

“Growth cannot be separated from the issue of unity.”



Paul Chang

As United Methodists, we have a lot to celebrate and to be grateful for. There's an emphasis on diversity, especially racial and ethnic diversity; support for ethnic plans (of which the Korean-American National Plan is one); and growth and progress around these plans. I'm very glad that we, as a denomination, are working on launching a major congregational development plan for the next quadrennium and beyond (Path 1 of the Council of Bishops' seven vision pathways.) It's the right strategic move for The United Methodist Church in the United States.

But when searching for areas needing improvement, growth and unity should be central concerns of The United Methodist Church. Our denomination has been declining in the last forty-some-years. We haven't shown overall growth for a single year during this period. It may be a serious symptom of what has not been very healthy in our church in the areas of evangelism, reaching out and spiritual vitality. These ailments are symptoms of something in the body. I hope we all do some serious soul searching on this question before the next quadrennium begins.

What causes these symptoms? It's a combination of a lot of things – complacency, lack of passion for reaching out to the unchurched, ineffective ways of dealing with conflict over some issues, and the maintenance mode of the denomination. While churches in the United States are distracted by so many different issues, we're not really concentrating on what's really important: the church's original work, evangelism and the transformation of the world.

To be true to who we really are, we must be bold but twofold in the approach, combining evangelism with the practice of social holiness.

We need to be bolder in terms of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we should not be afraid of doing it, as found in the Bible and as it has been transmitted to us through our church history. I hope we grow to become a global church with a good balance of evangelism and outreach. That would make us a relevant church of the twenty-first century.

Growth cannot be separated from the issue of unity, however. And if divisiveness over issues occurs at a serious level, the denomination will be distracted from what it's called to be. “The house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Our church has been – especially, at the general church level and at General Conference – suffering from a high level of tension and conflict between the left and the right. At the General Conference level, the headlines of news are most often around homosexuality.

Some dialogues have been happening, but they haven't shown much evidence of progress.

The tension is getting deeper, and both sides are more polarized. The voice of the moderates in our denomination should be heard more (represented) and respected. There is no simple answer to the issue, but we need to be wise and practical in dealing with it.

We need to be more Christ-centered than one-issue-centered. I hope that we find a way not to let our divisiveness influence the trust level and cooperation level of the whole church on our common missions and ministries while making enough room for dialogue.

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