

Rethinking the Worldwide United Methodist Church... Seeking a New Approach

(This is the prepared text of an address by Bishop Scott Jones, chair of the Committee to Study the Worldwide Nature of The United Methodist Church, at a breakfast meeting sponsored by the Wesleyan Renewal Movement in the North Georgia Annual Conference on June 18, 2010.)

By Bishop Scott J. Jones

God has a great future in store for The United Methodist Church.

There are those who are predicting our decline and demise, but they are wrong. I firmly believe that we will be part of a great explosion of Christian faith.

We have many assets. Our primary asset is the Holy Spirit working through our people—faithful laity and clergy who day in and day out seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Looking at the whole connection, we have an amazing history if we will only remember it. We have excellent biblical doctrine if we will only preach and teach it. We have an amazing organization if we will only focus on fruitfulness rather than talk about our inputs. We have a worldwide presence in a single church if we will only find the right combination of connection and regional adaptation.

Since John Wesley's time, one of the strengths of Methodism has been its ability to hold fast the essence of the gospel while adapting to changing realities of people. We did that through the first 200 years of our mission work here in America. But sometime in the 1960's we grew complacent and decided that we could ignore the main thing and focus on a large set of side issues.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. For us, the main thing is the Bible, and the Bible is a missionary book. It is about a missionary God calling into existence a missionary people, and since the first Pentecost that missionary people has been the church of Jesus Christ.

Essential to the church's identity is its mission, and we formulate it clearly: the mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Now, I would like to lecture for a whole semester on that one sentence. In teaching United Methodist doctrine and evangelism I have spent a lot of time talking about the meaning of these words. I can summarize it by saying that, properly understood, our mission statement summarizes the entire Bible, and because our doctrine is biblical, it summarizes the United Methodist doctrine that our pastors have promised to preach and maintain.

As we think about our mission, there are seven vision pathways which the Council of Bishops have agreed are crucial for our future. Ten of us have outlined these in a book entitled *The Future of The United Methodist Church*. The seven pathways are:

1. Teaching the Wesleyan model of reaching and forming disciples of Jesus Christ.
2. Strengthening lay and clergy leadership
3. Developing new congregations
4. Transforming existing congregations.
5. Ending racism as we authentically expand racial and ethnic ministries
6. Reaching and transforming the lives of new generations of children
7. Eliminating poverty in community with the poor

These later got summarized into four focus areas:

1. Creating new places for new people
2. Developing principled Christian leaders
3. Engaging in ministry with the poor
4. Stamping out killer diseases by improving health globally.

(I ask that as you think about developing *principled* Christian leaders, you remember the original vision pathway which says that “principled” means teaching and preaching the United Methodist way of salvation.)

This is a vision worth giving your life to! We are doing a great deal of amazing ministry all over the world. But all of us as leaders need to admit that there are significant blockages which are keeping us from greater effectiveness, greater fruitfulness. It is the job of leaders like you and me to name those blockages and then guide the church into removing them so that the Holy Spirit can work among us more fruitfully.

The mission statement is the key to this. The second sentence of the mission statement is (and I’m quoting ¶120) “Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.” Every part of our connection should be evaluated on how well it helps local churches in their mission, either resourcing them directly or doing on their behalf essential missional activities they cannot do by themselves.

Right now, there are eight different study committees looking at the various steps that might help us live into the future God has in store for us. I am grateful that the Council of Bishops is coordinating significant conversation and cooperation among all of them. The most important is the Call to Action steering committee which started its work with seven agenda items:

1. Developing metrics for effectiveness and accountability across the church
2. Rebuilding our leadership development system, with special attention to young people
3. Eliminating the guaranteed appointment
4. Recasting the quadrennial General Conference
5. Reordering the life of the church
6. Establishing a “global office” or central organizing center for coordination and efficiency
7. Constructing a viable financial future

I am not sure how this Call to Action Steering Committee will move forward from this list of possible tasks, but they are gathering a lot of data and will report to the Council of bishops and Connectional Table in November. From conversations I have had with their leaders, I think they will be seeking the three or four key interventions that will be most helpful in the renewal and revitalization of the American part of our denomination.

I chair another one of those study committees: The Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of the United Methodist Church.

At the 2008 General Conference, the General Conference by more than two-thirds margins approved a number of constitutional amendments aimed at helping us live more fully into our worldwide nature. The vote of the annual conference delegates was released last month, and none of them were approved. It is clear now that the two-thirds of the General Conference was mistaken in recommending this plan to the Annual Conferences.

I cannot remember a time when the General Conference’s action on these kinds of matters was so firmly rejected. There is lots of conversation going on, especially within the Study Committee which I chair, as to why they were rejected.

But the most important question is how to move forward. The problems which gave rise to this vision of our worldwide nature have not gone away. They grow more pressing every quadrennium.

One of those crucial questions is this: what parts of *The Book of Discipline* apply everywhere to all United Methodists, and what parts are adaptable to local contexts?

Our current situation is that all of the Book of Discipline applies to the United States and that Central Conferences can adapt portions of for their context. The Constitution gives Central Conferences the responsibility “To make such rules and regulations for the administration of the work within their boundaries including such changes and adaptations of the General Discipline as the conditions in the

respective areas may require, subject to the powers that have been or shall be vested in the General Conference.” (§31.5) This is supplemented by ¶543.7 which reads, “A central conference shall have power to make such changes and adaptations of the *Book of Discipline* as the special conditions and the mission of the church in the area require, especially concerning the organization and administration of the work on local church, district, and annual conference levels, provided that no action shall be taken that is contrary to the Constitution and the General Rules of The United Methodist Church, and provided that the spirit of connectional relationship is kept between the local and the general church.”

