



A World Parish?

Bruce W. Robbins

United Methodists know what it is like to have a place on a public square in the United States. Other United Methodists know what it is like in a local congregation in a city in Angola. But they know very little about each other's lives and concerns. Sooner or later, United Methodists will be forced to recognize the powerful factors underlying what it means to be a global church. We love to think of ourselves globally, but we often do not consider the consequences! There are great problems and gifts that come with the global church. Here are some examples.

A Problem. One of the great challenges of any global structure occurs when the "whole" contains parts with deep differences among them. Relationships between United Methodists in the United States and Africa, for example, are affected by the difference in wealth between the two places. Denominational leaders have not talked much about finances because of the sensitivity of the topic. But we can no longer avoid it.

My job places me in close relationship to the bishops of the UMC. I have watched in recent years as many bishops of the Central Conferences (those outside the U.S.) have advocated for salaries equal to the bishops in the United States. With racism and paternalism so deeply imbedded in our system, the request carries strong weight with it. When speaking to an African bishop three years ago I asked, "Why do you need to have such a large salary when the cost of living of your nation is so low?" He replied, "A bishop in my country is like a king. And

a king needs to give gifts, that is, to have things to give to his people."

I was struck by his complete and straightforward honesty with me. At the same time, I was deeply troubled about what this said about the church. What did it mean that a bishop received a salary for this reason, a salary that was many, many times greater than the few dollars per year that pastors in his area would receive? What did it mean that the church used this measure to provide

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aid to United Methodists? I did not know how to respond to this kind and honest bishop. I could not criticize his desire to help his people. At the same time, I could never agree with this model of the church. After putting on my ecumenical hat, I asked what the large salary would mean in this bishop's relationship with the other bishops in his city. It would have to affect the relationship!

People involved in the United Methodist Church and its global relationships know that this anecdote is just a glimpse of many challenges facing the denomination as it seeks to be global. Here is a list of some:

- Participation and relationship of

delegates at General Conference who speak different languages and have varying levels of preparatory material provided for them.

- General agencies of the church trying to be global without resources that enable them to do so.
- Seeking to acknowledge and address the "elephant" of financial disparity between United Methodists in different countries across the world.

- Processes for admitting even national churches of other denominations into the United Methodist Church in response to their requests.

- Local and global tensions so evident in contentious issues such as homosexuality.

A Gift. It is a precious gift to see the global nature of the church lived out among United Methodists. Many Annual Conference teams have visited and had team visits from countries such as

Congo, Mozambique, the Philippines or Colombia. To see the face of the world church as it is lived out or to hear stories about it is thrilling. We feel God's presence among us. And we see the needs: each other's need for spiritual renewal and the need for the basic necessities in poverty-stricken and war torn places. Such opportunities help us grow in knowledge and faith.

Of course, the visitors do not have to be United Methodist! But the family connections are strong. Somehow it is different when they call themselves United Methodist, when they are us! Such is the gift the global United Methodist Church offers us.

Are We Global?

In one sense, we are global. United Methodists exist in many countries across the world including Africa, Asia, North America and Europe. It is vital for us to keep the global perspective. Our lives and understandings are richer when we see through eyes other than our own, local ones. For many, the structural connection is vital to seeing through global eyes! However, we are also global through the Body of Christ. We can be taught by other Christians and other families as well as by our own. It is not a requirement for the fullness of our church, (that is, the UMC), for the UMC itself to be the global church. In truth, we are a small part of a much larger whole.

A Wesleyan Understanding

The *Discipline* says, “The Wesleyan emphasis upon the Christian life—faith and love put into practice—has been the hallmark of those traditions

now incorporated into The United Methodist Church. The distinctive shape of the Wesleyan theological heritage can be seen in a constellation of doctrinal emphases that display the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying activity of God” (Par. 101).

The text goes on to outline the power of grace in Wesleyan tradition. It explains the powerful connection of faith and good works that sustains the passion for mission and service among Wesleyans. Here is one famous sentence that incorporates Wesleyan tradition: “For Wesley, there is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness.”

United Methodists share these characteristics with Wesleyans the world over. Hopefully, when people hear the term “Methodist” they will think of these kinds of commitments. Would that we could all live up to them! I am convinced that very little difference exists between United Methodists and other

Wesleyans. I envision a global church that places the special value of what it means to be Methodist within the wider Christian family.

A Need for Change: A Vision and the Principles of Institutional Faithfulness

All previous attempts to make large, structural change have failed. Since 1928, when the Central Conferences were created, there have only been modifications of the structures despite urgent calls for transformation. I suggest that we consider change, initially, in two phases. The first phase would create a UMC structure that preserves that connection that people believe is so important and, at the same time, would provide opportunity for “self-headedness” to United Methodists in different regions of the world. The result would be a denominational structure ready to move

into closer connection, locally and globally, with other Methodists. A second phase would seek to assist in the unity among Wesleyans and Methodists across the world. Changes such as these are needed for us if we truly seek to live out Jesus’ prayer for the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ. Continuing the status quo is contrary to the Bible!

Here are principles that could govern change. In all our changes we shall:

1. Uphold the rich tradition and faithful discipleship of the UMC.
2. Envision a structure that recognizes and strengthens the interdependence between United Methodists and other Methodists throughout the world.
3. Remember the Constitutional foundation of the UMC as a part of the Universal Church of Jesus Christ which we understand, theologically, to be the Body of Christ.

We shall understand that any institutional structure, even the UMC, is a provisional and temporary structure hoping to find the unity of the One Church to which Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures call us.

4. Understand that any institutional structure, even the UMC, is a provisional and temporary structure hoping to find the unity of the One Church to which Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures call us.
5. Commit ourselves to ask at all times whether the changes we propose enhance or diminish the opportunity to proclaim the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in each place.
6. Keep the three voices of self-headedness, interdependence and Christian unity in mind and heart as we proceed.
7. Work toward a Church that expresses the oneness of all in each place and a unity in relationship to the Church in all other places.

A Vision to Remember and to Guide Us

In 1968, Bishop Barbieri, from the Buenos Aires area of the Latin America Central Conference of our church, imagined the following to the General Conference:

At the summit, therefore, we would have a world conference through which we would seek interdependence, so that all the churches therein involved could learn from each other on an equal basis and receive such mutual assistance and inspiration as necessary, up to the day when we shall belong to a larger fellowship in pursuit of the final aim of coming to be one flock under the leadership of the One Pastor (1968 *General Conference Journal*, p. 243).

May God help us at General Conference in Pittsburgh and beyond to live into such a vision. □

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