

Will the conversation at General Conference reflect our passion for the ministries that unite us or our insistence on squabbling over an issue that clearly divides us?



Don Underwood

Several years ago I hired a talented young woman who did not grow up in The United Methodist Church to run a specialized ministry in our church. A couple of months into the job we had a conversation in which she confided to me that, under ordinary circumstances, she would have never driven into the parking lot of a United Methodist Church or attended a worship service where the clergy wore robes and used hymnals. It was in that moment that I realized that the church that had raised me and nurtured me and had always been relevant in my life was irrelevant to the lives of millions of young people in this country. It had become, in the minds of many people, another one of those tired old post-WWII institutions along with Kiwanis, Lions, and Shriners.

No one wants to say it, but The United Methodist Church is dying. We have tired old buildings sitting in poor locations in shrinking communities. We have an entrenched bureaucracy that refuses to change, and a Council of Bishops that has, for decades, declined to lead. Our older members are dying, and our young people are leaving. The message that we are sending to the public is that we are confused, divided, and unsure of our mission.

Does our church have a chance? Yes, but time is running out. Incremental progress is no longer good enough. If we emerge from the Ft. Worth General Conference in 2008 looking pretty much like the same church that concluded the last three General Conferences, the decline will inevitably continue.

On the other hand there are signs of hope. Scattered around the country there are vital United Methodist congregations with creative, vibrant, dynamic ministries and worship experiences. Their members are making disciples for Jesus Christ. They are doing so by studying the Bible and participating in hands-on mission projects, and lives are being changed. These churches are the exception rather than the rule, but they demonstrate that United Methodists can still be extraordinarily relevant in a new and changing world.

In the agencies of the church there are remarkable glimmers of hope. The Global Health Initiative now being spearheaded through collaboration between the General Board of Global Ministries and United Methodist Communications not only

articulates a global mission that is understood and affirmed by the people in our pews, but it offers the opportunity to redefine our church and how we are perceived by the rest of society. Saving the lives of children who are threatened by malaria is relevant. And the effort appeals to young people that we are not now reaching.

We now have a strong core of very competent, proactive bishops who aren't willing to place collegiality before mission. They want to lead us in bold new directions and they are asserting themselves in their annual conferences, in the Connectional Table, and in the agencies.

United Methodist giving to relief efforts for the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina has given clear signals not only about the financial potential of United Methodist donors, but also about where the hearts, minds, and passions are for those who sit in our pews and fund our ministries.

"Designated giving" used to be dirty words in United Methodism. Today it points the way forward in terms of underwriting new, exciting, and relevant ministries. Are we willing to listen to what is being said to us by our donors, and to embrace change? Or will we continue to yield to those who want to protect the way "it's always been done."

Finally, there is the message that we will send from the next General Conference. Our church is inexorably divided over the question of homosexuality. We all know that more contentious debate and more voting is not going to heal that division. Will the conversation at General Conference reflect our passion for the ministries that unite us or our insistence on squabbling over an issue that clearly divides us?

We have before us the opportunity to choose how we wish to be perceived by the rest of society. When the gavel falls on that last session in Ft. Worth, will the world see a church that is divided over homosexuality, or a church that is united by its commitment to share the love of Christ, to save children from the diseases of poverty, and to preach grace to a broken and hurting world?

It is a scary thought, but in the Easter season of 2008 we will, by the grace of God, have the opportunity to choose our future. Which will it be?

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