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Washington, D.C.**

The United Methodist Council of Bishops has issued a “Call to Action” that includes asking congregations to reproduce themselves.

One suggestion is for churches to expand their ministries among racial and ethnic populations in the quest for diversity.

What does this mean? How will we prioritize our time, resources, and strategic efforts to accomplish this goal?

The General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR) is given the task to challenge and empower the denomination to address issues of race, ethnicity and inclusiveness. Our views of the church and the world, in light of our evangelistic mission, are largely based on the changing and contrasting demographics of our nation and denomination.

What we see is not very encouraging so far.

About 28 percent of the U.S. population is racial/ethnic, compared to just six percent of reported United Methodist Church membership, according to figures from the General Board of Global Ministries Office of Research.

Results of an informal, online survey of United Methodists by GCORR in 2005 partly explain the disproportionately low number of racial/ethnic persons in the church: 82 percent of respondents said they believe racism exists in the denomination.

Another 65 percent said they knew someone in the church who practices racist behavior and 42 percent said they have personally experienced racism in the church.

Despite these troubling findings, there are some hopeful signs of increasing racial/ethnic inclusiveness in the church.

Some 85 percent of United Methodists who responded to our survey believe that addressing racism must be a priority of the church and 92 percent believe racism is a sin.

It is also encouraging to note that racial/ethnic clergy now comprise 10 percent of all clergy, a growth of .26 percent from 2003, according to data from the General Council on Finance and Administration. And racial/ethnic membership has grown by .24 percent since 2002, now comprising 7.77 percent of all members.

While we are still a 92 percent white denomination, this incremental growth in racial/ethnic presence is a positive sign.

The national trend toward increasing diversity will continue at a rapid pace. Among Americans 70 and older, there are 5.3 white people for every person of color, or a ratio of about 5:1. For

Americans younger than 40, however, that ratio is 2:1. Among children 10 and younger, the ratio is 1.5:1.

It is expected that for every four people born in the U.S. within the next 30 years, three of them will be persons of color.

Although it is clear our society will become increasingly diverse, it is not clear what The United Methodist Church will look like until the call to racial/ethnic inclusiveness becomes a core value in the vision and future plans of the denomination. Sadly, it is still marginal in our goal-setting and deployment of resources when it should be more central.

If the church is to embrace and reflect the growing diversity of communities around the world, we must fully integrate that call into all areas of the church. That includes leadership among bishops, conferences, boards and agencies, and delegates to General Conference and jurisdictional conferences.

We do see a critical distinction between the terms diversity and inclusiveness. The former is about mere presence while the latter is about meaningful participation.

We urge local churches to not only invite but welcome and engage new people—especially people of color—in the life and ministries of their congregations. The same must be true of our denomination if we really seek growth, social relevance and transformation.

With a shrinking, aging white population among the 300 million U.S. citizens, almost half of the total population will be racial or ethnic minorities by 2056. The 2000 census showed that three out of 10 people in America are minorities, with 6.8 million identifying themselves as multiracial.

From 1980 to 2000, the non-Hispanic white population grew about eight percent; the growth rate for other groups was much higher. The African-American population grew by nearly 30 percent, Native Americans by 75 percent, Latinos by 142 percent and Asian Americans by 185 percent.

In 2000, the United States had over 35 million more people of color than it did in 1980. In the not-too-distant future, most of the people you encounter are likely to be people of color, and that may one day include churches that today are predominantly white.

New immigrants from Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East are holding onto their identities and cultural heritages—often out of necessity—unlike previous European immigrants who found it easier to assimilate into a more homogeneous society.

How will we, as a church, prepare to do cross-cultural evangelism in intercultural settings?

In Louisiana, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Georgia, almost 30 percent of the population is black, yet that picture is not reflected in our churches anywhere except in South Carolina. How effective are we being if we are not growing churches and increasing membership in the most diverse parts of our country?

Race *does* count, as Cornel West asserts in his book, *Race Matters*. As Christian disciples, we must convey the message that racism and ethnocentrism cannot fit into the framework of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For too long, our nation's faith communities have been racially segregated. We in The United Methodist Church must stop to think about, and then reshape, the messages we send from our churches to the nation's growing multiracial, multi-ethnic population, many of whom are recent immigrants with strong international ties.

So how do we make our churches places where everyone feels invited, valued, and included? We have to modify some long-established practices and initiate new ones. We must learn how to interpret and address the sociological and psychological impact this changing demographic picture will have on the life of our membership and Church.

The vast number of changes will influence us all. We need to view the growth in our multicultural communities—combined with this new demographic data—as teaching resources for our denomination.

If the church is to continue being a strong force for Christ in the world, our congregations and connectional bodies must reach out more to welcome, engage, and be influenced by people who are different. Only then can our churches and our denomination become different and more vital as well as making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.