

Options for the Future

With Some Strategic Implications

Summer 2004

I. Background

The 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church in its closing hours overwhelmingly approved a resolution proclaiming unity in Christ. In so doing it professed a desire for dialogue and finding means by which the diverse theological perspectives of The United Methodist Church could continue to exist together. In theory, this is a laudable and worthwhile goal that all who call themselves United Methodist should be willing to commit themselves to. However, the resolution failed to address the reality of the position we find ourselves in as a church.

Prior to the 2000 General Conference, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns hosted a dialogue to seek common ground between the divergent theological positions expressed within our church. At the conclusion of the first meeting, Bishop Judith Craig stated that the divergent views on the primacy of Scripture were such that it was most likely impossible to find the much desired common ground.

The reality is that for more than 30 years our denomination has tried to find that common ground. The reality is that, in that time, instead of growing closer theologically, we have grown farther apart. The reality is that events in the Western Jurisdiction and elsewhere have confirmed that schism has already occurred. This statement is not made lightly, but with recognition that schism violates the unity that Christ wills for His Church, and it pains God greatly. However, wishful thinking and proclaiming that schism has not already happened does not make it so.

We must face up to the reality that the holders of the diverse theological perspectives are firm in their beliefs, and that we as a "united" church lack common agreement on the foundation of our Christian doctrine. We are house divided. Over the past 30 years, too much time, energy, and resources have been spent on holding the United Methodist Church together in the face of our theological schizophrenia. One can only imagine what could have been done to minister to the least, the last, and the lost of the world with those resources.

These conflicts are not minor, but strike at the root of revelation, authority, and mission. We have no compatibility on these matters. This fundamental division has given rise to a smoldering animosity that will eventually destroy what remains of The United Methodist Church.

This is more than an intramural ecclesiastical squabble. It raises first order questions of whether United Methodism has a future as an effective tool for making disciples throughout the world and, if there is such a future, how United Methodists are to move beyond our current mode of quadrennial conflict, a high level of distrust, and widely held cynicism. The conflict, distrust, and cynicism marking our denominational life today are not simply emotional reactions, but grow from longstanding experiences within an ineffective and unfocused institution.

We believe that there is nothing to be gained and a great deal to be lost by ignoring or denying the divisions that exist in our church. We believe that only by addressing these divisions will the General Conference of 2008 be better able to meet the challenges already mounting to confront it in Fort Worth.

II. Do We Need a New Wineskin?

Lyle Schaller has advanced several questions that we need to ask ourselves as we formulate a methodology to respond to the division in our church.

1. Is our denomination healthy and vital? If it is, then there is no reason not to perpetuate the status quo. (Schaller states that this is one expression of denial.)
2. Is our present system the one we need to maintain? If it is, then the problem is that we don't have the right people in the right places, and we need to effect personnel changes. (This is another form of denial, according to Schaller.)
3. Do we have a few problems and the time has come to patch the old wineskin? If so, we need to recognize that patches cost money, and our top priority should be studying the places that need patching and raising money for the patches.
4. Are we at a place where we must face up to the fact that the time has come to replace that old wineskin with a new one?

(The Ice Cube is Melting, p. 92)

Is our denomination healthy and vital? The answer is a resounding NO! Our history since merger in 1968 has been a witness to continual indifference to the missional and evangelistic mandates of the church, such that United Methodism within the U.S. continues in unabated decline. Schaller notes that at least 200,000 United Methodists exit the denomination every year (p. 94). Concerns have been continually raised over the lack of accountability in the teaching of our seminaries, the administration by our bishops, and the preaching from our pulpits. As a result we have concluded that:

- United Methodism is tragically, perhaps fatally, divided in matters of doctrine and mission.
- United Methodism has become increasingly irrelevant to the world of the 21st Century due, in part, to its internal conflicts.
- The ideological and political agenda of some of our leaders, including bishops, clergy, board and agency officials, and many delegates to the General Conference has replaced the orthodox/evangelical/apostolic gospel of Jesus Christ to such a degree that our denomination has, in some respects, become a hindrance to the redemption of the world.
- Despite rhetoric to the contrary, many of the establishment elite of United Methodism in the U.S. do not value or respect the witness and vitality of the global Methodist Church.
- Unquestioning support of United Methodism is no longer a faithful response to the call of Christ in our lives and/or our congregations.
- There is a widespread awareness that United Methodism is not united at a foundational level of beliefs, practice of ministry, and focus of mission.
- The last three General Conferences spent major time and energy on restructuring, with major research and development efforts leading up to these conferences, and in all three conferences, the recommendations coming in were either rejected *in toto* or radically altered. At the same time, any attempt to openly discuss the divisions that exist in the church was firmly prevented. The General Church processes indicate a dysfunctional institution, not one that is healthy and vital.

