

**The Rev. Lisa Withrow, associate professor of congregational studies
Methodist Theological School in Ohio
Delaware, Ohio**

What stands out about the state of the church?

During my parish service and travels in the upper Midwest and the East for field education visitations, I receive snapshots of churches in different social locations, economic settings and racial-ethnic contexts. Some churches are thriving; most are not. Observations indicate that most congregations are attempting to adopt the disciplinary mission of “making disciples for the transformation of the world.” Several responses have been emerging since the Matthew 28 text was moved to the beginning of Part III in the *Discipline* in 2000.

First, congregations who interpret this text as a call to evangelism struggle to know how to evangelize in a post-Christendom world, where ethics of globalization affect jobs, economics, communications, and theological premises (particularly from the global South and East). Latino and African countries along with Korean sisters and brothers send evangelists to the United States now because we have become so secularized.

Second, “making disciples” implies that we Westerners have the answer for the world regarding a meta-narrative for all people about how to be Christian. Some churches function this way (modernist thinking) and some are uncomfortable with decreeing how people should appropriate a universal Christian faith construct. Anyone who has had conversation with Christians outside North America knows that a universal construct is part of a Western colonial mindset. An attempt at keeping universal theology (particularly Christology) is now returning to the U.S.A through the aforementioned countries; universal doctrine, however, no longer exists.

Third, and more practically, denominationalism is under fire. Local churches resent top-down definitions about making disciples. Indeed, churches find themselves being accused of trying to meet apportionments by using the making disciples theme to “get people into the pews to pay the bills.” With the statements from various annual conference leaders that churches will not receive particular appointments without paying apportionments, an unfortunate marriage of the mission and economic anxiety has occurred.

Ultimately, anxiety about the future is driving most local churches, districts, and annual conferences in this region. Rather than focusing on what churches do best, we are focusing on negative changes and entrenchments that economic viability normally brings. In short, the secular model of “success” has a stronghold on the local and regional United Methodist Church.

What are the forces in play, the yearnings and prayers of the people?

Related to the first question is the notion of what makes faith meaningful in an anxious society. Wherever I go, I ask congregations, “What keeps you up at night?” The answers are wonderfully deep and lead right into an “aha” about what the church *could* be doing in its social location. The primary answers are concern for children’s health and education, issues

of violence and the state of the environment, no matter what the theological stances of the congregations. Once people hear themselves name their own concerns, they are amazed at the links they can draw for their ministry.

Within an hour, energy rises and niche ministry possibilities emerge. This response occurs consistently, even cross-denominationally.

In many churches, the attempt to be faithful to denominational and annual conference causes has resulted in missing their own unique calls. I sense a desire to meet unique calls through niche ministries. Then congregations can align themselves with particular Funds for national and global ministries with greater integrity and intention.

What are the trends that best describe current reality?

It is difficult to separate church trends from secular trends because the church works hard to be relevant to the secular world. While relevance is important, it often turns into a capitulation to secular values or desires, such as creating sports complexes, providing a plethora of self-help programs, becoming social agencies, adopting music that sounds like secular radio and holding events that could be held just as easily elsewhere. In the post-Christendom, post-modern world, The United Methodist Church is being left behind because it looks too much like everything else. However, total separation is not the answer either. The popular phrase “being in but not of the world” rings true, but a new twist needs to be added for our era. We need to create a new relevance that does not exist in the current secular society. This relevance will only appeal to those who feel called to move beyond the secular values of success (many are searching for such meaning). The new relevance is an ancient one: radical love of neighbor (see pre-2000 *Discipline* for the mission statement based on the Great Commandment).

What that love looks like changes as society changes. It also changes depending on local context. Some churches are figuring out their niches and this call; disciples are most often “created” or people are transformed when they are shown this radical love rather when they are particularly evangelized.

Emerging churches, evangelical independent churches, and even secular organizations are focusing on issues of poverty and environment. These foci have been present in the mainline for a long time, but they have not been encouraged at a grassroots level so much as through denominational emphases or particular, short-term UMW projects. Teaching about the postmodern world, globalization (which affect farmers, factory workers, and suburbanites with middle and upper management jobs alike) give congregations the “current reality” contexts from which they can pursue their niche ministries.

What are the strategies and ministry that are most promising?

I have outlined some ideas above. The churches that are living into effective ministries have dispensed with long mission-writing endeavors, church-growth packages, and top-down direction. They are answering their particular calls, sometimes in neighborhood church networks with several niches represented for a holistic picture, and looking for the

denomination to resource them in ways that create a new relevance and radical love to transform the world.

Note: There is a discussion of deacon's orders and creative ministries that work with this kind of thinking that can emerge from this paper.