

# The McNitzky Solution & The Whitby Dilemma

## Why It's Dangerous to Ignore General Conference

J. Michael Lowry

Once again General Conference is upon us. Recently I visited with a number of colleagues about their hopes and expectations for General Conference. As a group they were somewhat skeptical about what any particular General Conference could accomplish. One member finally summed things up in a way that drew chuckles of appreciation. "Well," he said, "I just hope General Conference follows the first law of medicine. Do no harm."

Diminished hopes for General Conference leadership clash with the desperate need for denominational renewal. Detailed data reports deep membership decline across the board in most mainline denominations. As far back as a decade ago, Lauren Meade in his book *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, dedicated his entire first chapter ("The Storm We're In: It's Worse Than We Thought") to the basic thesis that the decline in mainline denominational churches is worse than we thought.<sup>1</sup> In United Methodism, we've moved from a period of unrecognized decline and denial to a period of deep searching and seeking for a way out of the perceived morass.

There are a number of situations in which a deep and sincere attempt is being made to faithfully engage the current situation. On a denominational level, the Council of Bishops' Seven Vision Pathways<sup>2</sup> offers a clear sense of direction towards transformation and renewal. On the local church level, many are engaged in holistic church health so that the church might be a mission station for the advancing kingdom of God, both in terms of evangelism and justice/mercy ministries. Committed pastors and lay leaders seek to engage in the whole range of deep discipleship in Christ.

Often these efforts are best represented by those pastors who simply have given up on trying to change the denomination but instead invested their time and energy in building great local churches. On one level this is, in fact, the non-denominational response. Don't try to rebuild a denomination; build a great church. For those pastors within a denominational tradition, such effort is not anti-denomination. Nor is such conviction uncaring of the denomination. Rather, building a great local church is seen as strategically the best way to rebuild the denomination from the ground up. Reformation through building great local churches is what I call the McNitzky solution.

A great church is defined in terms of outreach ministries to the last, the least, and the lost. While size and numerical growth are important, they are not the only standard of judgment. There are many notable examples of mainline churches of all sizes reaching out in powerful ways to enhance the kingdom of God. They are led by pastors and lay people dedicating their lives to building great churches that advance the kingdom of God with integrity and deeply faithful discipleship. Such discipleship is best represented in the twin witnesses of both evangelism and justice/mercy ministries.

One shining example is the work of a close friend and colleague, Pastor David McNitzky. David is the senior pastor at Alamo Heights United Methodist Church in San Antonio, Texas. He is a gifted preacher and pastoral leader. His love of Christ and his own deeply faithful spiritual journey are admired by those who come in contact with him. His passionate commitment to the ministry of Alamo Heights United Methodist Church is an example to be emulated by other clergy colleagues. During his 12 years at Alamo Heights UMC, the church has gone from 3777 members to 5277 members. Average worship attendance has increased 97%. During this period of numerical (evangelistic) growth, they have grown in their outreach of justice and mercy ministries. Not only have they routinely paid their denominational apportionments in full, but the church is engaged in a host of outreach ministries that attack poverty and injustice in the community of San Antonio. They haven't just engaged themselves financially but personally and holistically. Alamo Heights is a great local church in a host of ways far beyond mere membership size. It is actively engaged in advancing the kingdom of God as best it understands how to do so (including the intentional and sacrificial planting of a daughter congregation).

Looking back over David McNitzky's 27-year ministry, this is a typical pattern for him. Beginning with a small church in the Rio Grande Valley, Los Fresnos grew by 49% in worship attendance and engaged in outreach to new immigrants. Two other pastorates of varying typologies also experienced significant renewal both in terms of evangelistic growth (43% and 139%) as well as deepening discipleship represented by strong expansion of ministries of love, justice, and mercy.

When interviewed, David commented, "I've gone 25 years without speaking at Annual Conference except for one committee report on equitable salaries." On general church issues he remarked, "It's like tilting at windmills." David went on to say, "I'm grateful for those who work in that area [the larger church]." However, he maintains that his best contribution comes from building a strong, healthy and holistic local church.

