



## GENERAL BOARD OF **Higher Education & Ministry**<sup>®</sup>

# Why Vital Congregations Need a Denomination

## Preparing for General Conference 2012

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I serve as a district superintendent, giving oversight to 69 congregations, all within the region of Appalachia. Previously, I was a local church pastor for 28 years, the last eight at a large regional urban church. Simultaneously, I have served for the last four years as a vice president of one of our general boards (Higher Education and Ministry), chairing the ordained ministry division. I often sense that I have a foot in two different worlds.

I am also immersed in the movement toward the upcoming General Conference, and I am conversant with the legislation related to the *Call to Action*. I resonate with much of the *Call to Action (CTA)*: the redirection of the flow of energy, the need for turnaround leaders, especially clergy, and the equipping of the laity. The weakness of the *CTA* is the identification of drivers of vital congregations; for example, among 16 key drivers one notices a glaring absence of missional engagement with the community and world. The research was clearly shaped by the assumptions of a more "attractional" model of congregational effectiveness, and the outcomes flow from the questions that were asked.

With many of our leaders I hear the call to increase the number of vital congregations. But in a time of scarce resources, a question logically follows: why do vital congregations need a denomination? A United Methodist would acknowledge our traditions of episcopacy and superintendency; here the provision of the Restrictive Rules provide guidance and coherence in support of itineracy. But apart from structure, most United Methodist leaders see a bigger picture. A denomination works out the implications of a missional strategy that is more nuanced than simply whatever the market can bear, or how vital the congregational presence is in a given locale.

I love the local church. It is the basic context for the mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world. At the same time, the local church will, on occasion, be stronger as it

accomplishes mission that is beyond its own capacity, and as it is accountable to a wisdom that is outside its own day-to-day movements. Here the analogy of Ronald Heifetz (in *Leadership Without Easy Answers*) of the dance and the balcony is helpful. Faithful congregations and clergy are engaged in the dance, the daily and weekly movements that, added together, shape parish life: worship, spiritual formation, pastoral care, local and global outreach, evangelism.

A balcony perspective, in times of health and in times of crisis, will help the local church to sustain this activity. The absence of such a balcony perspective, in particular circumstances, can lead to chaos and a constricting of the movement of energy. A denomination, at its best, provides that balcony perspective: a person in authority (such as a bishop or superintendent) who can intervene in a season of conflict, or a compelling and needed mission that can lift the vision of a community beyond itself.

This balcony perspective is related to an important word for us: the *connection*. The connection makes possible many of the larger initiatives that transform the world. The connection is only as strong as the vital congregations that sustain it; at the same time, the connection carries many of the signature initiatives that are at the heart of our identity.

Most United Methodist leaders have a short list of connectional initiatives that they would describe as essential. For the sake of the conversation, let me mention two: Africa University and Imagine No Malaria. At their core, these initiatives are about education and health. They are strategic interventions with children, youth, and young adults. They have engaged leaders across the connection, and they are examples of collaborative leadership across general boards and annual conferences.

Africa University and Imagine No Malaria are a response to human need, to the aspirations of young people who want access to a higher education and parents whose children's lives are threatened by disease. But there are also deeper implications: in our Wesleyan DNA we remember that John Wesley was both an educator and an amateur pharmacist. The mission, from the beginning, was a network of schools and clinics, class meetings and field preaching, conferences and publications. It remains so today.

I have invested my life in leadership with the local church. By any measure and by God's grace, these congregations across 28 years have been vital. But my United Methodist identity also claims an essential place for the connection. At General Conference we will hear an urgent call to redirect the flow of energy to vital congregations. I would alter the language slightly in this way: we must redirect the flow of energy *through* the local church to the mission of God.

Vital congregations must be full partners with our general boards and agencies; there are positive signs of this across the connection, such as the work of Ginghamburg Church with UMCOR and the Sudan, and in the future this must become normative.

Yes, we must increase the number of vital congregations, but we must also think clearly and carefully about the connectional leadership that is required to sustain initiatives such as the Black College Fund, Rethink Church, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the sending of missionaries, and the education of clergy leadership. And this is just a beginning.

Vital congregations have exceptional leaders who should be engaged in this work, but they are, by design, more often participants in the dance. At our best, United Methodists have our feet in two worlds, moving from the dance to the balcony, from the local to the global and back again. At the 2012 General Conference, I am praying for a way forward that increases the number of vital congregations; and, at the same time, for a stronger connection that leads us more fully into the mission of God.



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