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Any discussion of United Methodism today needs to recognize to begin with that many good things are happening in the church. A number of individual churches are thriving and doing significant ministry. Our giving to relief set records in 2005 (the year of Katrina). Our Volunteers in Mission program is engaging more people in mission than ever before.

Having said this, however, it is time that we as a church begin to deal with the unmentionable, namely: *we are in decline*. For forty straight years we have suffered membership loss. *Forty years!* Furthermore, the rate of decline is not slowing but, if anything, it is increasing. By any statistical measure—worship attendance, church school enrollment, number of missionaries we are sending, market share of the Christian world, finances—the numbers are negative. Furthermore, there are no significant signs that this is being, or can be, reversed. Our membership is aging; the number of younger clergy is declining; the number of new church starts is not keeping up with the number of churches being closed. I believe the overall situation merits use of the word *crisis*.

I see five possible responses to this crisis.

1) **We can deny that it exists.** We can take the attitude expressed recently by Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA (a denomination in even greater crisis than the United Methodist Church). Speaking of the Presbyterian Church USA, Kirkpatrick remarked: “We have reached the potential tipping point of renewed growth and vitality.” He sees only good things ahead. I don’t know of any United Methodists who are that much divorced from reality, but it is not uncommon for pastors, superintendents, and bishops to describe the church in glowing terms and speak of a great future: many of our institutions seem healthy; giving is still good; people still give testimonies about finding Christ. Such remarks prop up morale temporarily, but they do not serve us well in the long run.

2) **We can admit we are in a crisis but believe that the crisis can be addressed by doing the same things we have always done, though better.** That seems the present course. We will authorize another denominational study on the ministry. We will design a new curriculum on leadership. We will develop a denominational program to address the concerns of some neglected group. We will encourage excellence in all areas of church life. We need to face that if this strategy has not brought results for any of the last forty years why would we think it will work in the next five?

3) **We can argue that denominational vitality has more to do with faithfulness rather than statistics and finances and therefore we exactly where God wants us to be.** We are making a social witness. We are creating the church for the future, which will be smaller but more effective. If this is what we want the church to be, then let us declare it boldly up front.

4) **We will accept the reality of our decline and order our denominational life accordingly.** We will expect to have seven million members in a few years, six million a few

years after that, and five million a few years after that. But we will deal responsibly with the reality of a smaller denomination. We will merge conferences (let's face it that this is what really drives conference mergers). We will cut out unnecessary programs. We will merge seminaries (at what point in our decline will we be willing to admit we do not need 13 seminaries?). A business corporation losing market share realizes it must downsize to avoid bankruptcy. Our loss of market share has been reduced from 33 percent (1850) to something like 6 percent. Re-sizing the denomination may be the best we can hope for.

5) **We can take the risk and make far-reaching and radical changes in order to reverse the decline and bring new vitality to the denomination.** Of all the options this is the least-likely to happen simply because denominations, like local churches, are institutionally conservative and resistant to change. We would need new leadership. If the church were a corporation after a forty-year decline it would be time to fire the whole management team and bring in new personnel. As I say, this obviously is not going to happen.

However, if it were to happen, what might some of the management decisions look like? Some options:

a) **Our in-fighting over matters of biblical authority (and related to that, homosexuality) might best be solved by amiable separation.** The emphasis should be on "amiable." Mainline denominations are not handling the conflicts they are presently engaged in well. What is happening in the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the United Church of Christ should be a lesson to us. It might well be that even to bring up the subject would lead to repentance and a new commitment to be together (but on a different basis).

b) **What might be a better strategy would be a new system of central conferences or missionary conferences** in which like-minded churches would have oversight of bishops they have more confidence in, and the encouragement of programs more compatible with who they are. Conferences would have some flexibility to set emphases or standards which reflect their values.

c) **We would re-"brand" United Methodism.** The concept of United Methodist "ethos" is a valid one, but it needs to be something very different from what it presently is (liberal academic culture with a United Methodist tag). This would necessarily lead not to "inclusiveness" which implies no standards (all do what is right in their own eyes) and no discipline, but to standards and doctrinal and ethical expectations. We are presently imaged as believing in nothing. We need something more than this. The re-branding would come not by emphasis on institutionalism but would grow up from the grass-roots, led most likely by significant churches.

d) **We would draw on the resources, vitality, and wisdom of the evangelical constituency.** It is worth noting that if there is an alienated constituency in the church, it is not the "progressive" wing of the church but the evangelical wing. A point to be made is that when evangelicals write critiques they are directed toward the "hierarchy," the "corporate culture," the one-sided political stances of the agencies, and the lack of theological inclusiveness in the seminaries and in many programs. When "progressives" write critiques they are more often than not directed not to the institution (which is friendly

to them) but toward the “right wing” (IRD, Confessing Movement, social conservatives, biblical literalists, megachurches), whom they accuse of causing United Methodism’s problems. The point is that the institutionalism of the denomination as now constituted is not evangelical-friendly. Indeed, evangelicals are often made to feel as strangers in their own country. Evangelicals have a lot to offer. Two churches in the North Indiana Conference, Granger and Union Chapel, with a combined worship attendance of 7,500 (11 percent of the entire conference), are tolerated at best in the conference, and rarely called upon for resourcing. A local college, Indiana Wesleyan, is making a concerted appeal to United Methodist evangelicals and presently has 65 United Methodist students in its ministry program, far more than all the official United Methodist institutions have together. Yet the conference makes no effort to connect with the school or with the students, and many will be lost to the United Methodist Church. Our official seminaries appear to have little interest in hiring or involving evangelical scholars.

Could United Methodist corporate culture open itself to new ideas and new approaches to faith? Probably not, but we can dream.