

Occasional Papers

PREPARING A NEW GENERATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERS

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United Methodism in a World Context: Navigating the Local and the Global

Janice Love

Understanding the implications of international dimensions of The United Methodist Church requires an examination of a number of contexts within which we are situated. We will be able to address more creatively and conscientiously some complex challenges that face our church if we strive to get a better analytic grasp of trends in the world, in Christianity—including worldwide Methodism—and within our particular denominational family.

Most importantly, when we seek to understand the world around us more clearly, we fulfill our basic mission more effectively. The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* (§121) reminds us that our mission “is to make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God’s grace and by exemplifying Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world.”

This paper will address briefly the following contexts that I believe are significant: the dual tendencies of globalization and localism; the positive and negative dimensions of both; The United Methodist Church as part of a wider Methodist and Christian family; the role of the United States in the world; several sensitive topics I call “the elephants in the room”; and some questions that remain.

I speak out of my own personal contexts, which include being a lifelong United Methodist from the Southeastern Jurisdiction, an academic specializing in world politics for most of my professional career, an ecumenist with more than thirty years of involvement with local, national, and global ecumenism, and a citizen of the United States who has traveled to and experienced Christian communities in more than forty countries. I relished being directly involved in the governance of the World Council of Churches for twenty-three years, just as I love my local congregation—Wesley United Methodist Church—back home in Columbia, South Carolina. Most recently I have observed and participated in the church from the perspective of

being the chief executive of a historic women's mission organization deeply immersed in partnerships for participating in God's work of mercy and justice across the world. However, this paper does not represent in any way an official position of the Women's Division or of the General Board of Global Ministries.

Because of the contexts that shape my thinking, I am delighted that you have asked two United Methodists from outside the United States to respond to my remarks. I do not pretend to grasp fully all the dimensions of these issues or to have many answers, if any. Dialogue across our national and cultural contexts will improve our ability as a whole church and as a family of Methodists to address these challenges.

Globalization and Localism

Some of us are old enough to remember a renowned Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, who once declared, "All politics is local." His point was that the problems and concerns of towns and cities around the United States affect the actions of their representatives in the nation's capitol, and help determine whether or not they get reelected.

If he were alive today, O'Neill might declare that all politics is global because of the powerful impact of globalization. The reality, however, is that all politics is now both local and global. Two major trends are at work in our world. First are the processes drawing people and places more closely together, blurring boundaries and leaping over barriers. Second are the processes separating people and places from one another, heightening boundaries and barriers between people who try to distinguish their piece of the world or their identity from that of others. The term *globalization* has come to be the most widely used concept to describe the first set of trends. The term *localization*, or *localism*, describes the second set of trends.

These patterns and tendencies that seem so contradictory frequently interact to reinforce and even to shape each other. Often they coexist in particular places and may or may not be opposed to each other. Furthermore, both can be seen as having positive or negative consequences, depending on the values of the viewer.

First let us look at globalization. The term has become a key buzzword. Its widespread use began in the 1980s, with its popularity soaring in the 1990s. As with any unfolding concept its meaning varied considerably with almost every analyst who used it across more than two decades. Some derided the term; others embraced it.

Along with many others, I take the perspective that globalization is a *process* occurring across the world. It accelerated significantly in the late twentieth century. To claim that globalization is a process is to reject earlier assertions that defined globalization as an *outcome* or an end-state that the whole world would reach at a given point in time. Many debates continue about globalization and the utility of the term, but we do not have time to delve into these.

The definition I use is provided by Anthony Giddens. He states that globalization is "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa."¹ In other words, culture, politics, economics, migration, and other activities are stretched across national boundaries such that "events and decisions taking place on one side of the world have a significant impact on the other."² What seems to be local may be very global and what we presume to be global may be at the same time very local.

This definition has several advantages. It leaves open for investigation the possibility that the concept of globalization may be applicable to more than one time period in history, which I believe it clearly is. The definition also allows for globalization to be viewed as multifaceted, and either positive or negative in its consequences. Globalization, however, is not the only important trend with which we cope these days.

At the same time that globalizing forces seem to bind people and societies together across vast geographic distances (for good or ill), other powerful forces seem to be separating people from one another, fragmenting the world into smaller, decentralized social units. James Rosenau describes this seemingly countervailing trend as follows: “[L]ocalization derives from all those pressures that lead people, groups, societies, governments, institutions, and transnational organizations to narrow their horizons and withdraw to less encompassing processes, organizations, or systems.”³

If globalization generates transcontinental relations, then localization concentrates activities and relationships much closer to home—within subnational or national arenas. Globalization encourages similarity and uniformity among people, groups, and social systems, while localism⁴ fosters differences. Localism separates “us” from “them,” while globalization seeks to put “us” together with “them” to create a combined “we.” Globalization expresses the human desire and need to expand our horizons to take in goods, services, and ideas unavailable to us at home, while localization embodies the human need for close community, like that of family, neighborhood, or culture. Just as globalization can have negative consequences, like imperialism, so localization can be manifest in harmful tendencies, like xenophobia. Both have positive potential too.

