

Critical Questions for American Christians  
“What Is the Future of United Methodism?”

John 2:12-22

Dr. J. Howard Olds

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United Methodists gather this week across the United States in Jurisdictional Conferences to elect 20 new bishops. Since my name is no longer on the list of nominees, I have the freedom to talk candidly about this Church into which I was born and to which I have given my heart, my soul, and my deepest devotion.

I am honored and deeply grateful to be a United Methodist pastor. Every week I get to do what I most enjoy doing—connect to people, preach the gospel, observe hearts being touched and lives being transformed. Often Sandy and I say to one another, “It doesn’t get any better than this.”

Over the years I have never aligned myself with any political action group in our denomination. I am not a member of the confessing movement and I have resisted moves to become a reconciling congregation, even though I believe deeply in the theological principles of confession and reconciliation. Instead, I have steadfastly held to the *via media*, the middle way. A colleague once said to me that the only things in the middle of the road are yellow lines and dead skunks. Nevertheless, here I stand; I can do no other. And from this perspective, our denomination appears to be in deep trouble. So bear with me as I voice a sobering concern by asking, “Is there a future for the United Methodist Church?” The answer is, “Yes, if...”

**THERE IS A FUTURE FOR UNITED METHODISM IF WE RISE FROM DENIAL.** I sat with renowned researcher Lyle Schaller a couple weeks ago who began his two-day lecture on the future of Methodism by saying our denomination is terminally ill. Being the statistician that he is, he backed his premise up with these numbers:

1. Our membership has declined 22% in the last 40 years. Any business would declare this an emergency.
2. In 1965, 1 in every 15 Americans was a United Methodist. In 2000, the ratio was 1 in 29.
3. In 1956, we received 816,000 new members. In 2000, we received less than half that number—398,000. Forty-one percent of our 35,000 churches received no new members in the year 2000.
4. The median age of United Methodists is now 58. If you think that is middle age, exactly how many 116 year old people do you know? Over the next 30 years, many of our churches will close because the present membership will be dead unless something dramatic happens to these people called Methodists.

In spite of these sobering statistics, our denominational leaders seem to be buried deep in the miry clay of denial. We don’t play the numbers game, we often hear.

It sort of reminds me of a cartoon that I either saw or is just in my mind. On a deserted island there sits a bishop and one leader of a denominational agency where once there were many, many United Methodists living. They look at one another and continue to say, "We still don't count numbers." I wonder if a bishop and a general board executive will be consoled by that argument when they wake up one day to discover they are the only remaining members of this denomination. That is denial as far as I am concerned.

'All of this has been said before,' say those with their head in the sand. It has been said before: Richard Wilke said it in his book And Are We Yet Alive? twenty-five years ago. Will Willimon said it in his book Rekindling the Flame. Our response to such prophets has been to shoot the messenger instead of receiving the message.

'We are called to be the true remnant of our heritage,' say the defenders of the status quo. I wonder if John Wesley thought that when he took to preaching in the fields? 'Let's be practical,' say others 'and protect our pensions by raising more apportionments to fund them.' Pastors of local churches from whom all funds flow are beginning to say you may be my brother, but you are getting mighty heavy.

So last May, in Pittsburgh, my colleague Bill Hinson stood on the General Conference floor and said, "I believe the time has come to begin to explore an amicable and just separation that will free us all from our cycle of pain and conflict," sending a shock throughout Methodism and causing delegates to join hands and sing "Blest be the Tie that Binds."

Is Bill a radical? I don't think so. I prefer to think of him as a realist. It all reminds me of that old fable where the emperor is tricked by two rogues into believing that he is wearing marvelous clothes made from magical cloth that is only visible to the wise and clever. Not wanting to run the risk of being stupid or dunces, everybody goes along with the hoax while the emperor parades around naked. The farce continues until a child exclaims, "The emperor is walking around with nothing on." The innocent statement of that child shocks a community back to reality. The emperor really is naked. If the current buzz over Bill's statement at General Conference shocks us out of denial, then he will have done a service to the Church.

**THERE IS A FUTURE FOR UNITED METHODISM IF WE RECLAIM OUR MISSION.** When those in power question Jesus' authority to cleanse the temple and restore it to its primary task, Jesus replies, "Destroy this temple and I will build it back in three days."

