

Dr. Gil Rendle, consultant
The Alban Institute
Herndon, Virginia

Let's start with the conclusion. I believe that the state of the United Methodist Church is vibrant, even vibrating. A mix of desire and uncertainty will do that to you. I work increasingly with leaders in churches and middle governing bodies (conferences) across a large number of denominations who deeply want to be faithful and effective. They just aren't sure how to do it. To see change coming is not hard. Many have led through change. It is a task of a different order, however, to provide leadership through a change that also demands that the leaders change.

The United Methodist Church, along with other North American denominations, is in a time of denominational reinvention in which the change is coming from the bottom up—from the local congregational level up through the conference and into the national church. A good number of our churches are “getting it” and are learning to be more effective in talking with the changed culture which seeks faith but can't easily connect with past congregational practices. Another good number of our churches want to be clear about their ministry and are working to learn how to change.

However, a good number of our churches will not be able to make the transition. Some are recalcitrant, some won't work to provide a generational transfer of the faith, and some are below the threshold of change. One of the greatest challenges that lie ahead for our conference and national leaders is the need to focus attention, prayer, and the limited resources of dollars and good leaders in those places and with those people where ministry can thrive—not where ministry has to be propped up and subsidized. If The United Methodist Church truly wants to make disciples for the transformation of the world then our best resources need to be directed to congregations and ministry fields where leaders are learning to actually make disciples.

It is clear that complex institutions are a constituency of constituencies. Whatever the stated public goals, the real agenda of an institution is shaped over time by the constituencies with the most powerful voices. For example, schools have a public agenda focused on the educational needs of students. Over time, however, the non-public agenda that drives established school systems is set by the needs of the teachers and administrators who have dominant voices in their systems. In similar fashion the public agenda of our denomination is set to focus on disciples—people formed by faith and sent out to change the world. The reality is that the more forceful non-public agenda has been set over past decades by the needs of struggling churches, the clergy, the administrators, and the structure of a mature and aging denominational structure. A challenge for leaders today is to refocus prayer, attention, and resources on the public agenda of our church to make disciples and to transform the world.

This is risky business. To make such changes leaders must break the norms of prior and present practice which is making others in our denomination uncomfortable. Where change is taking place lay leaders and clergy in congregations, bishops and district superintendents in conferences, are redefining their roles. This hard work of reshaping leadership roles is a

critical leverage point for denominational change. However, the resulting changes in what can now be expected from leadership prompts resistance to, and at times sabotage of, our best leaders. Courage is now required for leadership and prayerful support is needed from all.

The changes in congregations and conferences that I have observed over recent years are still experimental and experiential. We are working our way through a cultural change that does not have a clear path for all. Spiritual discernment now takes the form of difficult organizational work as leaders seek to be open to the movement of God's Spirit.

Discernment, as in the Exodus, has some days of great clarity when the pillar of fire is before us giving clear direction but in other days, direction disappears and we will need to pitch tent. Legislation is not likely to help either at the general church or the conference level.

Like the IRS code, mainline denominational polity over past decades has grown exponentially across our various denominations with the continual addition of rules, directions, and interpretations.

What is needed is not more rules or stricter adherence to rules but experimentation and learning.

The literature on congregational vitality is getting richer with such experiments, observations, and learnings. Leaders are increasingly sharing their work and their insights across congregational and conference lines. As leaders we are in an enviable time when God is doing something new. There is little to fix and much to learn. There is little to be sure of but much to trust.