Some examples of localism are efforts to prevent the movement of goods and services into a particular area, as with protectionist trade policies; or the resurgence of previously suppressed cultural practices, such as the French debate about whether or not Muslim women should be allowed to wear headscarves.

Globalizing trends often produce localizing reactions. For example, news media brought home to people all over the world the pictures and stories of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and voters lined up for miles for the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. Both events inspired those seeking democracy in other parts of the world where dictators expected to reign for years; and both events helped spread the worldwide movement for more national democratic systems.

On the other hand, globalization also often subverts localizing trends. For example, governments like that of Iran that try to eliminate their citizens’ access to cultural influences from abroad find themselves undermined by satellites, computers, and other technology that beam in music, commentary, or images from afar. Or those who promote the local often take advantage of the infrastructure of globalization. For example, xenophobic leaders attempting to mobilize one ethnic group to fight another might use the technology of mass communications, as was the case in the Rwandan genocide.

Globalization and localization have interacted, sometimes at odds, sometimes synergistically, throughout much of human history. In contrast to previous periods in history, today’s world represents far greater degrees of globalization. Yet localization in many forms also remains prominent, as people, societies, and governments attempt to hold fast to what is close to home.

Positive and Negative Dimensions of Globalization and Localism

Globalization and localism have both positive and negative dimensions. The phrase *global village*, for example, invokes our high calling to care for all the human beings in the world as though they lived right next door to us. On the other hand, the phrase *global pillage* represents the reaction many people have when their place in the world comes under the domination or control of a distant government, corporation, or other institution trying to increase its profits, often at the expense of the people in that particular place. For example, some parts of Africa have experienced global pillage through what is called “resource wars”; that is, armed conflicts over precious minerals. Ask the victims of these wars what they think of the global gold or diamond industries, as well as the local warlords, all of whom profit from these conflicts.

Many neighborhoods and cities appropriately take great pride in cultivating and displaying their historic identity and cultural heritage—a positive side of localism. However, when such efforts lead them to shut out immigrants or people ethnically different from themselves, this becomes a negative dimension of localization.

Therefore, neither globalization nor localism is inherently good or bad. Either can be toxic and ruthless. Each can also be life giving and merciful. Sometimes they are clearly a mix. As a church, we should be careful about incorporating either of these words into a goal or a vision statement. Such incorporation usually assumes or implies a positive connotation and can be confusing. Our job as Christians is to ensure that the processes of globalization and localism work for the good of all. In this, of course, lie some of the great challenges of our day.

Some illustrations from The United Methodist Church will help to demonstrate these concepts. Globalization is when large numbers of Methodist Koreans migrate to a U.S. city. Localization is when a local United Methodist church decides to share its facilities with the Korean-speaking Methodists who need a place to worship and form Christian community, thereby redefining the basic identity of this particular local congregation. Both of these are positive developments.

Globalization is when the 2004 General Conference moved at an unprecedented speed to admit the Methodist Church of Côte d’Ivoire into The United Methodist Church. Localization is when the same General Conference decided not to apply the formula that applies to all the other delegations to determine the 2008 allocation of delegate seats to these new United Methodists. This illustration contains both positive and negative dimensions.

The United Methodist Church in the Context of World Methodism and World Christianity

Most churches founded in or with a long history in the United States continue to be identified as United States churches. A few Protestant denominations with national origins in the United States now have incorporated churches in other parts of the world into their organizational life, but most have chosen not to or would never consider it. Whether or not they organizationally integrate churches from other countries into their operations at the national and world levels, these churches all continue to bear the cultural, political, economic, and other identifying marks of being American.

Some models of how churches organize themselves will help to illustrate this point. The following list is not exhaustive or definitive but helps to put our church and our aspirations, whatever those are, in perspective.