The leaders were stunned. It had taken them 46 years to build the temple. Now Jesus is proposing to restore it in three days. As usual, the people in power failed to get it. Prophets are radical, usually threatening. For Jesus, the Church was not a building; the Church was not a steeple. For Jesus, the Church was his body,

resurrected in his people. We continue to proclaim it today; the Church is the body of Christ. More than any moment since the Protestant Reformation, the United Methodist Church stands in critical need of defining its purpose and understanding its mission.

*The Church is of God and will be preserved to the end of time for the conduct of worship, and the due administration of his word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and conversion of the world,* says the old ritual of membership.

Wesley was clear in his vision of Methodism being called to “spread spiritual holiness throughout the land.” He felt a strong mandate to reach the masses with the gospel and serve the needs of the poor.

Have we, his followers, settled for intra-quarreling and political positioning? Is it not time to lay down the weapons of half-truths and outright lies and repent of our endless battles that have marred God’s love and diminished our witness to the world? Is it not time to understand that the gospel cannot be reduced to politics and we are not called to be the church of the political left or right? Our calling is not to be conservative or liberal, practical or even American. Our calling is to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I, for one, am weary of political persuasions setting the agenda of the Church. There is an old African proverb that says, ‘When elephants fight, the grass suffers.’ I hope those determined to fight at denominational levels understand the damage done to local churches in doing so.

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who proclaim God’s love for all humanity and who demonstrate God’s love individually and in society. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

I believe United Methodists have an approach to the gospel that 21st century people are eager to hear. People want to know that grace is free for all, not just the elected few. People want to know that discipleship is a life-long developmental process. There’s more to religion than being saved, sanctified, and petrified. Faith is dynamic, alive, moving, making a difference. People are hungry for meaning and significance. They want to live beyond self-interest. As our youth discovered last week at Mission Fest, a cup of cold water, or a back yard clean-up does make a difference in the light of eternity and we need not go half way around the world to do it.

When our General Conference met in Pittsburgh, a petition was considered to make “failure to pay apportionments” a chargeable offence for clergy. In other words, a pastor could have his/her credentials revoked if the church he served failed to pay the denominational franchise fee. I was curious to note that no similar accountability was discussed concerning the making of disciples which we

say is our main mission.

**THERE IS A FUTURE FOR UNITED METHODISTS IF WE RECONNECT THE CONNECTION.** The wave of Church systems today is toward independence. The marquees that once announced Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian now read Community, Fellowship, Non-denominational. Even churches that are connected to denominations often hide their identification.

Grace Street was lined with lovely, matured trees, manicured lawns, and three churches. The three churches were each built in different styles and shapes, but they each posted a sign out front proudly displaying the name of their church. The three churches were named First Community Church, Second Community Church, and Third Community Church. One day the pastors of these three houses of worship met on the sidewalk. That's when one pastor said to the others, "Maybe it's time we define what we mean by community."

Independent churches are generally led by entrepreneurial pastors who attract self-serving members longing to have their needs met by a congregation. Although about 80% of such church-starts are aborted within ten years, some in our day have been quite successful at attracting huge numbers of constituents.

What's wrong with churches geared to customer service designed to meet their members' needs? Isolation. No man is an island. No one walks alone. So Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church spends most of his time these days building the "Willow Creek Association" which is something strangely resembling a denomination.

Can United Methodists be connectional in an age of independence? **Yes, if** we replace ecclesiastical hierarchy with team work and give local churches a place at the table. The old system of top-down is gone forever. **Yes, if** we redirect our mission dollars from subsidizing clergy and ingrown churches, and invest them in the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the lost, and others marginalized by society. **Yes, if** we stop using large churches as cash cows to prop up a system that is outdated and ineffective, while denying them the freedom to employ the leadership needed to fulfill their vision. **Yes, if** we can agree on core values while agreeing to disagree on non-essentials and in all things practice charity. It was John Wesley who said, "I am afraid, lest the people called Methodists should exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power." May God save us.

So today I pray, come, Lord Jesus, come. Your Church is weak and sharply divided, and only You can make it new again. Mold us and make us after Your will, while we are waiting yielded and still.

Amen.