



Lyle E. Schaller

The merger of 1939 reunited three branches of the Wesleyan movement in the United States into one denomination called The Methodist Church. The other three dozen branches of that movement in this country continued to go down other roads. During the next fifteen years, the membership of The Methodist Church in the United States grew from 7.36 million in 1940 to 9.22 million in 1954. In percentage terms the rate of growth was almost exactly the same as the increase in this nation's population.

Following the merger of 1968, the new United Methodist Church reported 10.78 million confirmed members for 1969 in 41,000 organized churches. That confirmed membership of 10.78 million was equal to 5.3 percent of the American population in 1969. By the end of 2006, the confirmed membership had dropped to approximately 8 million, equivalent to 2.6 percent of the American population.

Page 1330 of The General Minutes for 1965 reported The Methodist Church overseas in 1964-65 included approximately 950,000 members or 1.57 million baptized members in 6,574 organized churches plus 15,980 regular preaching places plus 6,240 other churches and chapels. At the General Conference of 1966, 14 percent of the delegates came from approximately forty nations outside North America.

Forty years later that annual report on what are now identified as the "Central Conferences of the United Methodist Church" had moved from a back-of-the-book location in the General Minutes to page 24 of the 2005 edition. For 2005 the seven Central Conferences reported a combined total of nearly 3.5 million lay members plus nearly 6,000 ordained clergy in 8,144 organized churches plus 4,900 preaching places.

### What Are the Points of Commonality?

On a variety of issues the Judicial Council of the UMC has relied on the guideline of uniformity in making decisions. In the American culture and economy it has been easier to bring two or more institutions together under one institutional umbrella if all share several points of commonality and if all agree to rely on the same "rulebook" for purpose, structure, and governance. Examples include the merger of profit-driven corporations plus a variety of nonprofit institutions such as local governments, hospitals, colleges, Protestant congregations, public school districts, and Protestant denominations.

**QUESTION 1.** In designing the organizational structure of the United Methodist Church as a global church for the twenty-

first century, do you believe that the differences between one group of annual conferences that have been withdrawing from the parish ministry for four decades and another group of conferences that have been expanding their role in the parish ministry (a) can be accommodated under one institutional umbrella relying on a common rulebook for governance or (b) will require a customized and locally written rulebook for each Central Conference and/or each continent and/or each national or regional jurisdiction?

### Baggage from the Past

One of the lessons from the past six centuries of the Christian religion on this planet is that it is easier to create the new than to reform the old. One example in America has been the proliferation of the Protestant religious bodies that trace their origins back to John Wesley or John Calvin or Martin Luther. Another is the birth of a fifth expression of the Jewish religious tradition in America in 1963. A third has been the founding of tens of thousands of nondenominational Protestant congregations since 1960.

I believe the baggage cannot be ignored. I believe the most influential single piece is that American Methodists have inherited a commitment to be part of a global church. **Any one or more of the Central**

**Conferences may declare it is free to become completely autonomous, but I do not believe The United Methodist Church in the United States is free to do that!** I do, however, believe the time has arrived for the General Conference to create a special commission to design a new model for The United Methodist Church to serve as a global religious body in the twenty-first century.

While the Christmas Conference of 1784 did not perpetuate the concept of the apostolic succession (one of the four central organizing principles of the Anglican Quadrilateral), it is still valued among some American Methodists. Which of the other Anglican traditions continue to be influential in the Central Conferences?

On the American scene three pieces of baggage from the 1972 General Conference cannot be ignored. One came with the recognition that it would be impossible to amend the Articles of Religion in the Constitution of the UMC. The compromise was adoption of four criteria (Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason) for “theological reflection,” but NOT as doctrinal standards. In recent years these four criteria have been used to support new doctrinal standards. What has been the experience in the Central Conferences with that amendment to the UM rulebook?