1. Some of the churches headquartered in the United States that incorporate churches outside of the United States are: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Episcopal Church USA, and our own church, The United Methodist Church. All of these have the vast majority of their members in the United States.
2. A number of Protestant denominations with national origins in the United States have consistently chosen to enter into close relationships—even covenants—with churches overseas; but they do not incorporate these churches organizationally into the institution of the U.S.-based church. Some illustrations are the American Baptist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ.
3. Just for the sake of comparison, some illustrations of churches with headquarters and large majority memberships outside the United States that have congregations inside the country are: the Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Korean Methodist Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.
4. Of course, a genuinely global church is the Roman Catholic Church. No one region or country dominates Roman Catholic Church membership or governance. Examples of other genuinely global confessional bodies that do not claim ecclesial status as formal churches but that attempt to provide worldwide arenas for mutual cooperation and challenge are the World Methodist Council, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The vast majority of churches across the world have their formal membership and their church governance contained within their national borders. They reach out across the world in mission; but for purposes of membership and governance, they stay within their national borders.

From the global and ecumenical perspective of the wider Christian community, the churches in the first category, such as The United Methodist Church (i.e., churches with some members outside the United States but with the vast majority of members inside), are considered basically to be United States churches. Many in The United Methodist Church may *want* our church to be understood and perceived as a global church. The reality is that in the eyes of the rest of the world, particularly the Christian world, we are not. Indeed, as I have contended elsewhere,⁵ I do not believe The United Methodist Church is a global church now, nor will it be in coming decades if judged by any number of characteristics. This is a simple statement of fact, without negative or positive connotation.

Demographic data demonstrates why The United Methodist Church is not global. The following numbers are from 2001 and thus are a bit old, perhaps inaccurate in some of the finer details. (Most statistics on religious memberships lack accuracy in their details. More recent data exists for The United Methodist Church, especially in the United States, but not for Methodists worldwide. I have chosen to use one source for all the numbers for consistency of comparison, with one exception). These numbers are collected by the World Methodist Council, which is preparing an update to be published next year. Whether or not they get every detail right, the numbers here serve well the purpose of demonstrating where Methodists and United Methodists are in the world. The World Methodist Council reports that there are about 369 churches with Wesleyan roots in 135 countries.

Methodist Membership across the World

| | Methodists | UMC | Percent UMC in region* | Percent region in UMC** |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Africa | 8,167,484 ⁶ | 2,854,593 | 35 | 25 |
| Asia | 9,898,336 | 295,639 | 3 | 2.6 |
| Central America and the Caribbean | 501,684 | 10,000 | 2 | .09 |
| Europe | 511,570 | 109,996 | 22 | 1 |
| Middle East | 25,463 | 0 | | |
| North America | 16,363,862 | 8,249,579 | 50 | 72 |
| Pacific | 1,530,303 | 0 | | |
| South America | 1,145,996 | 0 | | |
| Total | 38,444,698 | 11,519,807 | | |

Source: World Methodist Council, *Handbook of Information*, 2002-2006, rev. ed., 2003.

* The percentage of Methodists in the region who are members of The United Methodist Church, e.g., 35 percent of all African Methodists are United Methodist.

** The percentage of members of The United Methodist Church who are from this region, e.g. 25 percent of all United Methodists are Africans.

There are more than two billion Christians in the world. About 20 percent of these are Protestants. If we compared our church systematically to these larger categories, we would get an even better sense of our particular, fairly small place in the world.

From the point of view of geographic dispersion, The United Methodist Church can best be described as a church with the vast majority of our members in the United States, a substantial minority (about 25 percent) in Africa, and small presence in a few other regions. We are not global. This is simply the reality of who we are. As a church, we clearly have a vision of a global presence and worldwide impact. This is as it should be. We are Wesleyan, after all, and the world is our parish! But based on membership, we are not a global church and are not likely to become one in the decades to come. This does not imply any failure to measure up to some ideal; nor does it point to any resounding success on our part. It is simply a statement of fact.

Yet we spend a lot of time and energy talking about and aspiring to be a global church. When these conversations happen, I am never quite sure what people mean by the phrase *global church*. I believe we could productively spend a great deal more time conferencing about a vision of being a church determined to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed across the whole world, as our denominational mission statement charges us to do, rather than literally striving to become from the point of view of membership and organization a global church. I believe framing the discussion differently would perhaps allow us to imagine possibilities of faithful witness in new ways.

Some Implications of Being a Historically U.S.-based Church

When we discuss the global context in which we find ourselves as a church, we cannot escape discussing the United States' role in the world, since the vast majority of our members live in the United States. Even those United Methodist citizens of other nations at times inevitably feel

the impact of the church being predominantly American.⁷ Those of us who are U.S. citizens need to speak openly and frankly with one another as well as with those from other countries about the influence of our nation on others.

When I taught courses in political science, I regularly prodded my students to recall some of the inspired words of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution, like:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among [people], deriving their just power from the consent of the governed . . .

