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Significant changes are taking place that offer hope for our future as the people of The United Methodist Church.

These hopeful signs suggest that the denominational decline is slowing and new, creative forms of mission and ministry are emerging. Though several primary factors are influencing the denomination's transformation, three will be emphasized here: the global nature of the church, cultural changes, and a shift in leadership focus and direction.

Globalization

In Mozambique, a faith community meets under a cashew tree. In Georgia, a workplace Bible study grows into a vibrant new church that now meets in what was once an abandoned United Methodist building.

We acknowledge the face of membership in The United Methodist Church is changing. Declining membership in the United States has been offset by remarkable growth in the central conferences. In Africa alone, membership has increased 244 percent—3.1 million members—in the past decade. Within this global movement, the church is finding new ways to be in and develop communities of faith and to carry out our mission and ministry of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

This quadrennium, we experienced the first Council of Bishops meeting on the continent of Africa. We also formed the first secular partnership between multiple general agencies and multi-million dollar private foundations sharing in the work to eradicate malaria. In record numbers, and by using new technologies like online giving, we generously responded to great natural disasters including the tsunami in Indonesia and the multiple, destructive hurricanes in the United States.

Cultural Changes

As the United Methodist Church moves forward into the 21st Century, many of our churches are making the most of technology—from interactive Web sites, to video-streaming of worship services, to downloadable iPod devotions—technology is a key tool to our witness in the world.

The people of The United Methodist Church have always been a giving and generous community of believers with a core committed to the apportionment covenant. In 2005, the church experienced increased participation in the apportionment covenant in all five jurisdictions. In addition, 17 annual conferences participated 100 percent in the apportionment covenant, up from 15 in 2004. While traditional giving is still the foundational funding source for the work of the general church, the ever-changing culture challenges our traditional approaches. Online giving and electronic funds transfers are becoming the giving means by which those that are inspired to do so share their abundance for the global work of Christ. In addition, several generations of the young and not-so-young are challenging the church to be more accountable and more hands-on in their giving and receiving. Thus, an increase in focused giving is occurring. We are welcoming and responding to this shift in the cultural understanding of giving.

Leadership

The collaboration within the church is a notable and hopeful sign of a denomination that is emerging from decline. The Bishop's Call to Action that provides a leadership direction for our annual conferences is a promising sign of hope. In addition, the collaborative work between the program general agencies and the Connectional Table that has resulted in four areas of focus for the work of the general church—leadership, congregational development, poverty, and global health—signifies a sweeping change of approach and understanding of how mission and ministry happen.

Signs of hope are evident, as well, within the General Council on Finance and Administration. During this past quadrennium, the council has expressed hopeful signs and transformative approaches through a culture of collaboration and a focus on servant ministry. The results of these efforts include:

- a more efficient and effective operational style that leads the denomination in demonstrating collaboration and cost-sharing;
- administrative partnerships providing services from payroll functions to travel and meeting planning assistance for other general agencies;
- responding to new ways of giving by offering electronic giving services to local churches through a relationship with VANCO;
- development of new resources and tools for constituent groups including a redesigned Web site and an online statistical retrieval system for annual conferences; and,
- collaboration with the Connectional Table that is appreciative of the *Book of Discipline* mandate to bring together the resources and ministries of the Church.

The theme for General Conference, 2008 “A Future with Hope” takes on new meaning in light of these hopeful signs. A future with hope brings possibilities of new enthusiasm for the work of the general church; a resurrection of world-wide mission and ministry that is articulated by local church members; and a greater global impact by our denomination as we make disciples of Jesus Christ.

This is a future that holds promise and hope while honoring our Wesleyan heritage.

Like the wind of hope over the earth in the creation story, the spirit of God is moving through us and creating a wind of change—a transformational change that inspires us as we, the people of The United Methodist Church, move forward into a future with hope.