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As a fourth generation cradle Methodist, I grew up with a fair sense of religious identity and purpose. As a youngster I knew myself as a Christian with an obligation to live as faithfully as possible according to teachings I learned in my small Hispanic Methodist church in Texas.

My church was a small Hispanic congregation where we worshipped God, loved each other, and sought to live faithful lives in our community. All of us were Hispanic, poor, and we shared our struggles to be faithful. We knew each other's weaknesses and shortcomings. But we were all part of the church family and in spite of our shortcomings, we continued to love and uphold each other. Life was simple and clear.

My how has church changed for me over the years! It is no longer as simple and clear as I recall my first memories of what it meant "to be" and "to do" church. I still consider myself a faithful United Methodist. But my sense of "being church" and "doing church" has become somewhat more complicated and challenging.

My church has become a global, diverse, multifaceted, and intertwined, yet independent network of people, congregations, agencies, and institutions that share a broad sense of being Methodist and United Methodist. We celebrate our commonalities, shared traditions, and theological visions, yet cherish and fight for our distinctiveness, causes, and independence.

I am still United Methodist and still love it as much as I did when I was growing up in my hometown. However, I am now amazed at how much we struggle "to be" and "to do" church as United Methodists. It seems that we struggle with what it means to be United Methodist and what we are called to do as a church!

I wonder if at the core we wrestle with the issues of identity. Identity as a community of believers and followers of Jesus Christ is not the issue. What we struggle with is our identity in what we have become as a global and diverse church.

We are a diverse church and celebrate our diversity! Our diversity is a product of successful ministry. We are global and multiethnic. We represent the American and the world's variety of socio-economic and political orientations. We welcome all peoples of the world and community. Thus, it is not surprising that our life as a church involves the struggles to live out our diversities. In other words, we wrestle with our identities. And because we hold on to our diverse identities we also struggle with the visions and sense of purpose that those identities involve. This is not to suggest that we should do away with diversity so we can reduce our struggles. On the contrary, struggling with our diversity is to be celebrated and affirmed as a necessity of life and who we are. Our challenge is how to manage our diversity and how to live together as God's people.

Our struggles as a global and diverse church are manifested in the tensions and debates listed below:

Local and Connectional

As United Methodists we wrestle with local needs and priorities and those on a connectional level. It is an issue of managing resources as well as decision-making. Who decides what to do with the limited resources of the church, including local congregations? What role do local congregations play in deciding where their resources go?

National and global

Long associated with the USA, the United Methodist Church struggles with the reality of a global membership in which the balance of membership and potential power may shift considerably. Will American United Methodists share power?

Majority and minority

As the United Methodist Church grows among the people of color and the traditional white membership dwindles, to what extent will the church share power and resources with racial and ethnic populations? Tensions between people of color and white United Methodists continue to strain the church unnecessarily.

Progressive- traditional

People of open minds seem to have different minds about many things. The many debates over homosexuality, war/peace, immigration, and other social issues many times appear more ideological than theological. Debate seems to be more focused on winning the debate than on trying to live together with diversity.

Diversity-assimilationist

To be United Methodist means many things. Increasingly a debate is emerging. There are those who seek the notion that to be United Methodist means to fit a certain linguistic and cultural profile. There are others who argue that ministry cannot be assimilationist. Does United Methodist ministry seek to impose a certain profile of life style, culture, and language on those culturally and ethnically different?

Freedom – accountability

As a connectional church and as a church of affiliated agencies and institutions, the United Methodist Church struggles with the issue of autonomy and accountability. To what extent are our institutions free from accountability? To what extent are they totally free from religious identity and tradition, as well as theological and social principles?

As United Methodists we celebrate our diversity and struggle with its realities. It is a goal we have long sought and now that we have reached it we wrestle with how to manage it faithfully. Our major challenge today is how are we to live out our diversity in faithfulness to our historic identity as Methodists? The many issues and tensions most visible seem to be grounded in our diversity as a church. I pray that we will not pull away from our commitment to a diverse church, but that we can find the strength to commit ourselves to love, respect, and affirm one another as members of Christ's body.