



Institution *v.* Innovation: Can edgy churches grow and thrive within the UMC?

By Arthur Jones

“CHURCH DOESN’T SUCK. WWW.GRACEPOINT.COM.”

As some United Methodist pastors drove by this laconic sign, they cringed because they knew something about GracePoint that even some of the church’s members did not know. GracePoint—the growing and controversial church in west Wichita, Kan.—was a United Methodist church.

Suck is a curse word! Call the bishop!

A few years later, on March 1, 2009, The United Methodist Church (UMC) had a new problem. Bryson Butts, the pastor of GracePoint, preached a sermon about church unity and then announced that the church was leaving the denomination.

What happened?

Bryson Butts would have you believe that their leaving was the consequence of “new wine in an old wineskin system.” Is Butts right? Can an edgy, effective, new congregation not thrive in a bloated denominational structure? Does GracePoint’s departure mean the UMC is an old wineskin incompatible with growth?

As a provisional elder in the UMC, hoping to start my own congregation within the denomination, and as the son of Butts’ former bishop, this question haunts me. Am I entering into a structure that cannot encourage innovation?

Old Wineskins

In America, the UMC is in a process of slow death. Since the denomination's creation in 1968, membership has dropped steadily. In 1970, the UMC had 10.6 million members. Thirty years later, that number would drop to 8.4 million members—a mere 3 percent of the population in 2000. What was happening to this denomination whose recent predecessors boasted 6.5 percent of the population of the United States?

Jim Ozier, New Church Development Officer for the Dallas area, points to the nature of the church as an institution: "The majority of our energies go to preserving that institution, giving lip service to the mission field." Is it even possible for the church to, as Ozier says, "give lip service to the institutional part and [be] driven by the mission field"?

It is true that much energy—at all levels of the church hierarchy, from bishops to preachers—goes to preserving the institution, but institutions are not always bad. Andrew Thompson, United Methodist elder and author of the blog *Gen-X Rising* (www.genxrising.com), argues that "any time you start thinking about the church across time, standing on the shoulders of the saints before us, you realize that there is no way [the church] can find expression without it taking on the character of an institution." The institution feeds hungry persons in Africa, starts churches and seminaries in Russia, and even protects doctrine.

But has the institution of the UMC become a useless husk that impedes the mission of the church?

New Wine

Denominational leadership emphasizes repeatedly that the mission field is in the crosshairs of the church, and the weapon is new churches.

Statistically, new churches have a much higher possibility of creating new converts. New church gurus—like Don Smith, a former advisor to GracePoint—teach potential pastors that in the first three years of a church, three congregants will make one convert every year, on average. In the following seven years, seven congregants are required to make one new convert every year. Churches that have been in existence for more than ten years require eighty-nine congregants to make one convert every year. By far, most United Methodist churches fall into this last category.

"Existing churches are going to do a pretty good job of maintaining what is at their core," says Smith. Maintaining, of course, is another word for slowly dying.

Smith argues that the way to grow a church is to "isolate the part of the church's ecosystem where there is equilibrium and honor that and then on the fringe create something separate." In other words, those churches that only reach one convert per 89 congregants need to be honored for their previous work. But the denomination will die if it relies on these churches to reverse the decline. The new and creative fringe is where the church is going to grow.

The UMC as a whole has gotten on this new church start bandwagon. Before 2012, the UMC—through a program called Path1—hopes to equip 1,000 new church planters to start 650 new churches that will each start another church in their first ten years. According to the above statistics, these churches are the only hope to grow the church.

But because the UMC is an institution, growing churches—like GracePoint—sometimes upset the balance within a large denomination.

The Tragedy of GracePoint

Butts started GracePoint as a typical new church start. He began to gather people around him and launched his church, sending out pamphlets with the United Methodist name to nearby neighborhoods: *GracePoint—a United Methodist church*. This blatant institutional affiliation did not last long. The designation did not seem to help him reach the unchurched.

