

Forty Years Later

Lyle E. Schaller

We are proposing a forty-year plan,” announced the spokesperson for a joint task force composed of representatives from the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in early 1960. “The seven major components of this plan include (1) a merger of these two denominations that are similar in both polity and doctrine, (2) a continued cutback in new church development—by the late 1960s, we expect to reduce the number of new missions started each year from an annual average of well over 100 in the 1950s to under 50, and we anticipate reducing that to fewer than 30 per year by the 1970s, (3) several members of our task force believe our itinerancy system must be perpetuated so we are recommending continuing the current practice of relatively short pastorates for all elders, regardless of the size of the congregation, (4) the creation of a new defined contribution pension plan for all ministers in the 1980s to replace the current Methodist defined benefit plan, (5) a series of capital fund campaigns to fully fund the current defined benefit pension plan for ministers from both denominations, (6) an increase in the number of congregations averaging fewer than 20 at worship, and (7) a reduction in the number of congregations from over 40,000 currently to 38,000 by 1970 and to 36,000 by the end of the century.”

What about the number of members?” interrupted one listener. “Does your proposal call for an increase or decrease in our total membership?”

“Our projections assume an increase in the American population of at least 50 percent over the next four decades and a decrease of about 2.6 million or 22 percent in the membership of the new church,” was the reply.

“Can you be more specific?” pleaded one pastor. “I’m the senior minister of one of the largest Methodist congregations in Ohio. What do you anticipate will happen in Ohio?”

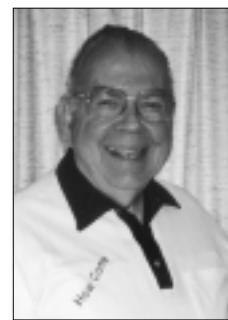
“Over the next forty years, we anticipate a net decrease in membership in Ohio of 39 percent,” replied the spokesperson while searching the pages of this proposal. “That compares to an anticipated decrease in membership of 42 percent in California, a drop of 46 percent in Indiana, 45 percent in Illinois, 56 percent in West Virginia, and 41 percent in Michigan, but only 30 percent in Pennsylvania and Minnesota and 31 percent in Wisconsin. By contrast, we anticipate a 40 percent increase in Florida, thanks to a 220 percent increase in the population of that state.”

“Why do you anticipate such sharp decreases in membership?” challenged a lay person. “A few minutes ago you said you were projecting more than a 50 percent increase in this country’s population.”

“That’s a good question,” came the well-rehearsed reply. “There are at least six reasons. **First**, we see a sharp increase in the level of competition among the churches in America for potential future members. **Second**, the price tag on this cutback in new missions will produce an aging and shrinking of our membership. **Third**, as I said earlier, we expect to see more than 10 percent of our existing congregations disappear by the end of this century. **Fourth**, we anticipate a decrease in the number of big churches, especially in the Midwest, over the next fifteen to twenty years. We do, however, anticipate an increase, especially in the South and Southwest, in the number averaging more than 800 at worship during the 1990s. **Fifth**, a predictable price tag on a denominational merger is a shrinking in the number of congregations and members as institutional concerns replace evangelism at the top of the agenda. **Finally**, we anticipate a continued withdrawal of these two denominations from the large central cities and older suburbs, especially in the North and West.”

Is this a summary of a meeting that actually was held back in 1960? Of course not! With one exception, this is a completely imaginary scenario. The one exception is all the trends and statistics identified in this mythical report reflect what really happened between 1960 and 2000.

How will decisions made at General Conference 2004 shape the future of The United Methodist Church? What will the report be in 2044? □



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