

Does the current polity call for each annual conference to design and implement its own ministry plan?

Will the General Conference of 2008 answer that question?

The 1957-1987 era in American Protestantism was marked by several mergers of major denominations and a half dozen major schisms. If the number-one goal of a denominational system is to persuade younger generations to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and active participants in the life of a worshipping community of fellow Christian believers, it appears the schisms were more effective in achieving that desired outcome than were the mergers.

Seven of the most significant developments on the religious scene in the 1960-2005 era were:

- (1) the emergence of what had been described by Robert William Fogel and others as the “Fourth Great” religious revival in American church history,
- (2) at least a 50 percent increase in Protestant church attendance since 1960,
- (3) an unprecedented migration of “Cradle Catholics” into Protestant congregations,
- (4) when compared to the previous three or four decades a new level of intra-denominational quarreling within several denominations,
- (5) the emergence of scores of new nondenominational megachurches,
- (6) the replacement of the small neighborhood congregation by the large regional church,
- (7) the level of competition among the churches in America for the allegiance of younger generations is at a far higher level than it was in the pre-1960 era.

If we focus in more narrowly on the years before and after the EUB-Methodist merger of 1968, the impact of that greater competition can be measured in statistical terms.

Fifty years ago, in 1956, The Methodist Church reported a grand total of 760,619 new members—350,769 by profession or restoration, 309,760 from other Methodist churches, and 100,090 by transfer of membership from other denominations.

Those three-quarters of a million newcomers were partially offset by the loss of 89,509 confirmed members by death, 73,857 who transferred their membership to another denomination, and a total 462,235 who anonymously “dropped out” or who formally withdrew or who were removed from the membership roll by action of a quarterly conference. Those 625,601 losses produced a net gain of slightly over 135,000. Gains and losses of slightly over 40,000 each in membership almost completely offset one another in the EUB Church in 1956.

Four decades later, after peaking at a combined membership of slightly over 11 million in 1966-67, these key indicators had dropped sharply. During the calendar year of 1996, 195,000 new members were received by profession of faith, down from nearly 360,000 in the two predecessor denominations in 1956 and only 128,246 members came via intradenominational transfers, less than one-half the 1956 total. At the end of 1996 membership was reported at 8,496,047.

Perhaps the most significant indicator in reflecting on the

future of the UMC in the United States is the annual death rate. For the American population the annual death rate has dropped from 12.2 per 1,000 age 14 and over in 1970 to about 10 per 1,000 in recent years. The annual death rate of confirmed members in The Methodist Church was 8.9 per 1,000 confirmed members in 1952 and has climbed to 13.7 per 1,000 confirmed in 2004.

By the end of 2004 the membership was down to 8.12 million, only 183,401 new members were received by confession of faith, and 102,793 were received by transfer from other UM churches.

While consolidation efforts and administrative changes, such as an increase from 37 to 50 in the number of episcopal areas, could have been expected to be concluded within 24 years following the merger, the numerical withdrawal of the United Methodist Church from the American religious scene has continued. At the end of 2003 the total confirmed membership stood at 8,186,254 in 34,892 organized churches. The average worship attendance was 3,433,169 compared to an average of 3,448,000 in the 1990-1993 era and the average of 3,505,000 for the 1999-2002 years.

What will the General Conference of 2008 define as one goal in the ministry plan or strategy for The United Methodist Church in the next quadrennium? To seek to plateau with an average worship attendance of 3.5 million? To continue that long term withdrawal that began back in the last third of the twentieth century? Or to adopt and begin to implement a denominational strategy designed to expand the presence of The United Methodist Church in the American religious scene in the twenty-first century?

One yardstick for measuring progress could be that in 1965 the combined average worship attendance of the two predecessor denominations was nearly 4.4 million or the equivalent of 2.26 percent of the American population of 194.3 million. By 2003 that proportion had dropped by nearly one-half to 1.17 percent of this nation’s population.

Or does the current polity call for each annual conference to design and implement its own ministry plan? Will the General Conference of 2008 answer that question?