No one knows what these paragraphs mean. The three Judicial Council Decisions footnoted in the Book of Discipline all suggest that Central Conferences do not have much leeway in adapting the requirements of the Discipline. (142, 147, 313)

I am going to ask four questions to which I do not know the answer, and only the Judicial Council can provide the answer. I know how I would vote if I were a member of the Judicial Council, and you can join me in trying to predict how the current Council or a future one would rule. My record at such predictions is very poor. Here are the questions:

- Can a Central Conference refuse, on principle, to ordain women?
- Can a Central Conference decide to ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals?
- Can a Central Conference amend the Social Principles?
- Can a Central Conference ordain deacons only as a transitional stage toward ordination as an elder?

I am deeply committed to the unity of the worldwide United Methodist Church. I was nearly in tears at the 2004 General Conference when a church split seemed possible, and I rejoiced with the passage of the unity resolution.

In my book *Staying at the Table: The Gift of Unity for United Methodists* I argue that our unity is a gift from God and is constituted by our common doctrine, mission and core disciplines. I am grateful that our common doctrine is less threatened today than in the past, but issues of human sexuality continue to divide us. Our mission statement has been a powerful force uniting us as has our response to human need through Nothing But Nets, Imagine No Malaria, and the various hurricanes and earthquakes to which we have responded.

But there are other emerging problems as well.

Remember that everything the General Conference does is binding on the UMC in the United States. This arrangement worked so long as we were a US church with a few foreign outposts. It is predicted that in 2012 40 percent of the delegates will be from Central Conferences.

Imagine a day, perhaps in 2016 or 2020, when the General Conference is 60 percent from Central Conferences?

Can you understand the frustration experienced by these non-American delegates? They come all the way to the US for a meeting and spend 12 days working on US issues and paying little attention to things that matter in their home conferences. This is already a factor for Filipinos. We heard very clearly that they want to belong to worldwide UMC, but are frustrated by what they perceive to be the US focus of general church meetings.

Another factor: Today, Central Conference delegates have a significant vote on the US pension plan. This is a plan to which they do not contribute and from which they do not benefit. Last November leaders from the Mississippi Annual Conference strongly urged the General Council on Finance and Administration that in turn voted to ask the Council of Bishops to call a \$3 million special session of the General Conference to revise the pension plan. If we had done that, 300 persons would have come to the US for a few days to vote on a plan that does not affect them at all. This makes no sense.

If Central Conference delegates come to be the majority, they will have a control in setting apportionments to the World Service Fund, the Ministerial Education Fund, the Interdenominational Cooperation Fund, the General Administration Fund and other general church funds. They benefit from these funds, but do not contribute to them.

Here is another question: are the General agencies of our church US agencies, or global agencies? Why do we pay for Central Conference members of these agencies? The reason is they are global—general. The idea that they are doing programming for Central Conferences is amazing—they are not staffed for it, nor do they operate effectively in those places. The possible exception to this is the General Board of Global Ministries, but you should know that the European Central Conferences have their own United Methodist mission board which acts independently of GBGM, while seeking to cooperate with it.

Do we need our current general agencies? If your general church apportionments are too high, what are you prepared to cut? What is their mission? I would argue that we need to address improving theological education here in the United States, but also in Central Conferences. Is our General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, as presently configured, the best way to do that?

Underlying many of these questions is the deeper one: what really does tie the UMC together?

I think we are bound together by our doctrine, our discipline and our mission.

Imagine a copy of *The Book of Discipline* that had in it only those things that would truly be applicable for every United Methodist conference in the world.

What if we went back to the old name: *The Doctrines and Discipline of The United Methodist Church*? It would be a lot smaller, but what would it include?

The Study Committee on the worldwide nature of the UMC is working on that question. We voted to work on the basis that the following are so crucial to the worldwide unity of the church, that they must always be decided on by the General Conference and that no variation among the Central Conferences should be permitted: the Constitution, Doctrinal Standards, Doctrinal statements including the Social Principles, mission statement, and basic descriptions of episcopacy, ordained ministry and annual conferences.

Let us be very clear. The Study Committee will be bringing to the General Conference of 2012 proposals to help the church live more fully into its worldwide nature.

We have agreed that issues of human sexuality, including ordination, must remain the responsibility of the General conference. Further, we are not proposing any new layers of bureaucracy. We are affirming our ecumenical relationships including the World Methodist Council and the World Council of Churches. All of that remains unchanged.

Our study committee is composed of 20 persons and 13 consultants. We have described our work in the following way: “We see a worldwide United Methodist Church driven to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To live more fully into this vision, we are working toward deeper connections throughout the church, greater local authority, and more equitable sharing of power and representation around the world.”

I believe that in a globalizing world, the Christian movement needs a strong, worldwide, *united* United Methodist Church.

We are one of only a few truly global, Protestant churches in the world. Our mission work, our mutual accountability are crucial. We must avoid the mistake of the Anglican Communion. To claim this future, we must address a long list of blockages that are preventing us from moving forward as well as we can. God has a future in store for us if we will only live into it.

Here is the really big question: What should be the structural shape of the UMC in 2020? In 2040? In 2060?

If we are going to embrace this vision of a worldwide united church, then we need to take some steps during the next few years to move in that direction.

It is clear from the votes on the constitutional amendments that there needs to be a lot more conversation across the church to discern how best to live into that worldwide nature.

The Study Committee would like to invite you into a conversation about that vision and how best to live into it. Please go to our website, www.worldwideumc.org. There you can keep up with what we are doing, and participate in on-line conversations about our work. Those of you who will be General Conference delegates in 2012 will then have the full responsibility to evaluate what we bring and prayerfully determine what next steps we should take.