



The Power of Conversation

John L. Hopkins

*Hope for the church
is dependent upon the quality
of our conversations.*

*Conversations build relationships
and relationships build hope.*

*Jesus said, "Where two or three are
gathered in my name,
I am there among them."*

*The key to our future is as simple as
welcoming Jesus in our midst;
it is as complicated as tending
to our conversations.*

*Discouragement comes more
from the words we exchange
than from the realities
that confront us.*

Have you ever been in a conversation with another pastor and felt like your energy had been sucked out of you? Maybe you were talking about how hard it is to raise the budget or take care of the building. You might have been discussing the latest controversy or the decline in church membership. Whatever the content of the discussion, you left feeling more discouraged than when you met. An opportunity for encouragement from a colleague became an occasion for discouragement. We can pull one another down with our conversation.

In a recent cabinet meeting, a district superintendent reported on several churches in his district that were struggling. One could not balance their budget, another was divided over a building issue, and a third wanted the pastor moved immediately. From the tone of his voice, you could tell that he was struggling because he did not know how to respond to the many needs of his churches. After a moment of silence to acknowledge his frustration, a colleague said, "I had a couple of churches like that last year. I was about to give up on them but when I met with their leadership last month they were doing good ministry!" It was a word of good news in a moment of discouragement. I could sense everyone around the table relax and regain a sense of hope for the hard work ahead. We can lift one another up with our conversation.

Our Hope Is in Tending To Our Conversations

I have a simple thesis: Hope for the church is dependent upon the quality of our conversations. Conversations build relationships and relationships build hope. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The key to our future is as simple as welcoming Jesus in our midst; it is as complicated as tending to our conversations. Discouragement

comes more from the words we exchange than from the realities that confront us. As the proverb says, "Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18)

Hope is about our relationships with others, not about the state of our affairs. Hope is based more on our connection with others in the present, than on our belief in the future. We find it difficult to receive the gift of hope until we have meaningful relationships in our community. That is why justice and peace are connected. Justice is about establishing right relationships that lead to peace. No justice, no peace. Hope also comes from right relationships. No relationships, no hope. When our relationships are strong, we sense that no matter what the future holds, we will be together in God. Hope abounds.

United Methodists have always been a hopeful people because we know the importance of tending to our conversation. The historic Wesleyan question, "How is it with your soul?" begs for honesty before God and accountability to others for our discipleship. Our tradition of gathering in conferences is a means of grace. When we come together in conferences and speak the truth in love, God provides leadership for us. That is not to say that agreement is necessary for our conferences to be a means of grace. However, the way we tend to our conversations is crucial to our Wesleyan heritage. In this era of sound bites and uncivil discourse, the church has an opportunity to engage people in meaningful conversation about the future.

Unfortunately, much of our conversation is centered on problems, needs, and deficits. Certainly the hope of the church is not in our ability to solve problems. If our hope depended solely upon our resourcefulness, we would not need faith at all. Hope springs from the appreciation and imagination of God's activity among us. There is more going on around us than first meets the eye. Our task is to pay attention to the divine activity and join in!

I have been grateful for the work of Appreciative Inquiry originated by Dr. David L. Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University.¹ This approach to guiding conversation focuses on possibilities, capabilities, and assets. Appreciative Inquiry works on the assumption that whatever you want more of already exists in your organization. It seeks to identify the life and energy in a system for organizational change. The attention is on what is right rather than what is wrong and what is pres-

ent rather than what is missing. Through a series of questions we can move from discovering the past to envisioning potential for the future.

Appreciative inquiry asks questions through a four "D" cycle of Discover, Dream, Design and Delivery. The Discovery phase helps people discover life-giving properties that are already present in the exceptional moments of their life together. For example, *When have children experienced the presence of God in First Church?* The Dreaming phase helps people create shared images of what their organization would look and feel like if those exceptional moments and life-giving properties were the norm rather than the exception. *What would the neighborhood look like if First Church could reach out to the children?* The Designing phase helps people agree on the principles and develop the details for the changes ahead. *What will guide us as we design our Vacation Bible School this summer?* And the Delivery phase helps people evolve into God's preferred future using the work done in the Design phase. *How do you see God blessing our ministry to children in the neighborhood?* Quality conversations can identify the God-given assets that are present in our midst and become a means of hope-filled grace.

I have also been interested in the work of Dr. Juanita Brown, author of *The World Café: A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter*.³ The World Café invites people into conversations that matter and provides a Resource Guide on how to host a café. The formation of good questions and the ability to listen are essential elements of meaningful dialogue. When you are in a conversation that matters, you find yourself energized and filled with hope. Can't you imagine the United Methodist movement growing by engaging people in these kinds of conversations?