Symptoms

For the past five decades the institutional landscape of America has accumulated an increasing number and variety of failed institutions — five-and-dime stores, newspapers, commercial airlines, Ford Motor Co., philanthropic foundations, dairy farms, public high schools, hospitals, the Evangelical United Brethren Church, drug stores, councils of churches, motels, Protestant congregations, shopping centers, theological seminaries, publishing houses, department stores, police officers

killing civilians, political parties, *The United Methodist Church*, prisons, cotton farms, public elementary schools, financial institutions.

Explanations

Younger generations bring greater expectations. The bar for acceptable performance has been raised! In a free market institutions no longer are able to rely on inherited loyalties. As a system The United Methodist Church is organized to increase the number of small congregations (one-half of all United Methodist congregations average fewer than 53 at worship) and younger generations seek the quality, relevance, and choices that only large churches can offer. The loyalties of younger generations must be earned and re-earned. The free market has raised the level of competition. Compete or fail!

Responses

Deny. Seek financial subsidies. Outlaw competition. Guarantee employees their jobs. Resist accountability. Seek bankruptcy. Seek a merger partner. Reduce expenditures. Eliminate jobs.

Bring in a “turnaround expert.” Independent entrepreneurs create the new to serve new generations of consumers. Improve customer service.

A five-point strategy

1. Precisely define expectations.
2. Focus on outcomes.
3. Define specific, attainable, and measurable goals.
4. Create a system of accountability.
5. Demand accountability.

Nine questions

1. Is The United Methodist Church a failing institution? Back in 1906, 6.3 percent of the residents of the U.S. were baptized members of one of the six

- predecessor denominations. By 1966 that proportion had dropped to 6.1 percent and for 2006, it is estimated to be slightly over 3 percent.
2. Is The United Methodist Church competitive in reaching the post-1960s generations?
3. If not, is the absence of a denominational strategy the explanation?
4. If the strategy does exist, is the absence of accountability the problem?
5. Does The United Methodist Church have a “connectional” polity that could be compatible with and supportive of greater accountability?
6. Who in The United Methodist Church possesses the responsibility, the authority, the competence, and the experience required to institute and operate a system of internal accountability?
7. Can General Conference operate as the United Methodist General Office of Accountability? If not, can the General Conference of 2008 be expected to create and empower an office of accountability? Or should the General Council on Finance and Administration be transformed into the General Office of Accountability for the UMC?
8. Or has the operational decision already been made in practice by assuring that each annual conference possesses both the authority and the responsibility to create and administer its own customized system of internal accountability? Does that operational policy also grant to each annual conference the right to withdraw from the religious scene in the state in which it is located? Does the exercise of that right of withdrawal explain the withdrawal of The United Methodist Church from the ten states with the largest number of residents?
9. Is it too late to demand greater accountability?



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United Methodist withdrawal from the ten most populous states

Evangelical and United Brethren and Methodist Churches

State	2004 Pop.	2004 UMC Membership	UM % of State Pop. 1960	Member Decline 1960-2004	UM % of State Pop. 2004
CA	36.1 million	324,367	2.06%	180,000	0.5%
TX	22.4 million	764,587	7.98%	806,000	3.6%
NY	19.4 million	485,320	2.89%	320,000	1.7%
FL	17.4 million	270,236	5.46%	375,000	2.2%
IL	12.8 million	532,708	5.28%	270,000	2.1%
PA	12.4 million	771,313	6.81%	525,000	4.2%
OH	11.5 million	748,706	7.71%	429,000	3.7%
MI	10.2 million	303,599	3.88%	174,000	1.7%
GA	8.8 million	378,668	9.60%	475,000	5.4%
NJ	8.7 million	192,601	3.17%	108,000	1.3%

Interpretation: For example, in 1960 the membership of the UMC (and its predecessors) in California represented 2.06 percent of that state’s population. In 2004, the membership of the UMC in California represented 0.5 percent of that state’s population.