



New Possibilities and Challenges in a Worldwide Church

Ruediger R. Minor

The 2004 General Conference will have the largest ever number of non-US delegates, mostly from the Central Conferences in Africa. Does this mean that the importance of American United Methodism is fading and will be diminished or even lost? While there is indeed evidence of a greater visibility of the worldwide nature of the United Methodist Church, its part in the U.S. will achieve a new role and importance in this process.

Though the talk about the “Global Nature of The United Methodist Church” has achieved popularity and even generated some controversy over the last 15 years, the worldwide international character of this church is anything but new. The Rev. Dr. Patrick Streiff, a renowned United Methodist Church historian from Switzerland, recently argued, that the parent bodies of United Methodism were even more international in the time after World War I. In an article in *Mitteilungen der Studiengemeinschaft*, the German language historical magazine of United Methodists in Europe, he quotes the percentage of membership as well as pastors and bishops residing outside the U.S.A., which was considerably higher than in our time. There are, however, new elements and components in the present situation. United Methodism is taking part in the growth of Christianity, especially in Africa, and there has been a growing awareness in the U.S.A. of the worldwide nature of the United Methodist Church over the last 25 years.

The latter has lead to a stronger rep-

resentation of Central Conference members in Boards and Agencies of the General Church. Most of them have included “global” elements into their programs. I personally prefer the traditional “worldwide” as an epithet for the United Methodist Church. “Global” sounds too much as if United Methodism was just another element of “globalization,” the inundation of the whole world with a predominantly American culture.

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I remember a friend who came to Russia about ten years ago. Noticing shopping signs in English, Snickers chocolate bars, and long lines in front of the first few McDonald's fast food restaurants, he asked: “Will ‘McChurch’ be next?” There is a danger of suppressing cultural values and traditions and reducing the manifold gifts and graces of God's world to a dull and spiritless monoculture. However, what is happening as the United Methodist Church discovers its worldwide character is just the opposite of the spreading of a dominant and dominating culture. The growing weight and influence of the Central Conferences leads to mutual benefit for all parts of the church.

The growing parts of the church in

the Central Conferences will need the support of Conferences, churches and individuals in the United States. Most of our Central Conferences are in areas of the world that live under difficult economic conditions. Resources are scarce and needs are overwhelming. This is our chance to understand the Church as a “Connection.” All its parts are interrelated as in the body of Christ, as “the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is

equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.” (Eph 4:16, NRSV) With its gifts and its involvement, the church in the United States takes part in the growth of the church in the Central Conferences. We see new dimensions of the church's mission evolving that give witness to the truly worldwide nature of the

United Methodist Church.

The most striking element of this new missionary spirit is the direct involvement of persons from the “grassroots” as can be seen in a number of initiatives throughout the church. I will use the “Russia Initiative” of the General Board of Global Ministries as an example, because it has been the first of those new initiatives, and it is the one that I am most familiar with. Answering new opportunities and the call for help from the former Soviet Union, the 1992 General Conference took the bold step to renew the “Russia Mission.” However, the church's mission budget, the World Service Fund, had already been established and distributed. Therefore, the new mission faced the

problem of how to find resources for its ministries.

It has been the ingenuity of the Rev. Dr. R. Bruce Weaver from Dallas, Texas, that has built, with the help of the General Board of Global Ministries, a support system for the fledgling Russian church. He created a network of supporting churches (or districts, even some Conferences), which are connected with new churches in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. The heart of the matter is close relationships between these churches, their lives and ministries. The American side is providing the major part of financial and material support but it is also actively taking part in the ministry of its "sister" church, sharing in special programs for children and youth, outreach and humanitarian work or building and other "hands on" ministries. Prayer is a strong tie between the churches and even individual prayer partnerships.

At first glance, the Russian side seems to be the main beneficiary but numerous Americans have told me how they and their churches have benefited from the mutual work. There are indeed some instances in which Russians have been ministering with their American partners in churches in the U.S. Furthermore, there is a general component of revival in these exchanges. Churches and their members in the United States have experienced the mission to the world as their own mission and have found a new excitement and focus in sharing the good news with their next-door neighbors. They have been a part of the "body's building itself up in love." In this way, they are a part of the church in mission, sharing their minds, their talents and their dollars in a common task that has become

their own through this experience.

This is one of the greatest advantages of the United Methodist "Connection." People in these "supporting congregation" do not need to "shop around" for mission projects. It is their Church through its agencies that provides such opportunities; it is in their church's Central Conferences, where they can do "hands on" ministries.

The Russia Initiative has become the model for similar partnerships in Africa, Asia and Europe. They all take seriously the desire of active and discerning church members who would like to know what happens to their contribution. The structure of the church assists them in directing

their interest, finding worthwhile projects, and enabling an efficient realization of those programs. It is the body of Christ, indeed, where all the members work together and are actively involved in the achieving of the mission.

I am deeply convinced that there is an enormous potential for growth for American Methodism in partnerships with the church in the Central Conferences. It can help the church to overcome its preoccupation with numerical growth (or decline) that can be statistically verified. (Doesn't that mirror an ideology of growth that is dominating the American economy and thinking?) Meaningful involvement in the mission of the church will release energies that are

untapped so far and will attract new persons. There are other idiosyncrasies of a national culture that can easily entrap a "national" church. Fixation upon (homo)

sexuality (on both sides of the barricade) seems to be one of them. Dialog and cooperation with the church in the Central Conferences in a worldwide church will address the needs of the world—hunger, illnesses, inequality and oppression—in a comprehensive way that will witness to God's love to all humankind and the dignity and sacred worth of all persons.

The worldwide United Methodist Church can address a growing obsession with national security (not only in the U.S.) by joining forces for a just peace that would work for removal of the root causes of violence and terrorism. This would not separate the church in the U.S. from its culture; rather the church would be a prophetic challenge to its nation and culture.

Inviting my American sisters and brothers to a new intensity of our common witness, I am asking nothing new. It was the Methodist Church that helped me to meet Christ and taught me the gospel and its consequences for my life as a youth in Communist East Germany. Though a small minority in the country, it was part of a worldwide church. In this way, it has widened my horizons, enabling me to understand the Christian faith and Christian action in its breadth and depth, despite the walls of concrete around the country and of laws and regulations that tried to imprison people and their minds. It was my American Methodist sisters and brothers who brought to me this spirit of the warm heart, the open mind and the bold action in the name of Christ. Let us together embrace this spirit anew to bring the Good News as a healing word to a hurting world. □

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