



Widening the
Circle
Strengthening the
Connections

Joel N. Martinez

From the beginning, the church has been energized by the Spirit to break out of cultural isolation so that the story of Jesus may be shared with people of all cultures. The cultures, peoples, and languages represented in the streets of Jerusalem all heard in their own language the story of God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:5-12.) In the Hispanic Creed, Dr. Justo L. Gonzalez expresses it this way: "We Believe in Jesus Christ . . . God made flesh in one culture for all cultures . . ." (*Mil Voces Para Celebrar* [Spanish Language United Methodist Hymnal] page 70.)

The earliest witnesses to the gospel point to the missionary calling of the church to follow Christ across all boundaries until the peoples of the whole earth are reached.

The United Methodist Church is rooted in the response of John and Charles Wesley, as well as many others of their day, to reach beyond parish, class, and national boundaries with the gospel of redeeming grace. We are most Wesleyan when we are truly missionary. As with the Wesleys, this requires risk, frequent failure, new learnings, and trust in God's abounding grace.

With this heritage, what is our response to God's call in mission today? Let me offer the following reflections under the theme of widening the circle, strengthening the connections.

Widening the Circle

First, as we work toward a more global church we are limited by truncated conversations. As United Methodists prepare for General Conference, we are invested in internal conversations, issues, and legislative proposals. In the midst of these deliberations and decision-making, however, a significant community of mission partners, Affiliated Autonomous Methodist, Autonomous Methodist, and United Churches (with Methodist traditions) will be marginally involved.

It is not possible, legislatively, for this to be different. It is, however, incumbent on us missionally to enlarge the circle of

conversation, deepen the dialogue, and invite the insights of this wider circle. A gift to us at this General Conference will be the "Report of the Study Committee on the Relationship between the United Methodist Church and the Autonomous Methodist Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean." (*See pages 21-22.*) Our mission future will be enriched and strengthened as we widen the circle.

Second, United Methodists in the U.S. often fail to acknowledge the dominant and privileged role we take in conversation, relationships, and planning for mission within the UMC.

While it is true that the church's center of gravity is shifting from North to South and from West to East, it is clear that the U.S. still exercises disproportionate influence. If we are to realize a clearer consensus on our mission priorities, our resource allocations, and any organizational changes, we would be well served to include and value the contributions of the whole church. We have made some progress through the Pan-Methodist dialogues in the U.S. Now that General Conference, for instance, reflects greater representation from United Methodist conferences outside the U.S., a more balanced perspective on mission may emerge. Third, as historic participants and leaders in the ecumenical movement, we dare not diminish our engagement in this mission conversation and collaboration. Indeed, the centennial celebration of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910 is shortly to be celebrated. The renewal of the call of the one mission in Christ is even more urgent today in the wake of a century of war, divisions, and genocides.

United Methodists must go farther in cultivating ecumenical, inter-faith, and non-governmental partnerships for the sake of mission. Enlarging the circle is our Wesleyan pattern.

Strengthening the Connections

There is hope and power when there is connection among partners in Christ's mission. How can we strengthen the connections?

We are most Wesleyan when we are truly missionary. As with the Wesleys, this requires risk, frequent failure, new learnings, and trust in God's abounding grace.

First, we should continue the mission practice of linking laity and local congregations in wider and wider circles throughout the world. There is an invigorating and creative exchange of dreams, ideas, resources, and experience which should be encouraged. The Volunteers in Mission movement is the clearest expression of this mission practice. Students, academic institutions, and other groups have also “thickened” these connections that help us live and serve globally. Many of the new initiatives of the General Board of Global Ministries are made possible through these linkages.

Second, while we seek to be more global in our mission, we will need to confront hyper-nationalism and xenophobia. The scale and depth of cultural, racial, and religious tensions are evident today. In this context, the movements of peoples across borders is an opportunity to connect, learn, and overcome these fears and divisions.

Faithful mission requires welcoming the sojourner. Fruitful mission practice will also welcome the gifts, experiences, and dreams of those newly arrived into the common mission in our nations and communities. In affirming the gifts of all, we will strengthen United Methodism’s ministry to all in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Third, we can be more effective in our mission when we seek out partnerships. I want to briefly mention two dimensions of partnering in mission. One is the south to south partnership. The General Board of Global Ministries recognizes and affirms the cooperation and exchange between mission partners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the Caribbean. In areas such as missionary service, evangelization and church growth, theological education, and global health the church in the South is teaching the church in the North. We should celebrate and encourage these connections.

Another partnering development is between the United Methodist Church and non-governmental organizations. Recent collaboration with major U.S.-based foundations around the issues of Malaria and HIV/AIDS is accelerating our mission with the poorest of the poor. Similar cooperation will be needed going forward especially with respect to the initiatives on global health and poverty. Inter-agency cooperation will need to become a pattern if the global mission challenges are to be met. The work of UMCOR after 9/11, during the Tsunami in Asia, and the Katrina-Rita hurricanes was more effective because of such partnerships with non-governmental organizations as well as government agencies in the U.S. and other nations.

Finally, the path toward the future in mission is through wider circles of conversation and collaboration and strengthening



of the networks and connections that serve God’s mission. In a divided and fearful world, United Methodist mission around the globe can be an infrastructure of hope, a linkage of grace. □

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We All Get An Invitation... So Then Why Would God Keep A Blacklist?



Who Will Be Saved?

William H. Willimon

What does it mean to say that salvation is God’s business, and God’s alone?

“Who will be saved?” is almost always a question about them, and rarely about us. Thinking itself wrapped securely in the everlasting arms, the church has spent much of its history speculating on whether God will allow anyone else to join the party.

But if we truly believe that salvation is God’s business, and God’s alone, then perhaps we should stop asking, “Who will be saved?” and ask instead, “How is God calling me to participate in the redemption of the world?” Rejecting the idea that God chooses some and not others, drawing on his Wesleyan heritage, and deepening his longstanding theological conversation

with Karl Barth, Willimon reflects as a pastor and a theologian on God’s intention that all would someday return from the far country into the loving embrace of the One who created them. *Abingdon Press.*

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