

Culture, Church, and Cokesbury

Caught by Complexity

Ezra Earl Jones

In April of this year I spent four days with 125 United Methodists in an Annual Conference in the heartland of the United States.

In addition to the members of the Conference cabinet, who at that time were completing the challenging annual task of appointment-making, there were more than 100 local church folks (half laity and half pastors) assembled to re-envision the Center of the church and the essence of living as a disciple of the risen Christ in the twenty-first century.

The journey through those four days was arduous, the conversation often heated, but it was entered into with high expectation and high resolve. Why? Because the culture is changing so fast and diversifying so thoroughly that patterns of congregational life that once served helpfully no longer do. It was because the yearnings of people for God in this world are so varied, their time frames so narrow and so broad, their approaches so diverse, their likes and dislikes about worship styles so governed by their age and lifestyle, their religious traditions so numerous, that these congregational leaders are conflicted about how to respond.

☛ How can congregations offer forms, rituals, and liturgies that catch up and lift up to God the prayers of people who seek God in so many ways?

☛ How can they craft the Sunday school and small groups in ways that optimize learning, sharing, and community building?

☛ How can they invite and equip people for living every day in a way that makes the world more just, peaceable, and loving?

How can we bring the knowledge and skills of the people who provide resources together with the yearnings of the people who receive and use those resources to help them live more faithfully? That is our challenge.

The folks at the April gathering were already on the path of figuring out how to be church in the contemporary changing world—that's why they were there. And the time together with folks from other congregations was helpful in exploring issues and discovering resources. They are now continuing the challenge and most tell me they are not discouraged—even if they are sorely perplexed.

Cokesbury (including Abingdon Press) is the primary supplier of resources for

United Methodists and some other Protestant denominations. As these several United Methodist Churches, and more than 30,000 more around the world, have struggled to deal with the increasing complexity in their communities and churches, so has Cokesbury

As congregations have struggled with how to frame worship services,

Cokesbury has struggled to provide support: Bibles in multiple versions, hymnals with songs of many music traditions from African to Korean to Spanish to English and more, sermon exchanges through IPreach.com, liturgies based on the Christian year, *The New Interpreter's Bible*.

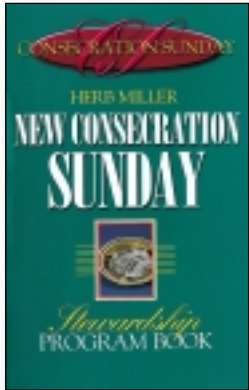
As Sunday school teachers search for biblically-based, inviting, teachable resources, Cokesbury keeps listening and

offering new possibilities: New editions of *Disciple Bible Study* and studies such as *Christian Believer* and *Steward*.

Cokesbury keeps expanding the range of resources and supplies it offers. It also continues to expand the ways you can find those resources: www.Cokesbury.com, extensive direct marketing and catalog programs, (1-800-672-1789), and 75 Cokesbury Bookstores throughout the country.

The challenge of the congregations and our whole culture is the same challenge Cokesbury faces in supplying the

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congregations. Every day we see new opportunities and every day we fail to see new opportunities. Sometimes we hit the mark, but sometimes people tell us they "don't find themselves" in our resources or that our services don't meet their needs.

The task is not a new one. We all know that. The church has always had to adapt and so has Cokesbury.

In 1789 the fledgling Methodist movement in America organized a publishing agency (Cokesbury) to provide reading materials for the pastors and through them for new Christians. Most were uneducated or poorly so. It was a good thing to do. It was a necessary thing to do.

Every pastor needed a Bible, a songbook, and a copy of the *Book of Discipline*. The pastors wanted tracts to distribute to help in home study and evangelism. When the class meetings and later Sunday school classes were formed, study materials for teachers and students were provided. From the perspective of our day, the needs in that time seem rather simple.

Today the United Methodist Publishing House provides tens of thousands of resources and products for hundreds of thousands of congregational services and settings. Several million people who worship, study and participate weekly in 35,000 congregations (of several denominations) in scores of countries—these are the people served.

On the other side of this equation are the people who produce the resources for all of those people. More than one thousand people are staff of the UMPH itself. They are people who receive and fill orders, editors, designers, photographers, and store personnel. In addition there people who work with the staff in many capacities: writers, artists, researchers, robe and sign makers. Tens of thousands of people contribute.

How can we bring the knowledge and skills of the people who provide resources together with the yearnings of the people who receive and use those resources to help them live more faithfully? That is our challenge. The complexity for both congregations and Cokesbury confounds us.

At this moment Cokesbury is beginning anew to listen and respond. After 32

years of paying attention to congregations in three other United Methodist agencies (the last 20 years at the General Board of Discipleship), I am now working with Cokesbury staff to discover again for the first time what congregational life is like across the whole denomination. What dilemmas are church leaders facing? How can we help them respond? I am personally trying to forget what I knew (even ten years ago.) I am relearning about congregations with the

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Cokesbury folks, who know our ability to be helpful depends on every person here learning more and more about more congregations, so that every congregation will have what they need to help more and more people learn to love God

and neighbor.

We are sending out an increasing number of editors and resource decision-makers from Abingdon and Cokesbury to visit churches across the United States in order to listen and discern their needs. Personnel in Cokesbury stores and Cokesbury Action Teams in Conferences across the church will be listening to what you and other congregational leaders and participants are saying and struggling with. So if you see one of us anywhere—stop us and tell us your story (if we don't stop you first.)

We will become stronger through this time of rapid change and increasing diversity—our society will, our United Methodist congregations will, Abingdon and Cokesbury will. Either the world will change again and be simpler, or we will learn to treasure and serve more people in more places based on their life situations and their wide-ranging approaches to God. We're working on the latter! □



Ezra Earl Jones was formerly General Secretary of the General Board of Discipleship. He is now Director: Cokesbury's Learning with Congregations Initiative.