

Adam Hamilton

# Trends, Challenges, and OPPORTUNITIES

*The last third of the twentieth century was a challenging time for mainline churches, and the United Methodist Church was no exception. But the important questions we must ask today are these: Is our denomination destined to continue to decline, with an occasional pause as we merge with other declining denominations? Or is it possible that the beginning of the twenty-first century could see the resurgence of the United Methodist Church?*

*I believe that the “present age” is one filled with potential for our churches. In this article I would like to offer a few observations on why this is the case, and how we as pastors and leaders can capitalize on this opportunity.*

*Before considering our potential, I would like to offer a few observations about certain trends that I see taking place in America today.*

*Some of these trends constitute a potential threat to our churches. Yet each of them represents a huge opportunity that could lead to a period of unprecedented growth and vitality within the United Methodist Church.*

## Trends

1. According to the 2001 Religious Identification Survey 14% of Americans claim no religion at all. That is up from 8% in 1990.<sup>1</sup>
2. Emerging from the materialism of the 90's is a strong interest in volunteerism, community service, and a desire to make the world a better place.
3. The first generation of young women are about to graduate from high school who have never known anything but inclusive language and who were taught from childhood that they should accept no limits on what a woman can do.
4. The “information age” offers more and better access to knowledge than ever before. At the same time this generation “knows” truth not simply by reading it, but by experiencing it.
5. The Baby Boom generation will be reaching retirement in the coming years.
6. In the next thirty years a significant part of the current membership of the United Methodist Church will pass away.
7. More Americans have a growing appreciation for “virtual” experiences, allowing these to replace traditional means of shopping, reading, or being entertained.

## 1. Tremendous Fishing

While it may be discouraging that the number of people in America claiming no religious affiliation has increased dramatically since 1990, a second reality is important—most of these persons continue to have an interest in spirituality. This 14% of the U.S. population we would call non-religious. Add them to those who are nominally religious—that is, people who only attend church occasionally—and we have a tremendous opportunity to actually reach new people for Christ. If we are called to be “fishers of people” then we are now surrounded by huge schools of fish. These persons still have the same basic spiritual needs human beings have always had—they need love, grace, meaning, purpose, community, hope, joy, and a connection to that which is bigger than they are. In order to reach these persons we will need to rethink how one goes fishing for these new fish. What kinds of activities, programs, sermon themes, worship music, would speak to this generation of non-religious and nominally religious people? What would turn them away? The fields truly are “ripe and white for harvest” but there is a greater need than ever for United Methodist churches who have a heart to “seek and to save those who are lost.”

## 2. Changing the World

The materialism of the 90's climaxing in the “get rich quick” dot-com craze has given rise to an emerging trend towards community service and a desire to “make a difference.” Many high schools now require community service in order to graduate. The recent renewed interest in AmeriCorps—the federal government's program which deploys young people in “civilian service”—is but one more indicator of this growing desire of Americans to “change the world.”

The opportunity for United Methodism in this area is tremendous. Our churches have always had a passion for community outreach and service. We have historically been known for our attempts at integrating the evangelical and social gospel and mobilizing our members to get involved in our communities. At the church I serve our neighborhood service ministry, FaithWork, offers an opportunity for hundreds of

people to gather on Saturday mornings to put their faith into action. This has deepened the faith of our members, been a tool for inviting friends to church, and been a visible witness to the community

## 3. A New Equality

The publication of the *Today's New International Version of the Bible*—an inclusive language version of the popular *New International Version*—by Zondervan and the International Bible Society, despite strong protests from conservative Christian leaders, points to the growing reality that young people are growing up in a day and time when the gender biases of prior generations are being obliterated. I believe that an increasing number of young adults will look for churches where women's leadership is valued at every level in the church.

Our denomination would do well to look at developing marketing tools to tell the story of our embrace of women's rights and women in leadership in the church. There are millions of young women and men who will find the patriarchal views of conservative churches unappealing, but who would be drawn to a denomination with a history of supporting women's leadership in the church.

## 4. Experience and Reason

Never before has so much information been available to so many. At the same time, the way this information and knowledge is communicated is no longer simply through the printed or even the spoken word, but through interactive and multi-media learning and hands on experience. In something of a resurgence of romanticism, feelings are once more valued alongside of the intellect.

Today's young people will want informed clergy who offer sermons that speak both to the heart and to the intel-

lect. They will expect sermons to be helpful, informative, and able to clearly link faith to daily life. They will want evidence that pastors have taken advantage of the vast amount of information available to us today. And they will be drawn to preaching and worship that makes use of multi-media.

