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Something radical is happening!

I join most active lay members of the United Methodist Church in being concerned about the current state of the church, but I am optimistic about the future. Why should I be optimistic when we are losing members at an alarming rate? When we hear of frustrations with church structure? When “turf issues” obstruct opportunities for meaningful reform and accelerate theological and cultural differences?

I am optimistic because I see evidence of a growing commitment to live and reclaim a way of life that defined the early Methodist movement—a way of life that held fast to “doctrine, spirit and discipline.” This year the Council of Bishops will host a Convocation for Extended Cabinets under the theme of “The United Methodist Way.” Also, many Methodists are moving into areas of cooperative ministry affiliated to the church but not institutionally mandated. These partnerships and grass-root movements are nudging the church away from “maintenance” to “mission.” The conversation is moving back to the center in a way that focuses on matters of agreement rather than disagreement. Something radical is happening! If this continues, we might experience again spiritual renewal and membership growth within the denomination.

A few of the many encouraging signs

1. The Emerging Church and Methodism:

A seminary professor was distressed that some of her brightest students were running into obstacles in their annual conferences due to understanding of the emerging church movement. She was afraid Methodism might lose these gifted young pastors. Her concern led to a network among seminary and college professors, district superintendents, and several emerging church practitioners to hold a UM convocation on the emerging church. Theologians prepared papers on the emerging church which pointed to similarities with Wesleyan theology and the early Methodist movement. There was worship, discussion and prayer. The gathering began a dialogue of understanding between students, seminarians, church leaders, agency representatives and practitioners.

2. The Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table

This quadrennium the Council of Bishops has focused its energy and leadership resources to lead the church in “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” As they shared how their conferences are focusing on this commitment seven “vision pathways” emerged. These pathways were presented to the Connectional Table and the General Agencies to guide their visioning, strategic planning and budgeting. Areas of collaboration for resourcing the church have been identified and the council is considering a “Call to Action.” Throughout this process the council has evidenced a new “team leadership” approach. Also, we have seen that the newly formed Connectional Table and the Council of Bishops can work together to focus and enable ministry for the good of the whole church.

3. A National Strategy for Congregational Development

Starting new churches is the documented way to “professions of faith and church membership growth.” As a part of one of their “vision pathways,” the Council of Bishops brought together representatives of the council, the network of Annual Conference Church Developers, the General Board of Discipleship, the General Board of Higher Education and Ministries, the General Board of Global Ministries, the Connectional Table and the National Plans to develop a national strategy for congregational development. Areas of turf protection gave way to a new sense of cooperation and consensus. Positive results are now being shown.

4. Technology and the church

To reach today’s culture and be more efficient in ministry, the church will need to be “wired”. Leadership from the United Methodist Church has helped introduce advances in technology to the church. Cutting edge resources are now available through an “open source” project called the Web Empowered Church (WEC), which is featured in a recent Abingdon publication by Mark Stephenson. WEC has brought together effective ministry experiences of leading United Methodist Churches and committed Christian techies to develop powerful “open source” software solutions. These resources will help local church ministries become web empowered at little or no cost. Also, United Methodist bloggers fill the web with lively discussion and dialogue on what it means to be a Methodist. Is this Wesleyan? In introducing the 2006 republishing of John Wesley’s *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Dave Roberts contends: “Wesley was to church life what Google was to search engines. He disrupted the religious norms of the day. If Wesley were here today, he would be entirely at home in the social spaces we create with our online diaries, our iTunes play lists, and our blog-inspired questioning of the giants of the media establishment.” I agree!

5. Youth and Campus Ministry

Ask a lay person what is the top need in the church and chances are they will either say “evangelism” or “ministry with young people.” Recent institutional efforts have encouraged global meetings, representation and legislation. But budgetary pressures have resulted in some reduction in funding when increased funding is sorely needed. But there are two bright spots: The Youth Worker Movement led by an advisory board of youth ministry leaders and educators has been spun out of the General Board of Discipleship and the College Union movement led by an advisory committee of effective campus ministers and denominational leaders working in coordination with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. I hope these will become models for effective partnerships between agencies of the church and independent associations of practitioners in the vineyards of the local church and college campus. It is encouraging that some of the strongest support for these movements come from seminary professors who are once again looking to their primary calling – to prepare clergy for ministry.

Yes—something radical is happening!