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Seen from one point of view, there is not much positive about the state of the church, our United Methodist Church, right now. The night I was ordained in 1972, we had over ten million members. The morning after, we started losing members. While I've been a pastor, we've lost about three million. That's a whole lot of negative news. We are not succeeding in just about every area of measurement of ministry and institutional health. Membership loss continues, along with financial seepage, so once thriving ministries are on the ropes. We are aging away. We're closing more congregations (and need to close thousands more) than planting congregations. Over half of my congregations haven't made a new Christian in the last year, or year before.

It isn't much consolation to point to the failures of others ("The Episcopalians are worse off."). It's all very sad.

At the end of the last Board of Trustees meeting at Emory, I told President Wagner. "As a bishop I sit on twelve (count 'em twelve) boards of trust. I want to thank you for letting me be on Emory's board. This is the sole institution, which I have in trust, that is neither financially bankrupt nor almost bankrupt." That's sad.

When he preached to a new crop of United Methodist pastors at our Conference last year, Bishop James Swanson began his sermon with, "I hope somebody has told you that you are becoming a leader in a troubled, declining organization." Now I'll admit that's not the most upbeat way to start a sermon but if you were around as long as I have been then you would know why the bishop's statement was some consolation. At least we're moving from decades of head-in-the sand denial and uninformed blaming (though the poor IRD who, all evidence to the contrary, still howls that we're losing people because we're too far left—not not because it's true but because it raises funds for the IRD). We're moving from official obfuscation toward a new spirit of honesty. By the grace of God, Bishop Swanson is not alone in admitting: We're in a fix.

Not only are we telling the truth about our malaise, but all over our church, hundreds of pastors and laity are busily searching for the God-given means to do something about it. Renewal is a growth industry among us. Programs like Natural Church Development are springing up all over our church—renewal rising up from creativity at the congregational grass roots rather than top-down episcopal imposition. After thrashing about for a couple of decades, after realizing the lie of the quick fix, a number of congregations in my own Conference are reporting positive, sustained movement forward in making new disciples, growing healthy churches, and reaching out in the name of Christ. Come with me across Alabama and I'll show you some amazing acts of God among some of our churches.

These new initiatives show that we've learned a great deal about church growth and decline, about making disciples and about being the church in the last few years. It's therefore a great time to be a United Methodist. Enough of the hand wringing, denial, and defensiveness! Forget the continued malaise in the General Church, I can show you a couple of dozen unlikely congregations in my conference where God is definitely doing some great new

things. While they are still a minority of our congregations, I believe they are light and salt, yeast and germinating seed for an exciting future.

It's not news that an aging, two centuries old denomination is in decline. What's news, God-given good news, is that God appears to have a purpose for United Methodism even yet. The Holy Spirit refuses to be constrained by our cowardice, our dull, middle class mindset, or even the limitations of bishops. Just as it ignited a priggish little Oxford don named John a long time ago, the Holy Spirit can heat us up, set us on fire even now. We've got in our Wesleyan bones a hankering for New Birth. We were created by God in an ecclesiastical situation that was a great deal more moribund in the eighteenth century than we United Methodists are today.

Our great challenge, as I see it, is not to be more creative, not to put more into snappier advertising, and not to come up with more sure-fire ways to get more members and to grow our finances. The great challenge for us today, in our current state, is the challenge that we've always faced as a church – how to keep up with the radical, constant movements of the Holy Spirit. Our God is a God of life, not death. We've got a God who loves to raise the dead, who works best when all seems lost and the horizon looks bleak.

If the Resurrection is true, as we know it to be, if once defeated and dead Jesus Christ is bodily risen from the dead, as we affirm every week, then we ought not to linger too long in thinking about our sad recent past. We've always got more future with this God than history. We've got longer to serve the Risen Christ and to sing his praise than our last two hundred years as a church. So arise, let us go forth. "State of the Church" sounds much too stable, too staid, and sedate. Let's be true to Methodism -- the Body of Christ in motion.

Our challenge is to keep up with a living God.