In addition they will value worship in which they feel their hearts “strangely warmed”—worship that is both intellectually and emotionally satisfying. All of which represents a tremendous opportunity for a denomination known for its deep appreciation of reason and experience. But it will also require a shift in the way many of us preach and lead worship. Methodism, at its best, offers an approach to the gospel and to spirituality that brings together the head and the heart—and this is something twenty-first century people will find very compelling.

## 5. The Coming Population Explosion

A population explosion is coming—not of babies—but of retirees! In the next thirty years there will be a huge increase in the number of people over 60—an age group that we have historically done very well with in our churches. During the latter years of life, people become more interested in religion. In addition I have noticed that many in my own congregation who, in their younger years listened to rock and roll

music, now prefer to attend our more traditional worship services. It may be that our tastes in musical and worship styles change through the years, which could indicate that there will be an increasing demand for more traditional forms of worship among aging Baby Boomers in the coming decades—even as younger adults demand worship that is more interactive and experiential. The aging of the Baby Boomers could signal a significant opportunity for growth in our churches.

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## 6. What to do with \$41 Trillion

According to the Social Welfare Research Institute at Boston College there will be an unprecedented transfer of wealth happening in America in the next 50 years—ranging in estimates from \$41 trillion to \$136 trillion, as America's most prosperous generation dies and passes on its accumulated income and property. Many of the persons holding this wealth are members of the United Methodist Church. In October of 2000 the 715-member St. Mary's United Methodist Church in Georgia received a bequest of \$60 million from one of its members. Imagine what your church might do with a gift of even a fraction of that amount. The opportunity for redeveloping our churches, starting new churches, launching community outreach programs, and furthering the mission of the church is staggering. Unfortunately few of our churches have a planned giving program in place and, as a result, many of us will not be recipients of this wealth because we failed to ask for it. Developing this ministry should be a priority for every United Methodist Church in the United States today. It is important to note that people are more likely to name our churches in their wills if we have a compelling vision of what we would do with the funds once they were received.

## 7. Virtual Preacher?

One final idea that may be worth exploring in terms of future trends: A small but growing number of churches are offering multiple simultaneous worship services in multiple venues by means of simulcasting or playing a previously recorded version of the sermon, allowing one excellent preacher to serve many congregations at the same time. Each of the worship services has a "live" pastor and/or worship leader as well as

live music—only the sermon is via video. One such church is the North Coast Church in Vista, California. Saddleback and Willow Creek churches are both experimenting with this model. The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, has been doing something like this for years.

Imagine the possible applications of this idea. An ordained pastor and team of committed lay leaders might provide pastoral care and administrative leadership for ten to fifteen small churches in a circuit, with the pastor preaching in each five or six times a year. The rest of the Sundays of the year the worship service would be led by a gifted lay person, with quality music, but the sermon would be given via video from the congregation's choice of several gifted preachers in the country. The church could even choose the theme of the sermon from a library of possible sermon topics or lectionary readings. The cost would simply be that of purchasing a video projector and screen, and a video taped copy of the sermon available for as little as \$20 per week.

Is it possible that the unchurched would be drawn to a community United Methodist Church to hear a series of sermons on video tape on a compelling theme done extraordinarily well and incorporating multimedia? I was skeptical at first but this idea is working in churches in California, Oklahoma and Illinois. The church benefits by having a very low cost for clergy while enjoying outstanding preaching. In addition the church is not as effected by changes in pastors that typically occur with some regularity in student pastorates and other small United Methodist congregations. There are a host of other possible applications for this idea.

Well, there you have it—a few ideas to prime the pump of your own creativity as you look at our rapidly changing world. I am convinced that the first half

of the twenty-first century holds remarkable promise and hope for our denomination. Today's non-religious and nominally religious people are very attracted to an authentically Wesleyan approach to the Christian faith.

What will it take to reach these people? It will take leaders who can integrate the evangelical and social gospel as Wesley did so well. It will take preachers who can proclaim the gospel in a way that speaks to the head and the heart, while inspiring people to live the gospel with their hands. It will require a willingness to explore new forms of worship, new ministries and new mission ventures.

And it will require a passionate pursuit of Christ's mission: "to seek and to save those who are lost." □

<sup>1</sup>"Charting Unchurched America," *USA Today*, March 7, 2002 Cathy Lynn Grossman.



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