Is our present system the one we need to maintain? Again our answer must be a resounding NO! The irreconcilable differences that exist between evangelical/orthodox Christians and revisionist Christians within United Methodism has led to ideological oppression by United Methodist leaders who expect denominational loyalty while undermining our covenant of doctrine and polity. This problem is systemic and not limited to a handful of bishops and board or agency officials. We have observed that:

- Bishops and general agency officials are primarily selected on the basis of ability to maintain the status quo at best or promote a revisionist gospel at worst.
- There is no accountability of our leadership to the broader constituency of the church as a whole.
- Our present system is based upon an antiquated top down hierarchical understanding, rather than a servant leadership growing out of a shared ministry.
- The general ineffectiveness of many boards and agencies in supporting the ministry of the local church means that many local churches ignore the denominational structure in order to make disciples.
- The denominational system is often so cumbersome that it cannot respond to the emerging needs and trends in ministry at the beginning of this 21st century. It is also highly resistant to the kind of change that would bring about reform.
- In the thoughts of Lyle Schaller (*Ice Cube*), the system is set up as a covenant community, but in many ways it currently is functioning like a voluntary association. The difference between how the church is functioning and how it is set up to function produces frustration and ineffectiveness.

Should we patch the old wineskin or replace that old wineskin with a new one? For over 30 years, the United Methodist renewal groups have been working to patch the wineskin. Through the expenditure of enormous amounts of money, time, energy, and creativity, some progress has been made. Overall, however, the church is demonstrating its inability to resist the anti-Christian and anti-Scriptural trends of the American culture. And the hard-won gains on the legislative front are lost through the unwillingness of individuals and congregations to live by them. An estimated one-fourth to one-third of the church is operating out of a world view substantially opposed to the traditional, orthodox Christian world view. Patching the wineskin simply does not alleviate the consequences of the collision of those two world views within the church. Patching the wineskin also does not address the systemic dysfunction that continues to produce conflict and spiritual and numerical decline.

The thoughts of this paper are based on the conclusion that the unity of The United Methodist Church has already been so severely compromised by the teachings and actions of those who advocate doctrinal revisionism and the acceptance of homosexuality that the only alternative is the creation of a new wineskin. We have concluded that there are so many roadblocks to the spiritual renewal of the United Methodist Church within the current system that the creation of a new wineskin is necessary.

III. How to Create New Wineskins

New wineskins can be created in one of two ways: through structural separation or through radically reconstituting the current United Methodist Church into a new entity.

A **structural separation** among United Methodists would merely reflect the division that already exists within the church, much as a divorce often reflects the reality of an already existing separation within a marriage. It would also allow two or more new entities to emerge that could be structured for evangelism and missions, allowing spiritual renewal to take place.

The grounds of such a separation are many and include:

- Practical denial of the primacy of Scripture - despite language in our *Discipline* that affirms the primacy of Scripture for theological construction, a large minority of our church has adopted the idea of "continuing revelation" that may augment or even overturn the teachings of Scripture. The ideas of "modern biblical scholarship" are taken as a "corrective" for the traditional understanding of biblical teachings. Personal and corporate experience, along with the latest findings of scientific research (whether or not they are born out in further study), are used to negate or overturn the traditional understanding of biblical teachings. The consequences of this approach are seen in the denial of the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, for example, as being inconsistent with a "modern" understanding of how the world works. This approach is also being used to disregard the clear teaching of Scripture regarding homosexuality.
- The elevation of inclusiveness - to a certain extent, inclusion is a Scriptural value that ought to inform the church's witness and practice. However, it is not the most important value. Values such as fidelity to the Gospel, truth, righteousness, and obedience appear to have much more Scriptural weight. The concern is that inclusiveness has become the overriding value, more important in the church's practice than doctrinal fidelity, truth, or even a clear experience of salvation through Jesus Christ. Inclusiveness has become the new idolatry of The United Methodist Church.
- Breakdown of accountability - although many of the church's written policies are clear and consistent with traditional Scriptural teaching, they are not being uniformly enforced. There have been instances when it has been impossible to obtain compliance with the church's prescriptions and proscriptions, particularly in the area of the acceptance of homosexuality. It has also proven virtually impossible to exercise any action that would hold bishops accountable to the doctrinal standards of the church, or in the exercise of their Disciplinary responsibilities of oversight and correct process.
- While all Wesleyans fervently believe there is no holiness without social holiness, there has been an imbalanced emphasis on social issues at the national and denominational level, an inordinate amount of time and energy is devoted to responding to and making statements about moral and social issues. Much of the church leadership and bureaucracy seem to operate under the idea that the mission of the church is to change society and bring about heaven on earth, by political means if possible, by coercion if necessary. This approach often proves divisive within the church, where there are disagreements over the most fruitful course of action in dealing with the needs and failings of society and government. The church's responses and statements also absorb the greatest amount of energy and attention, distracting from the more foundational responsibilities of making disciples and enhancing the effective ministry of the local church. This imbalance has contributed to the numerical decline of the church over the past 30 years, and at times sends the message that social and political change is more important than personal salvation and discipleship.
- Energy demanded by the need for reform - the efforts of denominational renewal groups over the past 35 years have made a significant difference in the course of The United Methodist Church. They have had a moderating influence on the church in terms of its social positions, helped to restore a sense of the disciple-making mission of the church, brought about a more biblically-centered theological statement, and held the line on a number of moral issues, particularly marriage, abortion, and human sexuality. These gains, however, have come at great cost in terms of the expenditure of time, energy, and money. As a group, the younger generation of United Methodist renewal leaders is not as willing to continue devoting that amount of resources to the cause of denominational renewal. One wonders what the ministry impact of all these resources would have been if they had been

