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What stands out about the state of the church?

This question begs a dozen different approaches. The reductionist fallacy is the immediate refuge of critics. One wag in the last century said that the Church of England had been going downhill ever since the bishops stopped wearing buttoned leggings. If the church's current situation was the result of a single issue, a quick turn-around would be possible. Unfortunately that is not the case with The United Methodist Church.

I have always believed that our genius was our ability to organize ourselves for the work of the gospel. We have been institutionalists. One author described our church in the title of a book, *Organized to Beat the Devil*. We have had remarkable accomplishments over the years in world missionary expansion, education, women's rights, civil rights, temperance, and evangelism. These enterprises arose in local churches and were then organized through various agencies of the denomination.

But the church has paid a price for its genius in organization. If one studies the *The Book of Discipline* of the church over the last 120 years, one will observe the growth of copy focused on the organization of the denomination. In the *Methodist Episcopal Discipline* of 1884, printed on very small pages, the chapter on Ministry is 11 percent of the copy while 378 pages are devoted to administration. In the *2004 Book of Discipline*, printed on much larger pages, the chapter on Ministry covers only 10 percent of the copy while administrative and legal chapters require 724 pages.

There is a dramatic change in the ministry chapters in the tone of the writing. In 1884, the chapter is hortatory and exhorting with strongly worded descriptions of how a minister should go about doing the work of the gospel. In more recent times, the ministry chapters tend to be more prescriptive and legalistic reflecting a significant shift toward a kind of professionalism.

And this phenomenon may be recapitulated in conference and local church organization. We have a penchant for internalizing our life at the risk of over-looking the purpose of our life. Most of us United Methodists define ourselves institutionally. Meanwhile, the clarity of the gospel is wrapped up and sometimes obscured in the refined institutional paragraphs of our *Discipline*.

I am an institutionalist. I do not believe that a person can be a Christian in isolation from other believers. The church, however fragile, is the best instrument we have for living out the intentions of God in our world. But somehow we have become fascinated with the means instead of the ends. Paul Tillich used a wonderful metaphor of "transparency." He asserted that Jesus is the Christ simply because he was transparent to the ground of his being. That is, when we see Jesus Christ, we see the source of his being—God.

Is the church of God? Generally, when we see the church, our vision of it tends to be opaque, not transparent. We see structure, regional bias, equity balancing, self-congratulation, and operational procedures.

In our fascination with our internal organs, we have found ourselves unable to speak with clarity and directness to the conscience of our people and of the world. We have left the public discourse on urgent moral issues to various kinds of idolaters—the exploiters, the dominionists, the neo-conservatives, and the bland and careless assumption of political leaders that religion is private and unrelated to any meaningful issue of public life.

We have so organized ourselves that it is almost impossible for us to take strong moral positions on issues, much less taking action. Our responsibility for maintaining the institution has overwhelmed our conviction that the institution has work to do. Who is assuming national leadership in behalf of our people? Who is calling for change in a policy of American military imperialism? Where is the prophetic voice of The United Methodist Church that should echo the voices of McConnell, Oxnam, Crane, Baker, Bosley, and Muelder of an earlier time? It is ironic that a “table” is a metaphor now for denominational decision-making rather than a “pulpit.”

The *Los Angeles Times* reported (February 18, 2007) that a mummified man was found in Southampton, N.Y. He had been dead for a year! He lived alone in a remote area and had apparently died of natural causes as he sat in front of his TV. When the police found him, the TV was still on. Maybe this is a metaphor for our institution. Life is flashing by—great and small events that have profound and accumulating moral consequence—while we are uncomprehending, motionless, and mute.

It is time for a resurrection. As a denomination we need risk-taking leaders. We need institutional transparency. We will then become an attractive church to thousands who long for moral imagination in these terrible times.