



Riley Case

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Many good things are happening in the church. A number of individual churches are thriving and doing significant ministry. Our giving to relief set records in 2005 (the year of Katrina). Our Volunteers in Mission program is engaging more people in mission than ever before. Having said this, however, it is time that we as a church begin to deal with the unmentionable, namely: *we are in decline*. I believe the overall situation merits use of the word *crisis*. I see five possible responses to this crisis.

1) We can deny that it exists. 2) We can admit we are in a crisis but believe that the crisis can be addressed by doing the same things we have always done, though better. 3) We can argue that denominational vitality has more to do with faithfulness rather than statistics and finances and therefore we are exactly where God wants us to be. 4) We will accept the reality of our decline and order our denominational life accordingly, or 5) We can take the risk and make far-reaching and radical changes in order to reverse the decline and bring new vitality to the denomination. We would need new leadership. If the church were a corporation after a forty-year decline it would be time to fire the whole management team and bring in new personnel. This obviously is not going to happen.

However, if it were to happen, what might some of the management decisions look like?

a) Our in-fighting over matters of biblical authority (and related to that, homosexuality) might best be solved by amiable separation.

b) A better strategy would be a new system of central conferences or missionary conferences in which like-minded churches would have oversight of bishops they have more confidence in, and the

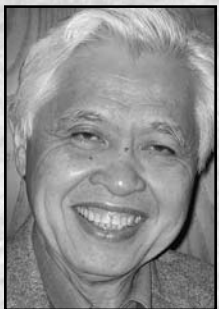
encouragement of programs more compatible with who they are. Conferences would have some flexibility to set emphases or standards which reflect their values.

c) We would re-“brand” United Methodism. The concept of United Methodist “ethos” is a valid one, but it needs to be something very different from what it presently is (liberal academic culture with a United Methodist tag). This would necessarily lead not to “inclusiveness” which implies no standards (all do what is right in their own eyes) and no discipline, but to standards and doctrinal and ethical expectations.

d) We would draw on the resources, vitality, and wisdom of the evangelical constituency. The institutionalism of the denomination as now constituted is not evangelical-friendly. Indeed, evangelicals are often made to feel as strangers in their own country. Evangelicals have a lot to offer. Two churches in the North Indiana Conference, Granger and Union Chapel, with a combined worship attendance of 7,500 (11 percent of the entire conference), are tolerated at best in the conference, and rarely called upon for resourcing. A local college, Indiana Wesleyan, is making a concerted appeal to United Methodist evangelicals and presently has 65 United Methodist students in its ministry program. Yet the conference makes no effort to connect with the school or with the students, and many will be lost to the United Methodist Church. Our official seminaries appear to have little interest in hiring or involving evangelical scholars.

Could United Methodist corporate culture open itself to new ideas and new approaches to faith? Probably not, but we can dream.

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Daniel Arichea

I fear that some policies and practices of The United Methodist Church lead to continuing and even complete dependency on the part of the central conference churches. I am also concerned that the issue of episcopal financial support is not being more fully addressed. Central conference bishops continue to be paid from the Episcopal Fund, and their salaries are set without consideration of the local situation, e.g. the current support levels of national church workers. I look forward to the day when central conferences take full responsibility for their episcopal leaders.

We also continue to meddle in issues that are primarily or even strictly American. This is easily done because the General Conference is a forum for the general church, and the American church has no forum that is primarily American, unlike the central conferences where central conference issues are discussed during the quadrennial session of the central conference. There

is, indeed, a need for an American forum where U.S. church leaders can discuss the situation of the U.S. church, without undue interference from those who do not belong to the U.S. wing of The United Methodist Church.

I am proud and happy that The United Methodist Church continues to demonstrate its concerns for the social side of the gospel. United Methodist Church leaders continue to speak forcefully on world issues like the Iraq war, global warming, children and poverty, AIDS, etc. I am concerned, however, that The United Methodist Church has not shown an equal concern for evangelism and mission. The number of United Methodist Church missionaries continues to decrease, and in many places they simply are not there. While evangelism is included in the curriculum of most if not all United Methodist Church-related seminaries, the effects of such courses on evangelistic programs of the general church are not at all apparent.

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