

***Forging the Future: Methodism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***  
***Jeremiah 29:4-7; Matthew 28:16-20***  
***October 25, 2009***

This month we've been looking at various aspects of United Methodism. The past two Sundays we've explored the meaning of "holiness of heart and life," and the membership vows of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We began the month with the story of my real great-great-great grandfather, Conrad Best, who was a Methodist Circuit Rider in the nineteenth century. He was one among 4,000 circuit riders who spread the love of God throughout the land. Today we consider how the United Methodist Church is forging the frontier of the twenty-first century with four areas of mission focus.

I begin with some historical context. One of John Wesley's most often quoted phrases is, "the world is my parish." The story behind this phrase is interesting. John's preaching evoked such an emotional stir and outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon people that parishes in the Church of England began to ban him from their pulpits. Such emotionalism was too much for them! A colleague preacher, George Whitefield, had the same experience and he took to the open fields to preach. He had great success in reaching for Christ those to whom the established church paid no attention. Aware of Wesley's preaching power and organizing skill, Whitefield sent for Wesley. Up to this point Wesley had only preached in regular worship services in England. He was extremely hesitant about such a style of ministry, referring to it as strange and vile. Nevertheless he gave it a try and the first day preached to about three thousand people!

In reflecting on this new style of ministry, he wrote in his journal: "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation." These are the Wesleyan roots of our emphasis on mission, witness, and outreach to the world and to every person, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, without regard to class or status.

Building upon our heritage and given our current global context, our denomination has selected four areas of focus for the next few years. These are part of a movement to reinvigorate the United Methodist Church.

The first emphasis is developing principled Christian leaders. This is an effort to overcome a crisis in clergy and lay leadership that exists especially in the United States. An immediate concern is the fact that the active clergy population is growing older and the number of ordained elders under the age of 35 who will eventually assume top leadership roles in the church is barely increasing. I was 27 years old when I was first appointed to a church by the bishop, but alas, I am no longer considered one of the younger clergy! A comic in a publication for clergy

has a sign advertising a Museum of Vanishing Species. One of the specimens is a pastor holding a Bible. A mother is explaining to her child, “They certainly were fun. You could criticize their sermons, phone them any time of the day or night, complain about whatever was on your mind. I wonder what happened to them?”<sup>i</sup>

A general rule is that churches tend to attract people 10 years older and 10 years younger than the pastor is.<sup>ii</sup> With most United Methodist pastors in the 55-70 age range, we will have a difficult time reaching people younger than 45 years of age. Thus, the future of the United Methodist Church in the United States depends on reaching younger and more diverse people. Research has shown that most young clergy made their decision to enter ministry before going to college. They were active in church as children and youth. Their local congregation was the most important shaping factor for them and their pastor was their key mentor.<sup>iii</sup>

The ministries with children and youth that churches offer are essential to the future leadership of the church. A congregation’s support of children and youth with their unique gifts and abilities is critical in their spiritual formation and their future relationship to the church. The encouragement and support this congregation provides for children and youth is rich and vital. You are making a difference in their lives and in the future of the church.

A second mission focus is Creating New Places for New People and Renewing Existing Congregations. For many years we have been hearing of the declining population of mainline Protestant churches, including United Methodist Churches. An interesting fact is that in American United Methodism, all of the growth in recent years has been experienced in the newest churches. If we were not planting new churches, we would not only be declining but also dying. The Great Commission given by Jesus, “Go make disciples of all nations,” is about sharing Christ with the next generation. We need to be mindful of the shifts in demographics and culture and reach out to new people in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them.

Research confirms that the most effective form of evangelism is starting new churches. New congregations are able to fairly quickly address particular needs, such as a new worship style or mission project or target community. My father attends a United Methodist Church that started in South Reno 23 years ago. In those years it has grown to have four worship services on Sunday with over 800 members.

The overall goal is to equip 1,000 clergy and laity to plant 650 new congregations by the end of 2012. The need for new United Methodist Churches is most apparent in the Western United States. The West has the fewest United Methodist congregations per population and yet is projected to have the largest population growth for the next 25 years. Thirty-nine new congregations need to be planted each year in the Western States just to keep up with the population growth.

We've done this before. From 1870 to 1920, Methodists averaged one new church start a day—for 50 years. That made us the strongest denomination in the country.<sup>iv</sup>

In previous years this congregation has helped launch other new congregations including St. Mark's UMC in Orinda. Healthy existing congregations are needed to anchor new ones and to call forth leaders who can reach new people.

A third area of focus is engaging in ministry with the poor. The biblical prophets warn us that our worship of God is only acceptable if joined to the merciful care for the poor, the weak, and the despised (Isaiah 58:6-9).