Our Hope Is in Confronting Reality

Conversations that matter need to confront realities as well as appreciate what is present. When we are strong enough to identify the elephants in the room we

Appreciative Inquiry is based on eight assumptions.²

- In every society, organization or group, something works.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities.
- The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey into the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
- If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
- It is important to value differences.
- The language we use creates our reality.

demonstrate that our faith is large enough to respond. Truth talking is a witness in itself. We should not be afraid to pull conversations out of the hallways and parking lots into the official gatherings of our church. Unless we have the faith to confront reality, we will not survive the challenges of the future. Just as an individual must confront the sin in their soul to get right with God, so must our church at every level be prepared to openly examine the difficult situations that prevent us from maximizing our potential.

Honest conversation is crucial. Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*,⁴ observed that great organizations confront brutal facts yet never lose faith. Great organizations develop a climate where truth is heard before decisions are made. Collins encourages us to 1) lead with questions, not answers, 2) engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion, 3) conduct autopsies, without blame, and 4) honor those who provide information you cannot ignore.

To confront reality we need to hear from a variety of perspectives. One sign of hope is our long tradition of letting people be heard in The United Methodist Church. The commitment to diversity is more than just having the right mix of people around the table; it is an understanding that every person has something to contribute. Many times a lone voice has led to a ministry that renewed the local church. Our tendency to put people in stereotypical categories limits the uniqueness of what they have to say. Likewise, our urgency to speak on behalf of those who are marginalized can prevent them from speaking themselves.

Conversations that confront reality need

to stay close to home. That is, we frequently look for universal reasons to explain uniquely local situations. We generalize rather than do the hard work of finding out what is really going on. How many times have we wondered why local church giving is down, only to respond that the economy has been stagnant? In our effort to understand, we generalize beyond what we can take responsibility for. Change comes when we move from analysis to praxis and take responsibility for change at the place where we can be involved. At times I think we spend more time talking about ministry and mission than actually doing it. The church must resist the temptation to explain complex situations with sweeping generalizations.

Our Hope Is in Jesus Christ

I remember a cold, snowy day early in March one year when I heard the sound of geese flying north! I said to myself, "Those geese are going to get to Canada and not find anything to eat this spring." As I stepped into my home, I humbly reflected that those geese might know

something I did not know. Spring was on its way! Something I had forgotten in the barrenness of my soul. These geese knew a new day was coming and invited me to have faith in that new day even though I could not see it.

Like those geese, the church—the Body of Christ—anticipates the coming of God and becomes a sign of God's presence to those who do not recognize him. When the Word became flesh and lived among us, God began a personal conversation with us that was punctuated by the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. When Jesus gave us the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, we were asked to continue that conversation in our words and deeds.

It is important for us to tend to our conversations. In Luke 24, we read about the two disciples walking to Emmaus who missed the significance of the resurrection because they were preoccupied with disappointments and problems. They were so serious about the sad state of affairs they were not aware of what was actually going on around them. And then in verse

15 we read, "While they were talking with each other and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Jesus was in their conversation even before they recognized him. Now that is a sign of hope! □

1 Originally developed in his doctoral thesis. See article by David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol. 1, pages 129-169 Copyright 1987 by JAI Press, Inc.

2 Quoted from "What is Appreciate Inquiry?" © by Joe Hall and Sue Hammond, Think Book Publishing Co

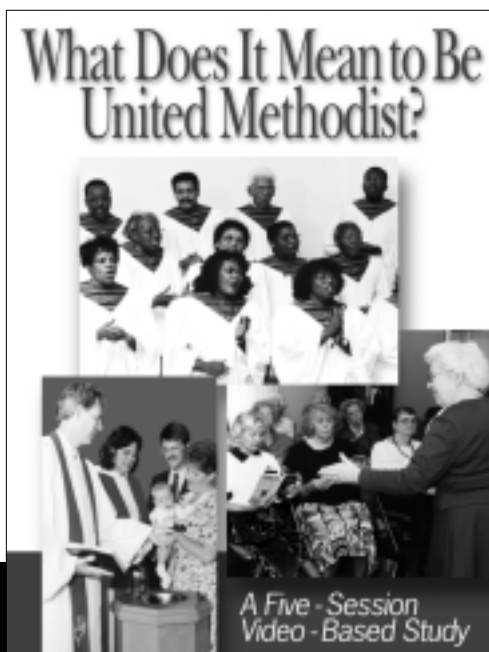
3 See the link www.theworldcafe.com

4 James C. Collins, *Good to Great*, Copyright 2001, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.



John L. Hopkins is Bishop of the East Ohio Area of The United Methodist Church.

Being United Methodist—a Journey of a Lifetime!



Have you ever been asked, "What does it really mean to be United Methodist?" This video study will help newcomers and members alike explore topics from church history to methods of worship in five, 15-minute sessions. Participants will cover the History of John Wesley and the Beginnings of Methodism, Wesley and Grace, Scripture, The Sacraments, and How United Methodists Do Church. This study includes videos in both VHS and DVD formats, and a printed leader's guide. *What Does It Mean to Be United Methodist?* is ideal for new member and refresher classes in both Sunday school and small-group settings. IZ2-0687345782. **\$100.00**

CIRP071001 PACP00267013-01

Published by
 Abingdon Press

Cokesbury
Resources for the Christian Journey

store, web, phone • Cokesbury.com | 1.800.672.1789