- expended towards making disciples, rather than in denominational reform. There may not be the willingness to commit over the next 20 years the same level of resources that have been committed over the past 20 years by both renewal leaders and grass-roots members.
- Disillusionment - the experience over the past several quadrennia has resulted in fatigue and disillusionment among some of those working for renewal. Despite gains on the "legal" front in terms of passing laws and policies at General Conference, the momentum still seems to be in favor of changing the denomination's positions in a revisionist direction. The leadership of the church, particularly some of the bishops, appears to be growing bolder in their attempt to defy General Conference and promote a revisionist agenda. Continued disobedience to the *Discipline* and ongoing use of loopholes to circumvent the intent of General Conference have led many to question the effectiveness of the renewal efforts of the past 12 years.

The **radical restructuring** of the United Methodist Church into a new entity could move in two directions. One direction would be to move more into an explicitly voluntary association, giving congregations, conferences, and jurisdictions more autonomy and allowing great diversity within the overall body of United Methodism (see Option B below). The other direction would be to move back into a covenant community understanding of the church (see Option C below). This direction would bring about greater certainty and uniformity within the UMC. Which direction one takes greatly depends upon what one's theology and vision of the church looks like.

IV. Options for the Renewal Movement within United Methodism

At this point, there are numerous options and combinations of options that could be pursued by those desiring renewal of the church. Lyle Schaller's *The Ice Cube Is Melting* contains a dizzying array of factors, options, and issues that could be considered. Here is a summary of the most salient options and some of the implications of each option.

A. Continue Current Renewal Strategies (Patching the Old Wineskin)

This option sees the tide of "battle" turning in our favor. It believes that if we continue steadfast in pushing for renewal, we will continue to make incremental progress in improving the spiritual and institutional climate of the denomination. It is just a matter of getting the right people elected as delegates and members of agency boards to bring about the cultural changes in the church that will foster spiritual vitality and growth.

This option is a type of **Forced Departure**, which is based on the model of church discipline, wherein the majority party within the church would essentially expel the minority party in order to create unity. The expulsion can be done either indirectly or directly. It would be done indirectly through making the environment of the church so hostile to the minority party that they choose either to leave or to agree to amicable separation. It would be done directly by requiring some type of "loyalty oath" or other enforcement mechanism that would require individuals and congregations to choose to leave if they could not live with the current majority policy.

Both sides are currently attempting to practice indirect forced departure. Choosing Option A would continue that process. The orthodox have mastered the legislative process and have been progressively tightening the requirements regarding homosexuality and (to a lesser extent) doctrine, hoping that those who could not support or live with these requirements would leave the denomination. The revisionists have control of the bureaucratic structures and the episcopacy and are using these structures to create an inhospitable environment for the orthodox, hoping that they will eventually leave. Up to now, these efforts have created a standoff that engenders increasing conflict, rather than resolving the problem. As the revisionist rebellion becomes more blatant, there will need to be more explicit methods of direct forced

departure, through the judicial complaint process, elections processes, and through Boards of Ordained Ministry.