His vision is appealing. It sidesteps the draining vexations of intra-denominational warfare. That he and the churches he has served have made substantial contributions both locally and to the larger Conference and denomination cannot be disputed. As the inevitable caterwauling of General Conference climbs in volume, the McNitzky solution is immensely attractive. The transformation of the church will happen one congregation at a time or it will not happen at all. The only problem confronting such a local church-rooted vision is the Whitby dilemma.

The phrase "Whitby dilemma" comes from a little remembered church synod that took place in Whitby, England in 664 A.D. Celtic Christianity had spread with great vigor from Iona to Lindisfarne and from there into Northumbria (what is today northeast England). The Celtic branch of Christianity was imbued with a sense of mission springing from the work of the famed St. Patrick. It was missional in the best

sense of the word, that is to say deeply evangelistic and wholly committed to the justice and righteousness of God's reign. It sought to convert enemies and end slavery, etc. Celtic Christianity moved into Northumbria grappling with the forces of darkness, oppression, and superstition. Meanwhile "Roman" Christianity spread upward from its base at Canterbury much more slowly. Rather than the free-flowing engagement of Celtic Christianity, it insisted on establishing the Roman brand of Christianity with all its institutional structure. The two branches met at Whitby to resolve their differences.

The synod of Whitby ostensibly focused on two issues: First, the proper dating of Easter; second, tonsure – the differing hairstyle of monks. Behind the seemingly petty issues of calendar and hairstyle lay the larger issues of church, "conservatism versus change: and indigeneity versus cultural uniformity....The driving issue, of course, was control."<sup>3</sup>

In the interest of church unity, the Roman way was accepted on both accounts. The force of institutional conformity triumphed over the more freewheeling Spirit-led expression and expansion of the gospel. In studying the Synod of Whitby, one almost gets a sense of a great leader like Hilda (the leader of the double monastery known as Whitby Abbey) and Bishop Colman from Lindisfarne acquiescing because of their conviction that the real importance was in spreading the gospel and engaging in the justice and mercy work of the gospel. It is almost as if they said, "We'll do it your way on unimportant things like dates and hairstyle, just let us continue to spread the gospel of Christ."

However, in measurable time, the control given up at the Synod of Whitby came slowly to squelch the fervor of the Christian movement. Institutionalization won out over Spirit led mission. While great days for Christianity still lay in the future for Northumbria, within twenty years the diminishing influence of the distinctively Celtic expression of Christianity – its vibrant combination of evangelism and justice, its heightened role for women, its openness to the Spirit's leading – began to be diminished.

The "Whitby dilemma" is precisely this: In time, institutional correctness and control stifle local ardor and enthusiasm. However great a local church, it cannot simply ignore what takes place in its councils and the conferences of the larger church.

While there can be little doubt of the current infatuation with Celtic Christianity, the Council of Whitby still stands as a prime example of institutional religion swallowing up the transformational ministries of a vibrant healthy branch of Christianity.

My friend David is right, the role of the local church in advancing the kingdom of God is central. Real renewal comes from the grassroots. But, it does not exist alone and out of context. The Council of Whitby and its successors (General Conference) are ignored at our peril.

The McNitzky solution and the

Whitby dilemma apply to us. The heartbeat of renewal will be in local congregations and leadership (both lay and clergy) that can transcend the controlling structures of ossified institutionalism. At the same time, the ability of institutional forces to diminish local vibrancy cannot be ignored.

The issues of General Conference are important and potentially missionally-challenging and life-changing for the local church. The challenge of McNitzky and Whitby is to combine the best of both. The possibility remains that Whitby (General Conference) can enhance and even liberate great local churches of every size, type, and location for the mission of advancing the gospel of Christ to the end that the prayer petition is answered in the affirmative – "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

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1 Loren B. Meade, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Alban Institute, 1996) p. 1.

2 See [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org). Enter key words: Seven Vision Pathways

3 George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Abingdon Press, 2000) p. 40. The third chapter is an excellent discussion of precisely what was at stake at the Synod of Whitby.

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