I often covet other traditions' search-and-call processes: when I am filling out endless forms or schlepping across the state to another conference gathering, when I tire of politics and bureaucracy, when the dreaded calls come from district superintendents.

But better or for worse, this was and is my vow: "Here I am, send me."