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Good News
Wilmore, Kentucky

As the United Methodist Church moves toward the 2008 General Conference, it faces the challenge of thinking biblically and theologically about a host of critical issues. The problem is we have not been doing that well for many decades.

The recommendation to make the United States a separate Central Conference has enormous implications and needs careful consideration. In light of sagging membership, money, and morale, one wonders whether a priority for us in Ft. Worth ought to be the creation of yet another tier of bureaucracy that will require major time and energy given to denominational restructure for the next several quadrennia.

We should avoid knee-jerk reactions to such proposals until we hear and see more of what is being proposed. One wonders, however, whether this request represents a strong felt need on behalf of the African, Asian, and European churches or whether we are making that decision for them. That, it seems, has not been made clear yet. What is clear is that the closer our relationship is with the churches in the central conferences, the better off the American church will be. We have been and are enriched by our close relationship with these churches.

We should be encouraged by talk of a major focus on new church starts for the next quadrennium. A robust strategy that causes us to stretch and pray much should be accompanied by a plan to assist the 42 percent of our United Methodist Churches who received not one person on profession of faith last year. This concern should be a major focus kept before delegates at Ft. Worth every day.

One might ask whether pastors have a clear theology of evangelism. New and tested resources are available for use in our local churches today. Annual conferences should consider ample opportunities for training in evangelism and outreach for those churches that are obviously struggling with the challenge of “making disciples of Jesus Christ.” And while starting new churches, let’s not forget our smaller churches. United Methodism has 33,000 local churches with 99 or less in average attendance! We must not overlook these churches in our growth strategies.

Another major concern for the 2008 General Conference will be a right understanding of the meaning of membership. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry’s Consultation on Judicial Council Decision 1032 held in Nashville in February of this year provided important analyses of the issues related to this critical concern (presentations are posted on the GBHEM web site).

At the heart of the discussion is whether the senior pastor has the executive authority to make the determination about one’s readiness for membership, or whether that authority resides elsewhere (with the bishop, the superintendent, etc.). One theologian claimed that the person who should make that call is the person who is desirous of membership. In that scenario, the term “membership standards” would be an oxymoron. There would be no standard.

Dr. Les Longden, one of the presenters at the consultation, noted that Decision 1032 provides us with a God-given opportunity “to penitently recover the ecclesial character of church membership.” He reminds us that our *Discipline* says we “share a common heritage” with all Christians, one that is “grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord” (2004 *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 101). This reminds us that we are firmly grounded in the apostolic faith of the church universal and are not free to re-write or dumb-down the script.

The opposition to Decision 1032, says Longden, seems to present in stark contrast a “theology of inclusion” over against a “theology of communion.” He is making a distinction made by Dr. Philip Turner, former dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, who lamented the shallowness of many contemporary definitions of the gospel, which say simply “God is love. God loves us. We, therefore, ought to love one another.” What’s missing, said Turner, is some word about the saving power of Christ’s cross, God’s victory in Christ’s resurrection, the promise of the Holy Spirit, the hope of our Lord’s return, and a call to repentance and amendment of life in accord with the pattern of Christ’s life (from “An Unworkable Theology,” *First Things*, June/July 2005).

For Turner, we are dealing with a theological chasm that separates those “who hold a theology of divine acceptance from those who hold a theology of divine redemption.” These, it must be said, are two very different theological understandings. A theology of divine acceptance, Turner adds, no longer needs terms such as faith, justification, repentance, and holiness of life. These terms “belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted.”

A biblically-grounded theology of divine redemption will help empower and equip our church to do vital evangelism as well as actively address critical social crises such as Africa’s need for clean water, malaria nets, and assistance combating HIV/AIDS; exposing and opposing human trafficking; the critical needs of the persecuted church around the world along with issues of religious liberty in China, North Korea, and the nations of the Middle East; vigorous opposition to America’s abortion culture, as well as continued efforts at reconstruction in the Katrina-ravaged Gulf Coast areas.

As we were reminded in the recent film, *Amazing Grace*, Wilberforce’s personal faith experience with Christ led to his crusade against the slave trade. That blending of vital piety and social ministry has always been characteristic of our Wesleyan theological heritage. May it so continue.