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The world in which The United Methodist Church serves is in trouble.

By the year 2030, the U.S. Geological Survey predicts, “Glacier National Park will have no glaciers. 400,000 square miles of Arctic sea ice have melted in the last 30 years—endangering polar bear habitats and further accelerating global warming worldwide.”¹

Threats to avian life in the United States are many, but the most serious is the outright loss of habitat due to poor land use, the clear-cutting of forests, the draining of wetlands, and sprawl.²

In developing countries and in pockets within developed countries, our children are dying.

According to the Population Reference Bureau, 2005 World Population Data Sheet: in the developing countries, there are 12 infant deaths every hour.³

Across the world, our people live in increasingly disparate economic realities. For instance, in the developing world, more than 1.2 billion people currently live below the international poverty line, earning less than \$1 per day.⁴ Half the world—nearly 3 billion people—live on less than \$2 per day.⁵

It is within this troubled context that we find troubled United Methodist Churches, especially in the United States.

In 2004, in the U.S., 41.6 percent of our churches did not have a profession of faith.

Membership in both our central and jurisdictional conferences continues to decline.⁶

The same is true with U.S. church membership and attendance per church.⁷

Local church debt and local church expenditures continue to increase while World Service and Conference Benevolences continue to decline. At the same time, in 2005, U.S. churches and people gave record dollars to the recovery efforts related to the tsunami and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

While many in the church continue to call for collaborative lay and clergy ministries, the reality is that many churches continue practices that call for passive laity who wait for the direction of the

¹ Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, Environmental Defense

² <http://www.audubon.org/bird/stateofthebirds/index.html>

³ Population Reference Bureau, *2005 World Population Data Sheet*)

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2005*

⁵ James Wolfensohn, President, World Bank. Plenary address to 9th International Anti-Corruption Conference, August 2000. http://ww1.transparency.org/iacc/9th_iacc/papers/day1/plenary/dipl_jwolfensohn.html

⁶ The State of Our Connection: A Statistical Analysis of the Jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church, GCFA, February 2006

⁷ The State of Our Connection: A Statistical Analysis of the Jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church, GCFA, February 2006

clergy. These laity are “passive churchgoers” or “lethargic conformers” who are addicted to “consumer church.”¹

Yes, the pain and tragedy of our world and its peoples is depressing. We could choose to ignore the signs of trouble all around us, and we could continue to provide incremental solutions to the issues of spiritual formation and leadership formation. If we did that, we would continue to live denial about the realities facing the church, the world, and us. We must choose to look directly into the face of the world’s and the church’s issues. We believe that the church is the one institution in the world that can hold all of what we see in hands of hope and confidence—not because we can by our own will make a difference in the world—but because we trust in God who leads and calls all to faithful living and discipleship. All things are possible through God, through Christ who strengthens us.

Therefore, the time for incremental quick fix change is past. We are living in a world and in a church that needs radical intervention. The status quo will not overcome the inertia holding us in place. Our incremental solutions will not turn the church or the world around on a dime.

Considering this entire world and church context, the temptation is then to dwell on what’s wrong with us as a denomination and then fix it. To do so, I believe, is to support the status quo. Focusing on what’s wrong is to continue to support an outdated model that places hope within the command and control systems. For too long we believed that if simply changed or re-tooled those systems we could change the church, and, therefore, impact the world.

Instead, we need to use an appreciative model, which is the foundation for virtually all vital and revitalized congregations. This model calls us to focus on our gifts while placing the urgency of the gospel before us as a guide for our action.

Focusing on our gifts means we trust our way into the future while experimenting with new forms of ministry, building new and renewed relationships, and placing our hearts, minds, and bodies into 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 renew.

It is by strongly supporting the launch of new movements of United Methodists that move into the church and the larger world, bringing the messages of hope and healing to people and the world. This is accomplished by supporting these efforts both financially and with our best leaders. And, paradoxically, it will succeed by loosening the grip of control and command leadership, allowing creativity to breath and flourish.

The world with its oceans, its waterways, its birds, its children, its aged, its people in our churches, its people not in our churches—all are God’s domain and all are within our care. Indeed, as John Wesley told us, “The world is our parish.” We must never settle for the status quo or be satisfied with a church that reaches fewer and fewer people and that impacts fewer and fewer of the decision-makers that affect our world. Rather, we are a people of a movement—a movement of United

¹ <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=214>

Methodists called and claimed by God to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the very transformation of the world.