

**Bishop Melvin Talbert (retired) executive director
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After conversations with United Methodists across the United States and studying statistics from the General Council on Finance and Administration, I am concerned about the serious decline in church membership in the United States. These statistics are alarming, and they are indicators of what is really happening in our denomination.

I see drastic decline in church schools, with the average attendance continuing to fall. However, who is leading our congregations is just as important.

We do not have people taking seriously what it means to be United Methodist. We are assuming that we don't have to do leadership development and training, we don't need to do teaching, we don't need to do good solid biblical teaching. We seem to be falling short in these developmental areas.

As The United Methodist Church, we have a good theology of balance – the Bible, tradition, experience, and reason. Yet we try to be *other than* who we truly are: United Methodists.

It's time for United Methodists to promote and tell the story of who we are and our ministry because it's one of the best-kept secrets regarding denominations in our day.

We need to be who we say we are – and be faithful to the Gospel as we know it.

I pray that we will have congregations that are alive, vital and growing, and I think the work that is going on now in the Council of Bishops, particularly with the seven vision pathways, provides hope for the congregations.

The Council of Bishops intends to introduce the seven pathways at General Conference 2008 to help the church center on making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The pathways are:

1. Developing new congregations.
2. Teaching the Wesleyan model of forming disciples of Jesus Christ.
3. Strengthening clergy and lay leadership.
4. Reaching and transforming the lives of new generations of children.
5. Eliminating poverty in community with the poor.
6. Expanding our Hispanic/Latino ministries.
7. Transforming existing congregations.

If we can get behind these initiatives, we can do some things together that will turn the denomination around.

**Bishop Daniel C. Arichea, Jr. (retired), the Philippines
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I am concerned that the United States wing of The United Methodist Church has just about given up on the issue of church growth, (this despite the fact that many books and manuals on church growth continue to be published in the United States) and now depends on the central conferences to provide church growth statistics for the church.

This also includes the openness of The United Methodist Church to accept churches outside the USA as bonafide members of The United Methodist Church. I often ask for what purpose is this being done, but of course I know: one main concern is the numbers game. I would rather that the United States wing of The United Methodist Church encourage and work for the self-sufficiency of the churches outside the U.S.A. so that they become real partners in mission.

I fear that some policies and practices of The United Methodist Church tend to lead to continuing and even complete dependency on the part of the central conference churches. I am also concerned that the issue of episcopal financial support is not being more fully addressed. Central conference bishops continue to be paid from the Episcopal Fund, and their salaries are set without consideration of the local situation, e.g. the current support levels of national church workers. I look forward to the day when central conferences take full responsibility for their episcopal leaders.

I am concerned that we in the central conferences have taken advantage of the generosity of the U.S. wing of The United Methodist Church. We continue to multiply the number of central conference delegates to the General Conference, and send delegates to the sessions of the General Conference, all expenses paid by the general church. We also continue to complain about the small percentage of central conference related issues that are considered in the General Conference.

At the same time, we also continue to meddle in issues that are primarily or even strictly American. This is easily done because the General Conference is a forum for the general church, and the American church has no forum that is primarily American, unlike the central conferences where central conference issues are discussed during the quadrennial session of the central conference. There is, indeed, a need for an American forum where U.S. church leaders can discuss the situation of the U.S. church, without undue interference from those who do not belong to the U.S. wing of The United Methodist Church.

There is an element that is positive in this attitude toward the central conferences, and that is, central conferences are accepted and regarded as equal to the American church, thus making the church much more inclusive and more global in its nature. However, I am concerned that there is a seeming contradiction here: while inclusiveness is shown in the full acceptance of central conferences, yet inclusiveness as a characteristic of the faith community is not really exhibited in a consistent manner.

Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the issue of homosexuality, where those with sexual orientations other than heterosexual are treated with disdain and even hatred and

suspicion. I somehow wish that sexual orientation would cease to be a category in the church, in membership, as well as in qualifications for the ordained ministry. I also wish that local churches and annual conferences would cease to designate themselves according to their attitude towards the homosexuality issue. I have a strong belief that this issue of sexual orientation can best be solved by the American church in an American forum rather than in a forum like the General Conference.

I am proud and happy that The United Methodist Church continues to demonstrate its concerns for the social side of the gospel. United Methodist Church leaders continue to speak forcefully on world issues like the Iraq war, global warming, children and poverty, AIDS, etc. I am concerned, however, that The United Methodist Church has not shown an equal concern for evangelism and mission. The number of United Methodist Church missionaries continues to decrease, and in many places they simply are not there. While evangelism is included in the curriculum of most if not all United Methodist Church-related seminaries, the effects of such courses on evangelistic programs of the general church are not at all apparent.