When GracePoint acknowledged their United Methodist affiliation, Butts found it to be a hindrance. "People wanted to know, 'are you a liberal church? What do you believe theologically?' In other words, because it wasn't helping us reach people, we said 'let's not use it.'" This was the first of GracePoint's steps in shedding the mantle of United Methodism for the sake of the mission field and the first of many actions that frustrated others in the conference.

Don Smith says that this is the case with many churches that use "outside-of-the-box techniques or ministry strategies that our existing churches would never dream of using. . . . From West Coast to East, they are shunned, isolated, condemned, and criticized." In other words, new churches like GracePoint often get a raw deal from some within the denomination because their approaches are unusual.

For example, the billboard mentioned at the beginning of this article is not a promotion that normal United Methodist churches would use. "Suck" is the equivalent of a curse word for older generations. Rather than agree with the premise of the billboard and herald it as an effective tool to reach people who would never broach the doors of a typical First UMC, people got mad. Even though the hierarchy backed up Butts, his unique style was abrasive and some within the system did not approve of such chaos.

The tension increased when GracePoint felt the call from God to expand to a second campus and found itself stepping on the toes of other United Methodist churches in the neighborhoods they were considering. Butts said they were not going to be competition for the other churches because they have different worship styles and GracePoint reaches an entirely different segment of the mission field. Frustration mounted, and eventually GracePoint decided to leave the denomination.

The UMC tried to continue GracePoint UMC the following Sundays, but despite significant help from neighboring United Methodist churches, not enough people were left to continue the church.

Don Smith resonated with Butts' frustration: "What I saw at every turn were road blocks being put up that were going to make it difficult so that Bryson and his team were going to have to spend just a huge amount of time trying to keep the peace."

In my opinion, Butts chose to exploit other people's feelings about his ministry as an excuse to leave the UMC rather than help lead the denomination away from irrelevance and a slow death. His leaving was neither honorable nor faithful. While I believe that he risked splitting his church for a power play, his lack of integrity and ecclesiology doesn't mean that he is wrong about the state of the UMC. Established churches should not see edgy and effective as competition. The mission field is too large for petty squabbling.

The Future of The United Methodist Church

United Methodist churches are not going to leave the church in swarms that will kill off the denomination; old age is doing a good job of that on its own.

Most clergy do not want to leave the denomination. Most couldn't if they wanted to because they are tied down to their property (whereas GracePoint had no building). No one disputes that the church's property belongs to the denomination. This "trust clause" will not save the denomination but only prolong its demise.

Instead of forcing pastors to remain, the UMC must become an attractive place for edgy and innovative pastors to do ministry. Can it change its culture?

"Absolutely," says Andy Nixon, pastor of The Loft—a second campus of The Woodlands UMC near Houston, Texas. "It is a question of 'how bad does it have to get?'... The Church must wait for the hubris about yesterday to die, and I don't think we are quite there yet."

Andy reminds me a little of Bryson Butts. Both can be thorns in the side of their institutions and, possibly because of that, are highly successful pastors. In the two and a half years since The Loft's first worship service, Nixon has grown the ministry to average over 1100 in worship at three services every week. He has a similarly unorthodox style and has no problem being controversial.

So why does he stay when Butts left? Nixon contends that "at some point, you have to realize the church is bigger than you.

... Every organization needs churches that are going to be catalysts for what comes next." Nixon hopes to be a part of that reformation.

A whole host of new church start pastors will be trained in ways to start effective and vibrant ministries. If they are treated like some United Methodists treated GracePoint, then we will see more choose the Butts option. But if we embrace positive deviance, allowing for churches that do not fit the standard mold, then The United Methodist Church can once again lead the way in participating in God's mission. Methodists grow when we focus on the mission of the church.

Will the institution of the church change and allow innovators? Will it focus on making disciples rather than taking care of the institution? This is a daunting task, but to those who care for the institution, the alternative of continuing decline may leave them no institution at all. □



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