The drawback of forced departure is that it creates a hostile environment within the church, whereby some are forced to fight against others to seek their exit or removal from the church. One wonders whether the General Conference or any other group of United Methodists has the stomach for the extended battle that would be required to carry out this option. The 2004 General Conference refused to implement strengthened accountability language, choosing instead to "be nice." One also wonders what long-term impacts would remain on the church as a result of this hostile battling. Would the victory be worth the cost? In the meantime, members continue to leave, evangelism is hindered by the intradenominational quarrelling, and the church continues to decline.

B Work for a Heterogeneous Denomination

This option believes that we will never get the United Methodist Church as a whole to agree to our vision of a renewed church. Rather than continuing to fight against the revisionists for control of the denomination, we would seek to decentralize control in the denomination and make a safe and healthy place for evangelicals to do ministry within the United Methodist Church.

- 1) Create "local option" for congregations, annual conferences, and jurisdictions to choose their theology and polity.
- 2) Create non-geographical "affinity" annual conferences and jurisdictions that may be based on theology, type of church, ethnic group, polity, or any other factor that could be an organizing principle.
- 3) Create a national free market for ministerial recruitment and placement, while giving congregations and pastors much more power in the placement process.
- 4) Make most apportionments voluntary.
- 5) Concentrate on resourcing local churches for ministry, rather than regulating and controlling local churches.
- 6) Establish the jurisdiction or the annual conference as the autonomous governing unit of the church, making the General Conference more of a loose association of those governing units.

(This approach is a combination of Schaller's options V-VIII and XI, pp. 186-193, 200-203.)

This option has the value of retaining the name and heritage of United Methodism, while creating within it a completely new kind of church that is horizontal in nature, rather than hierarchical. It would allow each local church to express its ministry in the way it believes God is calling without requiring that all other local churches agree to pursue the same course. It would eliminate the battles for control by structuring the church as a voluntary association and taking a "live and let live" attitude toward those who disagree. United Methodism would no longer stand for much of anything as a denomination, but would be an umbrella for diverse groups with differing theologies and practices of ministry within the UMC.

This option fits in more with the current *zeitgeist* in the United States (individual autonomy and self-determination). Thus, it would more easily be accepted by the General Conference. However, it would put evangelicals in the position of belonging to a group that would allow beliefs and behaviors that are antithetical to the Gospel.

C Refashion United Methodism as a High-Expectation Covenant Community

(This approach is a combination of Schaller's options IX and X, pp. 193-200, with additional elements.)

This approach would also allow us to retain the name and heritage of United Methodism, while creating within it a new church that would emphasize high expectations, high commitment, doctrinal certainty, and covenant accountability. This approach would be to jump immediately to the end state of what we hope our incremental changes under Option A would bring about. At the same time, there would need to be a renewal of the restated covenant for every member, pastor, and congregation. Those churches and individuals who could not affirm the renewed covenant would have to leave the denomination, and provision would need to be made for retaining property, pensions, and the like. This option would include:

- 1) Enhanced accountability
- 2) More power given to bishops
- 3) Emphasis on outcomes, rather than inputs (measure church ministry effectiveness and hold congregations and pastors accountable for effective ministry)
- 4) Emphasize missions and evangelism

The conditions and processes necessary to bring about Option C are similar to those for amicable separation (see below). It also contains elements of forced departure (see under Option A above). Many of the drawbacks and advantages of these would therefore apply.

D. Work for a Structural Separation of Methodism

This option believes that it will be impossible to renew the current United Methodist denomination. A new start for all the various factions within Methodism would allow for greater creativity, smaller and (hopefully) more effective denominations, and homogeneous denominations that are outward-focused, rather than quarrelling as factions within a larger whole. (This is Schaller's option XII, pp. 204-211.)

There appear to be two options for bringing about a structural separation within United Methodism: amicable separation and voluntary departure.

Amicable Separation

The option of amicable separation is based on both sides agreeing that a separation needs to take place. This option can be precipitated by one or the other side, but to go forward, it needs the agreement of both sides in the debate. The proposal worked on at General Conference calling for some type of commission or task group to create a plan of separation is the likely form this option would take. The appeal of this option could be broadened by creating the possibility of more than two options for new denominations. Lyle Schaller outlines five different denominations that could emerge (p. 206):

- 1) A new Methodist denomination closely resembling today's UMC, without the Restrictive Rules and with a reworked annual conference and general agency structure.
- 2) A new Methodist denomination retaining current UM doctrine, but with a new polity, organizational structure, and system of accountability.
- 3) A new Protestant denomination with its own distinctive doctrinal statement and an episcopal system of governance.
- 4) A new Wesleyan denomination with a new self-defined polity and doctrine.
- 5) A new Christian religious body with a self-defined polity and doctrine.

