

**This essay was requested by the Writing Team and the contributor (a current seminary student and candidate for ordination) asked and was granted permission for his/her name to be withheld.**

“Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors”—This is the slogan that The United Methodist Church uses in its advertising, promising potential members that this will be their experience when they visit a congregation. But we know this is not always the case. All too often visitors and members alike have found The United Methodist Church to be something much less than what our slogan implies. So should we change our slogan out of concern for truth in advertising? My answer is no. “Open hearts, open minds, open doors” is an ideal we strive toward, and just like any ideal that an individual or organization strives toward, we do not always embody said value. So instead of assessing the state of our church on how well we embody this ideal, perhaps it would be more useful for us to ask ourselves how well we are doing in our striving toward it. Let’s look at a few examples.

Perhaps no issue in The United Methodist Church has grabbed as many headlines in recent years as those issues directly involved with the cultural debate over homosexuality. In 2004, the Rev. Beth Stroud was stripped of her ministerial credentials by a church trial in Pennsylvania after she openly acknowledged that she was in a committed relationship with a female partner.

In 2005, Judicial Council Decision 1032 determined that it was appropriate for a pastor to deny membership to a person based upon their sexual preference.

What message are we sending through these actions? “Our doors are open, unless you are gay.”

Recently in one annual conference a proposal was put forth by the pastor and members of one of the conference’s largest and wealthiest churches to change the way that the pastors’ health care was managed. The proposal would have individual congregations billed directly for the full cost of health care, increasing the financial burden on poorer congregations and saving wealthier congregations substantial sums of money every year. Currently many poorer congregations rely on apportionments, funds from wealthier congregations, to pay the salaries of their pastors so that the ministry of The United Methodist Church can reach all communities, not just the ones that can afford it. What message are we sending through these actions? “Our doors are open, unless you’re too poor to run your church by yourself.”

Statistical research shows that while the age of the average American is somewhere around 30, the average age of a United Methodist is somewhere around 60. Currently less than 3 percent of ordained United Methodist clergy are under 35, largely because young people who are discerning a call to ordained ministry are faced with an adversarial ordination process that takes the better part of a decade to finish, only then to be appointed to a congregation that likely prefers to maintain the status quo rather than making vital changes to effectively reach the changing culture with the gospel of Christ. A young person who is discerning such a call more often than not looks at the present situation and opts instead to serve in another denomination or pursue a career outside the church.

What message are we sending by our unyielding allegiance to culturally irrelevant models of church? “Our doors are open, unless you want to change things.”

The problems of The United Methodist Church are certainly not unique. They are shared by other Christian denominations that see similar declines in membership, aging congregations and clergy,

struggling finances, and intense conflict over divisive social issues. But sharing these common predicaments with other denominations does not absolve us from the responsibility to address these problems and live up to the ideals we claim to strive toward.

We may never arrive at a place where we perfectly embody the ideals of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors,” but we certainly need to do a far better job of trying.