

UMC Challenges: Geography, Finances, Theology

Posted on February 15, 2017 by Mark Holland

Introduction: The United Methodist Church is facing its greatest threat of division since prior to the US Civil War. This is why I made the motion on the floor of the 2016 General Conference to ask the Bishops to lead the General Conference towards a new vision. The Bishops are the right leaders to address a Way Forward and they have assembled a study group with a broad base of perspective that gives the church hope for the future. I believe the Bishops understand that homosexuality is only the face of a whole body of issues in our church. As they work with the study commission this year, I believe they need to address three fundamental issues: 1) The fallacy of the global church, 2) The financial imbalance of the church, 3) The theological disconnect of the church.

1) **The Fallacy of the Global Church:** The United Methodist Church is the single largest of the many denominations that make up the “Methodist” family around the world. Yet, the UMC has 98% of its membership on only two continents: North America and Africa. Further, the United Methodist Church represents only 40% of American and African Methodists and only about 30% of the Methodist family in the world. The UMC still has small conferences in Europe and the Philippines. But in terms of being a “global” church, the UMC has NO churches on most of the globe, including none in Canada, China—SE Asia, the India region, Korea, Mexico—Central America—Caribbean, or South America. The chart below, created from the World Methodist Council Website tells the story of membership numbers:

Region	Total Methodists	“Other” Methodists*	United Methodists**
Africa	13,759,455	9,568,347	4,191,108
Australia–Pacific Islands	1,591,337	1,445,695	145,642
Canada	608,243	608,243	0
China–SE Asia	99,808	99,808	0
Europe	399,637	335,982	63,655
India Region	6,173,000	6,173,000	0
Korea	1,586,063	1,586,063	0
Mexico–Cen. Am–Carrib.	176,320	176,320	0
South America	279,190	279,190	0
United States	15,042,337	7,362,487	7,679,850
Totals	39,715,390	27,635,135	12,080,255

**“Other” Methodists include a few “United Churches” like in Canada where a number of

denominations are together. “Other” also includes denominations like AME, CME, AMEZ. For more detailed information, see the World Methodist Council Website: <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/about/member-churches/statistical-information/>

**As reported on the WMC website (above), varies from the updated 2016 GC numbers reported in the GC 2016 Advanced Daily Advocate p 30-34. For updated UMC numbers: http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/general-conference/2016/documents/gc2016-advance-daily-christian-advocate-full-english.pdf

There is an interesting, and sometimes sorrowful, history as to why various churches in the United States and other parts of the world split off from the “mother ship” to become independent Methodists. The how and why is beyond the scope of this article. But the reality remains, the United Methodist Church is not really “global.” The “Methodist” family is global, but most are not under the same Book of Discipline.

The challenge before the Council of Bishops is: Why is it important that this current collection of US and African churches share a common Book of Discipline? Can we be brothers and sisters in Christ, even serve in “full communion,” without sharing the Book of Discipline? And, if a global church is desirable (I think it is) why not engage the rest of Methodism around the world? A denomination defined solely by national boundaries can lead to its own set of problems.

The General Conference has known for years that this global imbalance alone is creating a crisis. In 2012, the General Conference called for a study on the “global nature of the church” to try to create a “global” Book of Discipline with a specific US only Book of Discipline to follow. The 2016 General Conference approved the progress report and the dialogue is to move to the Annual Conferences the next four years. The denomination as we know it may not even be intact in 2020 because of the three massive challenges facing our church.

2) **The Financial Imbalance of the Church**: The \$151,000,000 annual budget of the “global” UMC is apportioned almost exclusively from the US churches. The US represents 57% of the membership and 98% of the finances. The US church has historically covered 100% until the 2016 General Conference approved receiving some apportionment from Africa beginning in January of 2017. This will still represent less than 2% of the overall budget. For the sake of comparison, the often maligned Western Jurisdiction of the US church represents only 331,719 members but gives 6.55% of the budget. This \$9.9 million is more than all 5.2 million African

members contribute to the budget combined. No one disagrees that the US church should bear the majority of the funding, but a major imbalance has emerged between membership and finances.

If a US group of any size, whether “liberal” or “conservative,” splits off from the UMC, the remaining US constituents will bear an even greater financial imbalance with fewer than 50% of the votes at General Conference. I predict that there is no constituency of the US church so faithful that it will give up control of the checkbook. The African Bishops may have the most to lose in a split. All bishops across the church receive their pay from the General Conference. Decentralizing this could make a significant impact. In addition, many of their ministries are heavily dependent on US money. Finances won't split the church, but finances will split with the church.

3) **The Theological Disconnect:** The United Methodist Church currently spans three distinct—and potentially irreconcilable—mission fields. The descriptions below are intended to be general in nature, informative, and not pejorative. These categories are not original but I have witnessed the reality of them from my own work across the church and in dialogue with pastors and lay persons from Africa and all over the US. My intention is simply to characterize the thought chasm we face in the church. I am open to learning a better way to describe the differing world views—but describe them we must if we are going to move forward as a church.

Much of the African Church is ministering in developing countries where many people live with a “pre-modern” world view. African pastors have shared with me that they preach against witchcraft, sorcery, magic, and superstition. They are working to bring communities into a “modern” world view of science (clean water and sanitation), medicine (vaccines and antibiotics), and education (theology and social science). They operate in countries that are either non-democratic or emerging democracies. The poverty and societal conditions are beyond the imagination of most Americans and the church is on the front lines building hospitals, schools, churches, and orphanages. The Christian message is spreading fast and the churches are growing exponentially. These churches tend to preserve a literal interpretation of the Bible.

Much of the US southern, suburban, and rural areas are operating in a fully “modern” worldview. These are areas where the church is still central to community life and there is a strong intersection with patriotism and faith. These areas tend to be more “conservative” and “evangelical” and integrate Christian beliefs with science, medicine, and education. These are

often the largest churches in the US with the most financial resources. They have a strong missional sense, locally and globally. These churches tend to preserve a strong Biblical identity.

Many of the US northern, western, and urban churches are operating in a “post-modern” worldview. These churches tend to be more “liberal” and present in more diverse communities where one faith tradition is not as central to the whole. Many believe that all major world religions have value from which we can learn. These churches value the Bible and balance it heavily with Reason, Experience, and Tradition. These churches are often focused on social justice and cultural change. This group is leading the charge for full inclusion of LGBT persons into the life of the church.

The Bishops have to answer this question: How do you hold together a church where some are incensed by any discussion of homosexuality and others are incensed by the lack of change? The worlds in which we live, both physically and ideologically, are so different, is it possible—or even desirable—to live under a single Book of Discipline?

Conclusion: I have great hope for the people called Methodists to continue to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ across the world. I have little hope that the current structure of the United Methodist Church can endure the dramatic imbalances of geography, finances, and theology. It is time for change. And like it or not, change is coming. Will the change come like a glass plate hitting the floor and shattering into a mess that can only be swept up and discarded? Or will the change be a prayerful re-alignment of doctrine, people, and/or resources that allows the work of the Gospel to continue forward in our various contexts? I pray for the latter. Any call for “unity” that does not address these fundamental issues is a clanging gong or a noisy cymbal.

Realignments have happened many times among the Methodists around the world. We are still brothers and sisters in Christ, we still have a common history, and we still have a common witness in the world. If we are to remain one denomination, there will need to be significant latitude in the Book of Discipline to allow for effective local witness. And, at the end of the day, sharing a common Book of Discipline is NOT the goal of the Gospel. The goal of the Gospel is to celebrate our faith in Jesus Christ. Let’s stop fighting, gracefully realign the church, and get back to the work to which we are really called.

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