Jim Winkler says, "The church of Jesus Christ identifies with the poor and destitute not because they are morally superior, but because that is God's way of healing the pain of the human community." I appreciate Jim's description of the poor. He says, "Poor people are like diamonds. Diamonds are found deep underground where they are formed under the intense pressure of the earth. They have to be dug out, polished and cleaned so their beauty can be fully appreciated. Our mindsets must be altered to understand poor people are beautiful but operate under enormous pressure."<sup>v</sup>

One United Methodist-related ministry is the Justa Center in Phoenix. It is the only center in the United States specifically ministering to the homeless elderly, the fastest growing group of homeless people. Three hundred people venture through their doors each year; the only requirement is being over 55. (It may be where all of the obsolete clergy will end up!)

Methodists are also active in areas of the world where poverty is a grim reality. Here's one example from the 77 United Methodist congregations in Laos. Cultivating mushrooms has proven to be a successful form of economic empowerment for church members. Our Global Ministries personnel supply mushroom plantings to church families. When the crop matures, in a relatively short time, the mushrooms are sold on the commercial market. The farmers pay a tithe to the church, have small but growing incomes to support their families, and benefit the entire community by bringing in cash. It is known as the "mushrooms of faith" project.

The fourth focus area is Stamping Out the Killer Diseases of Poverty by Improving Health Globally. The greatest damage caused by poverty is disease. Senator Richard Lugar, a United Methodist, says, "Those suffering from chronic hunger are more susceptible to the effects of diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS. Children deprived of nutritious diets experience lifelong consequences such as stunting and cognitive impairment."<sup>vi</sup> Poverty and disease are inter-related and require an integrated approach.

Every 30 seconds, a child in Africa dies a painful death from malaria caused

by the bite of a tiny mosquito. The World Health Organization says most of the approximately 1 million deaths from malaria reported worldwide in 2006 were African children. Most were younger than the age of 5.<sup>vii</sup>

Malaria is both treatable and preventable with mosquito nets, adequate drugs, education and spraying programs. For several years the United Methodist Church has been working with the United Nations Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. This partnership believes that it can cover all of sub-Saharan Africa with mosquito nets by the end of 2010. The goal is to eliminate malaria deaths in Africa by 2015 and thus far the numbers are on track. Faith-based groups are training community health care workers to take prevention and treatment strategies out into the bush or rural regions where people have not been served.

Malaria costs the African continent an estimated \$12 billion a year. Imagine what the African nations could do with \$12 billion to educate children instead of burying them. A remarkable fact is that it costs only \$10 to provide a net to save a life from malaria. For us that's only 2 or 3 lattes worth to save a life.

These are the four major ways in which United Methodists address the issues of the twenty-first century. We are developing principled Christian leaders, with an emphasis on youth and young adults. We are creating new places for new people and revitalizing our existing congregations. We are engaging in ministry with the poor through direct services and advocacy. We are stamping out the killer diseases of poverty by improving health globally.

This is one of many reasons I am proud to be a United Methodist. Through our connectional system, we are living the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

Although the cost of our Christ-centered global ministry is significant, it is only a small portion of our local church budget. In general of every \$1,000, \$845 stays in the local church. The rest, \$155, goes to the general ministries of the denomination and to annual conference and district ministries.<sup>viii</sup> For those who wish that their funds were only spent locally, most of your gifts do stay in the local church. For those who wish we could do more, there are opportunities to give to specific projects and causes in the United States and around the world.

These are ways in which the United Methodist Church is living out its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. These are areas of focus for our general ministry, but they can also guide our local ministry. We give thanks for the heritage of sharing the love of God as known through Jesus Christ around the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Pontius' Puddle, *Circuit Rider*, August-October 2009, p. 33.

<sup>ii</sup> Rev. Tom Butcher, quoted by John Michael DeMarco, "On the Path to Reach New People," *Interpreter*,

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March/April 2009, p. 18.

<sup>iii</sup> Tom Gillem, "God's Call: Opening Young Hearts and Minds," *Interpreter* (September/October 2009), p. 14.

<sup>iv</sup> John Michael DeMarco, "On the Path to Reach New People," *Interpreter*, March/April 2009.

<sup>v</sup> Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, quoted by John Michael DeMarco, "'Ministry with' requires Listening, Learning," *Interpreter*, January/February 2009, pp. 14-16.

<sup>vi</sup> Sen. Richard G. Lugar, "Improve Global Health by Fighting Global Hunger," *Interpreter*, July/August 2009, p. 22.

<sup>vii</sup> Tom Gillem, "Rich or Poor Can Mean the Difference Between Life and Death," *Interpreter*, July/August 2009, pp. 15-17.

<sup>viii</sup> *The United Methodist Handbook*, United Methodist Communications, 2009, p. 35.

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