

A season of prayer and discernment: Acts 1:1-14

by [Kelly Lyn Logue](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

One of the buzz phrases in the United Methodist Church appointment process these days is “seasons of ministry.” As our bishops and cabinets try to encourage longer-term ministry appointments, this phrase helps us expand our imaginations. For too long in our tradition, clergy lived year to year, and so did congregations. Now we are imagining ministry that lasts beyond the current year.

Jesus practiced seasons of ministry. He spent a 40-day season in the wilderness after he was baptized, then emerged from that season to a season of gathering disciples. He spent many seasons traveling, teaching and healing. He’d take a miniretreat away from everyone to pray, then spend another season teaching. The season of his passion, death and resurrection was followed by 40 days of resurrection appearances and kingdom teaching. Jesus ordered the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there “for the promise of the Father.” They wanted to get moving on this “making disciples of all nations” thing. Yet instead of letting them loose, Jesus slowed them down. The power of the Holy Spirit would come, he assured them, but for now they were to wait for a season.

Not all seasons of ministry are result-oriented; some are transformation-oriented, and that makes us nervous. When our congregations are not growing exponentially in membership or worship attendance, the district superintendent is called and a request for a pastoral change is made. My own congregation is going through a time of discernment of our values, beliefs, mission and vision. It’s a slow, arduous process that we began two and a half years ago in a time of conflict; it will take another 18 months for us to complete, with the promise of more conflict along the way. We will spend even more time making sure that our life together models what we’ve hammered out on paper. Of course it’s the process that we’re after. The time we spend gathered together, “constantly devoting ourselves to prayer,” will bring transformation.

Some days I’m invigorated by this process and other days I’d rather walk away. It’s hard work to wait. It’s hard to sit and stay at the table when the going gets rough, just as I’m sure it was hard for the apostles to wait in Jerusalem. They had just

experienced Jesus' ascension, and now they were supposed to just hang out? They had just seen Jesus ascend into the heavens in a cloud, lifted out of their sight. Instead of telling the world about it, they were to go back down the mountain to the upper room and wait.

Waiting involves uncertainty. And since we serve the God of the universe, even the sky is not the limit when it comes to what the future may bring. Who knows what a life of seasons surrendered to God's timing might mean? Waiting takes time, and we're afraid to waste time. But if we model our lives after Jesus, time is not something to use or waste but a gift to experience. There will be a time to preach, heal and make disciples. But for now we are to spend a season together waiting and praying.

This is not a passive undertaking, but part of active discipleship. The transformation that was going to take place on Pentecost required preparation. This time would confirm in them what they already believed to be true: that Jesus died for their sins, was raised from the dead and appeared to them in risen form. Now they could claim their own authority to tell the good news of Jesus.

In Jesus' ministry, there were seasons of preaching and teaching to the big crowds, but there were also times of focused teaching just to the Twelve, to three or to one. The apostles too would address the crowds, but first, during this season of preparation, they were together, along with Jesus' mother and family, devoting themselves to prayer. In that time they discerned who among them might fill the void left by Judas and how the promise of the Father would come to them. Such prayer and discernment are anything but passive. But to the world, a season of prayer and discernment looks like nothing much is happening.

The resurrected Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and sits at the right hand of the Father: his power is limitless and his authority is cosmic. As Jesus' subjects, our work together is not limited by the boundaries of our imagination or by the world's expectations. Instead, we are freed to live into seasons of ministry. Some seasons we'll be busy serving as Christ's "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Other seasons, we'll be hunkered down getting ourselves healthy and ready.