The labels "Wesleyan," "Protestant," and "Christian" relate to how closely the new denomination's doctrine and polity resembles historic Methodism. Central Conferences would have the choice of becoming autonomous Methodist churches or affiliating with one of the new denominations. Under amicable separation, the United Methodist Church would cease to exist, and every individual and congregation would be forced to make a conscious choice of which new denomination to become part of (or to become independent).

This option has the advantage of bringing an amicable spirit to the process of structural separation, since both sides agree to its necessity. It poses the least potential for disruption, since minimal energy is spent fighting the separation and most of the energy is devoted to constructing the two new entities.

The drawback to this option is its requirement that both sides agree, in order for it to be effective. One side can hold the other hostage by refusing to agree, either to the need for separation or to some particular elements in the plan of separation. It would also require a high level of agreement by General Conference delegates, who tend to be institutional preservers and unlikely to easily come to such agreement.

Voluntary Departure

The voluntary departure of an organized group from the church is an option that is within the realm of possibility. It is the most frequent model of structural separation in the history of Methodism, including the formation of such denominations as the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Wesleyan, and Free Methodist, among a number of others.

The advantage of this option is that it does not require creating a high level of hostility within the denomination in order to succeed. It can be implemented by a highly committed group within the church, with minimal need for agreement by the General Conference. Thus, this option is most under the control of the group initiating it, where they are not at the mercy of other groups.

The disadvantages of this option are that it may require some congregations to leave their property behind (although one hopes a large enough critical mass of those departing could work around this problem). It also leaves the United Methodist denomination somewhat intact, with the accumulation of resources to potentially continue for decades on a progressively revisionist track. It will also require great investment of time and energy to create a new denominational structure, with the potential for further division among the departing group over the shape of that structure.

V. A Word About Tactics

There are several tactics that can be used to advance several of the above options: redirection of funds, withdrawal of fellowship (or communion), and networking.

Redirection of funds by local congregations is a means of expressing principled opposition to the direction of the denomination or parts of it. This is essentially a pressure tactic, designed to pressure the denomination into taking steps that the congregation demands. In order to be effective, there needs to be a substantial number of congregations taking this step in unison. These congregations also need to have in mind the concrete outcomes they want to see happen as a result of this action. Redirecting apportionments indefinitely will have little impact beyond making the local congregation feel good that they are not supporting a structure with which they disagree. It can also cause retribution in the form of retaliation against the pastor or removal of pastoral leadership from the congregation. Therefore, this tactic should not be seen as an end, but as a means to accomplish one of the ends stated above.

Withdrawal of fellowship is another, similar tactic, whereby the congregation states it is out of fellowship (or communion) with a certain portion of the denomination. This has a symbolic value, but little practical consequence. Like the redirection of funds, this is a pressure tactic designed as a means to another end. Most commonly, it is a prelude to separation.

Networking is a necessary prelude to most of the options given above. Whether one is merely seeking to continue the reform battle or is seeking to make a new wineskin for the denomination, organized and vocal support will be necessary. Networking can be formal or informal. Good News and the Confessing Movement currently have informal networks, while some annual conferences have formal evangelical networks. If a new network is formed, it must have a specific purpose or goal in mind, so that individuals and congregations who join the network know what and why they are joining. If we are not ready to announce our goal, our best tactic is to simply continue strengthening the existing informal network by finding contacts and establishing relationships, both from Good News to the contacts and among the contacts themselves. Networking would be helped by our clarifying what we bring to the table and why it would be helpful for evangelicals to link up with us. If there comes a time when a specific goal is decided upon, we could launch a new formal network in support of that goal.

VI. Conclusion

The above background, analysis, and options are offered to assist the Good News board in working through the decisions that must be made over the next few months or years. The pace of the decisions may well depend upon events within the denomination, over which we have no control. It may be helpful to have provisional decisions in place, so that Good News can respond quickly to a monumental development, such as the Dammann verdict. If we believe we are headed toward either a new wineskin or new denomination(s), there is much background work that could be done by a team of theologians, Biblical scholars, pastors, and organizational experts. A strong financial base will also be important to support whichever option we choose, and we should be seriously looking at expanding our staff to handle these eventualities. Additional thought and work has been done by a writing team from the Executive Committee that can resource the board, once an option is chosen.

Respectfully submitted by:

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