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In describing the current state of the church, it's hard to improve on Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way."

This could (perhaps "should") be "the best of times...the epoch of belief...the spring of hope" for the Methodist movement because in our spiritual heritage we have the experience of faith for which many people are waiting. My observation and my experience convince me that when we offer and live the Christian faith out of the center of our spiritual and theological tradition, masses of spiritually-searching people will say, "Where have you been all my life? This is exactly what I've been looking for!" The problem is that we have not been offering our tradition with energy, passion, creativity and joy. If we reclaim that spiritual and theological center, we could have "everything before us."

But for The United Methodist Church in the United States, it is also "the worst of times—the age of foolishness—the epoch of incredulity—the winter of despair." It's about time that we break through the foolishness of our institutional defensiveness and denial in order to face the painful reality of our current condition.

Although there are signs of hope scattered throughout the connection, the empirical evidence indicates that we continue the hemorrhaging of members, congregations, ministries and resources that Lyle Schaller described in *The Ice Cube Is Melting*. As a result, we continue the "voodoo economics" of increasing annual and general church budgets on a diminishing base.

If the question before every annual conference is, "And Are We Yet Alive?" the evidence in most of our conferences is not encouraging. We seem to be doing just about everything we can to fulfill John Wesley's fear that "the people called Methodists should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power."

What might we do to claim "the best of times" for the Methodist movement? Here are some suggestions.

1. Go to the center

For too many years we have expended too much energy bickering about circumference issues. Perhaps we could let the folks on the far right and the far left go off and fight while the rest of us move more deeply into the central core of our life together, what Mr. Wesley called "the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out." If we continue our current trajectory, we will prove William Butler Yeats correct when he said, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold—The best lack all conviction, while the worst—are full of passionate intensity."

2. Keep the main thing the main thing

The main thing in our mission statement is “making disciples for Jesus Christ.” The Methodist movement was born out of a passionate desire to share the good news of God’s love with people who had not experienced it and to form those converts into maturing disciples of Christ. When 40 percent of our churches have not received a single person by confession of faith, it’s clear that we are not accomplishing that mission.

3. Focus on the local church

The days of “denominational dominance” are over. New Christians are baptized and disciples are formed in local congregations that discover their unique mission and fulfill that mission with creativity and joy. General Conference needs to continue to move away from “top down” management and move toward more flexibility for local congregations within the framework of our theological tradition.

4. Rediscover the passion

In the Wesleyan tradition, the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart. Our problem is not a lack of organization or structure, but the spiritual aridity of too many of our congregations and leaders. The Methodist movement is alive and well in places where pastoral and lay leaders are alive in the Spirit and fulfilling their calling with passion, creativity and joy.

I still believe that this could be our “spring of hope” rather than our “winter of despair” and that we could have “everything before us” rather than behind us. I pray that it might be so.