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Reflections of a baby DS

When she became a judicatory leader, Virginia O. (Ginger) Bassford learned that things are not always as they seem.

by [Virginia O. \(Ginger\) Bassford](#)

September 14, 2010

"Baby DS." The name was first used on me about 15 months ago, just days after the bishop called and asked me to prayerfully consider an appointment as a district superintendent in the United Methodist Church.

What a learning curve since then! The name didn't bother me, though. I even liked it, a little. I'm the youngest of four by 15, 10 and five years and therefore am at once the youngest, oldest and only child -- a misfit from the get-go.

I remember thinking that I was never going to be "allowed" to be a pastor -- let alone a judicatory leader such as a district superintendent. When I was first interviewed by the District Committee on Ordained Ministry (dCOM for short), the members grilled me for what seemed like a lifetime. Then they dismissed me so that they could deliberate and vote on whether they affirmed my call to ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church.

I stood there for more than 20 minutes as the voices in the room next door grew louder and louder. I thought I was going to die. They started to yell at each other. "What will I do?" I thought. "They aren't going to approve me! Where will I go? I have to live out this call. Will I change denominations? Try again next year? What *will* I do?"

I was caught off guard when the door opened and there were 12 faces smiling at me. Each person shook my hand, patted me on the back and congratulated me. Talk about mixed messages! It took me days to gut-up enough courage to ask my mentor pastor why they had argued about me for so long. I still recall his response: "We weren't arguing about you. We were arguing about a theological issue you raised -- we voted on you the first 30 seconds after you were out of the room."

Well, how about that! Things are not always as they seem.

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The cabinet was not as it had seemed from my vantage point as a pastor.

My image of appointment making was of people who chomped soggy cigars and chewed the fat, swaggering as they hurled darts at a board. You've had those kinds of thoughts about your denominational leaders, too ... haven't you?

I was wrong.

This is what I've observed these past months: Looking around the table, I see faces lined with concern, people literally praying to ask the right questions, to make the best choice. They talk about how the best choice was not what was easy or necessarily fair by the world's standards. The best choice -- the one that had integrity, that helped advance the kingdom of God.

I've heard words of grace, far more words of grace than I would have ever imagined. I have *received* grace, both in sitting at that table and in realizing all the grace I have received in the preceding years.

I have felt the grave and passionate concern of my colleagues -- not just for an institution, *but for life* -- real, tangible life. Life that is bigger than you or me, greater than what you want or what I want, more important than our material wishes or desires. I have been washed over by the profound knowledge that this is not just a cabinet, not just a committee. These were pastors with whom I sat, perhaps in the truest sense of the word.

They are pastors who would neither rubber-stamp a proposal nor carelessly cast aside a candidate; who would strive not to do just *something*, but who would work and work and work and work to do the *best* thing, even if others outside the room did not understand and rejected them because of the decision they made. They are willing to be misfits, every single one of them ... of *us*.

The difference in the "before" and the "after" shot is gray hair, a bizarre sense of the holy, profound isolation, bittersweet awareness of what it means to follow after God and remain fully human. It's like finding the *aha* in a text and writing a sermon at 10 on Saturday night after you have been wrestled to the ground and pinned there for days. The words don't seem to make sense, but at noon on Sunday you know in the absolute core of your being *that it was God*. Somehow the people in the pew know that too. As you step out of the pulpit, there it is! Unmistakable! A pronounced limp.

Baby DS? Yeah, I'll wear it. Especially if the name is an oxymoron, a place of tension between what is yet to be and what has been -- between laughter and heartache, between creativity and technicalities.

I recently saw that pastor -- the one who was my mentor, one of the 12 who smiled at me after I was approved. It was a blessed conversation. He's in his second term as a DS, still full of mischief, and laughter, and life. Plenty to learn. Plenty to teach. I recently found an article written by my mentor about that ordination interview. Another colleague sent it to me years ago. Before placing it in the envelope, the colleague carefully drew a pointed beard, thick eyebrows, a mustache and horns on my mentor's "From the Pastor" photo.

"Take the work seriously, but don't take yourself too seriously!" they both remind me. Poke a little. Laugh a lot. Above all else, stay connected to God and with each other. That's the only way any of us -- babies or DSs -- ever make it through.