A second was adoption of a report that defined the UMC as a system that is a collection of subsystems. That opened the door to a demand that self-evaluation processes place a greater emphasis on specific, attainable, and measurable outcomes. Most annual conferences in America, however, continue to place a very high value on inputs into the system such as payments on apportionments, ministerial appointments, ordinations, and “one-size-fits-all” programs. What has been the experience in the Central Conferences in conceptualizing an annual conference as a system? Systems theory rests on the assumption that systems produce the outcomes they are designed to produce.

A third was a continued emphasis on the value of financial subsidies. This contrasts sharply with the “Three Self Principle.” This missionary concept traces back to Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, both of whom were born in 1796, but Roland Allen (1868-1947) was the one who led in winning widespread acceptance for this strategy. The strategy calls for each new Christian mission to be self-financing, self-governing, and self-propagating. In the 1960s the term “self-expressing” was added as either the second or third component of

a four-point strategy. How influential is this piece of baggage from the twentieth century in the Central Conferences? It continues to be the key strategy by several evangelical bodies in the United States in planting new missions designed to serve recent immigrants from Latin America and the Pacific Rim.

**QUESTION II.** Do you believe this and other baggage from the past can and should be ignored in designing a new model for the UMC to be a global religious body in the twenty-first century?

### **How High Is the Threshold?**

One of the most widely ignored, but extremely significant differences among Protestant congregations in America is in the road to full or confirmed membership. A growing proportion project relatively high and clearly defined expectations of anyone seeking to become a full or confirmed member. One consequence is the average attendance at weekend worship usually exceeds the number of confirmed members, occasionally by a 2-to-1 or 3-to-1 ratio. The vast majority of American congregations in UMC, however, project relatively low expectations and/or use an inadequate system for the assimilation of newcomers. One consequence is a low ratio of worship attendance-to-membership. Most annual conferences in America report that ratio is between 23 percent and 62 percent for the conference.

How high is that threshold in the Central Conferences?

**QUESTION III.** Do you believe that both high expectation and low expectation congregations and/or conferences can and should be able to use the same system of governance?

### **What Has Been Decided?**

**I believe next year will be 2009, not 1959. I believe globalism is a reality of the twenty-first century. I believe that many years ago God called The United Methodist Church in the United States to accept and fulfill its role as a global church.** By the year 2000 the UMC was well down the road to creating horizontal partnerships with other institutional expressions of this denomination on other continents. One expression of these relationships can be seen in the rapidly growing number of United Methodist congregations that have created a continuing partnership with one or more UM congregations on other continents. Most of the current traffic

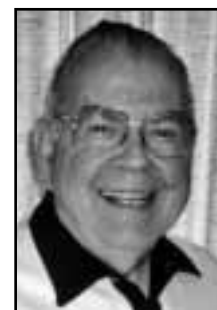
on the road that connects any pair of these sister churches consists of Americans volunteering to serve a ten-to-twenty day term working ministry with fellow Christians in a sister church on another continent.

Back in the first several decades of the twentieth century, a major theme in American Methodism was to convert nonbelievers into believers who accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. In recent years a major trend in American Protestantism has been to focus on transforming contented Christian believers into fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ. From this observer's perspective, the group experiences of these short-term volunteer missionary teams has become the most effective single component of a larger strategy to transform believers into disciples and apostles.

That is my number-one reason to believe the UMC in the United States should aggressively act to affirm and expand its identity and role as a global religious body. In the 1950s Methodist congregations in America turned to their annual conference, to national Methodist agencies, and to Methodist theological seminaries for resources. In the 1960s they began to look to parachurch organizations, independent publishing houses, and entrepreneurial individuals for help. In the 1980s UM congregational leaders began to look to self-identified teaching churches for resources. I believe in the twenty-first century UM congregations in America are finding sister churches in the Central Conferences to be a valuable resource.

**QUESTION IV.** What do you believe? Has the time come to create such a special commission? If yes, do you believe the General Conference in 2008 can and should take the initiative to create a special commission to focus on the role and structure of the UMC as a global religious body in the twenty-first century?

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**was ordained an elder in The Methodist Church by Bishop H. Clifford Northcott who placed a high value on the apostolic succession.**