

Town Hall Meeting, April 17, 2007

Remarks by The Rev. Karen Greenwaldt, General Secretary of the General Board of Discipleship

KAREN GREENWALDT:

Thank you so much for this opportunity to share about this important area of our church life—Church Growth.

There may be some disagreement on the various reasons why the United Methodist Church has experienced decline, but there is little disagreement about one major reason -- we simply do not start enough churches.

Across the United States, where the principle decline is occurring, we are presently starting, on average, ninety congregations a year. Ninety.

Membership in Jurisdictional Conferences continues to decline.

The same is true with attendance in many of our churches.

And there are other statistics, all of which support the temptation to dwell on what's wrong with us as a denomination.

Rather than dwelling on those, I prefer to suggest an appreciative model, which is the foundation for virtually all vital and revitalized congregations inside and outside our denomination. This model calls us to focus on our gifts while placing the urgency of the gospel before us as a guide for our action. One of our principle gifts lies in John Wesley's proclamation that "the world is our parish." It's a charge we need to make more real.

Our call to action doesn't just come from John Wesley, but church planting is a biblical mandate as well. The Gospel passage from Matthew 28 says to "Go into the world and make disciples." It's one of the clearest mandates in Scripture.

Responding to this commandment means that we must learn our way into the future while experimenting with new forms of ministry, building new and renewed congregations, and re-opening our hearts, minds and doors for a new movement of God's people.

In order for this experimentation to succeed, we will need to risk both the church's most gifted leadership and our financial resources. The time has come to risk both in order to make real Wesley's call and our response to Jesus' mandate.

The church growth provocative proposition calls the church to focus on possibilities – the incredible possibilities of starting of new churches in the USA and the renewal of existing churches.

I want to be sure I note that every goal in the Church Growth area is collaborative, none solely coming from any one general church agency. Let me lift up just a few:

The first has to do with widening our vision.

A team for new church starts in the US called the PATH I Team has been formed. Members include leaders from the Council of Bishops, the Board of Discipleship, the Board of Global Ministries, Higher Ed, United Methodist Communications, the network of congregational developers, the racial ethnic national plans, and others.

This bold initiative includes the goal to train 1000 new church planters to start 650 churches in the USA by 2012. Through this goal, conference leaders will have a pool of qualified church planters who will in turn start new churches that will reach thousands of new people on behalf of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second objective is to build a system for orienting and training Bishops and District Superintendents so that they are better able to make strategic church planting decisions. Although many of our bishops and DSs have excellent church planting skills, many do not. It's simply not a requirement for the job.

These leaders currently have few United Methodist tools to help them. We want them to have a rich database, a library of best practices that is tied to decision-making calculators that allow these leaders to answer simple questions like: "Based upon population need, where does a church need to be planted and where will it likely have the greatest possibility to succeed?"

And there are other objectives, such as:

- Helping annual conferences to allocate more of their budgets to new congregational development efforts – we want to help them allocate at least 5% more by 2012.
- Helping annual conferences to develop hundreds of new multi-cultural and racial ethnic churches within the U.S.
- Creating a "Church Plant Package" that will provide additional tools for local leaders.

These are just a few of the goals related to new church starts that are being presented to General Conference next year around the church growth proposition. But, let me conclude by naming a few other areas within this provocative proposition.

The Board of Discipleship, working with other agencies and with the Council of Bishops, will continue to provide help for church renewal.

The Board of Discipleship, working with United Methodist Communications and the United Methodist Publishing House, will continue to create a sustainable system for resource sharing that gives churches outside the U.S. access to basic church print and on-line resources that they deem a priority and in their own language. We will continue to focus work in Africa and will extend this work into the Philippines and Europe.

And, working with nearly all of the general agencies, the Board of Discipleship will offer the quadrennial 'Healthy Churches' training conference in early 2009.

In this short time, I have lifted up just a few of the areas that are part of the Church Growth provocative proposition.

The United Methodist Church serves not only those presently in our churches – all people and the whole created order are God's domain and all are within our care. We must never settle for the status quo or be satisfied with a church that reaches fewer and fewer people and that impacts less and less of the decision makers who affect the very world in which we live. Rather, we are a people of a movement – a movement of United Methodists called and claimed by God to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the very transformation of the world.

I am eager to take your questions and to be in dialogue about any of these areas I've briefly addressed. Thank you.