Although very imperfectly implemented at the time, these words, the Constitution that built upon them, and the Enlightenment philosophy that motivated their authors launched one of the most powerful and persuasive experiments in human history—an experiment that eventually expanded civil and political rights to virtually all people within U.S. borders. There is considerable room for improvement in this still unfolding project of government by and for the people. Nonetheless, yearning to gain greater control over the decisions that affect their daily lives, women and men the world over have drunk deeply from the inspiration American democracy provides.

The downside comes in the claim by many in the United States that our exceptional opportunity to forge a democracy from the eighteenth century onward made us God’s new “chosen people.” Historians like Karen Armstrong⁸ remind us of this triumphalistic paradox that on occasion infuses our democratic heritage. Those of us who are American are genuinely grateful for and take pride in the rich blessings of our nation. However, sometimes such pride gets steeped in a chauvinistic sense of superiority. Chauvinism, coupled with our political, economic, and military might, at times has led our country to dominate others across the world and to impose our government’s will on them whether they agree or not. Even though “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” Americans frequently act as though we know best what people in others countries need and want.

For example, the nineteenth-century doctrine of Manifest Destiny undergirded the conquest of Native peoples living on the “frontier” of the American continent and gave early evidence of deadly dimensions in the unfolding story of creating these United States, a reality that slaves imported from Africa had already experienced for two centuries. Farther away, our country’s early imperial excursions into or occupations of a number of other territories, including the Philippines, Cuba, and parts of Central and South America, had similar justifications. During the Cold War, the U.S. government or its proxies frequently intervened militarily in places like Greece, Iran, Vietnam, the Congo, and Central and South America. These forays continued to demonstrate some consistency in the potency of the country’s negative reach, the legacy of which too often has been the death of large numbers of people and/or the subsequent imposition of harsh dictatorships that crushed fragile indigenous movements toward democracy.

In contrast, the generosity and inspiration of the American democratic tradition, coupled with the international exercise of our economic and military power, displayed themselves with impressive success in fewer instances. Some of the most notable are the reconstruction of Japan and Germany at the end of World War II and more generally our postwar support for rebuilding powerful democratic traditions in Western Europe.

Interestingly, when trying to convince its citizens to go to war against Iraq and to occupy the country, U.S. government officials and others invoked the historical precedents of nation building in Japan and Germany. These success stories were lifted up, not the stories of Iran in the 1950s, Vietnam and the Congo in the 1960s, or many illustrations in Latin America across decades of the twentieth century—almost all of these being widely considered to be failures of attempted nation building.

These brief, broad generalizations mask important specific details of history. The particular causes of the numerous discrete episodes of direct or indirect U.S. military intervention vary across more than a century, as does the U.S. citizens' tolerance for them. However, the U.S. government's explanations for this “superpower obligation” or “imperial reach” have remained remarkably consistent. In the face of real or perceived threats to our national security, the U.S. government has chosen repeatedly to use the *means* of violence and domination in pursuit of what is often claimed to be the *ends* of freedom and peace abroad. The results at best are mixed and at worst constitute a betrayal of the fundamental principles we hold so dear.

In the telling of our national story, we who are American naturally like to dwell on the genuinely remarkable moments when we made profound and lasting contributions to the possibilities of democracy, peace, and justice across the world. Just as naturally, we frequently forget or remember selectively the difficult and deadly encounters that many people across the globe have had with our nation. Friends and foes alike in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and elsewhere often recount our history of international relations better than we do because many of their societies have been on the receiving end of blunt and violent instruments of our country's power. Obviously American democracy needs those of us who believe in the values of freedom, justice, shared power, and the right of people to determine their own futures to live and uphold such dreams and visions more authentically and clearly at home and abroad.

For those of us who are citizens of one of the most democratic countries on earth, as well as the most powerful, how do we ensure more positive and less negative outcomes from the American traditions that help to shape our lives? How can United Methodists from other nations help us see ourselves more clearly? What picture would non-United Methodist Christians paint of our presence in the world? How can people of other faith traditions help those of us who are Christian (and United Methodist) citizens of the United States understand the powerfully positive potential of our heritage rather than the ruthless and dangerous aspects of our power in the world?

More to the point here: What are the implications of this political, economic, and military secular reality on our church, the institution that I have described as a U.S.-based church? For example, we might ask members of The United Methodist Church from the United States: Does the global domination of our country in secular arenas lead us to hope for a vision of The United Methodist Church's global domination among all Methodists in the world? Might it be an easy and natural goal to which we aspire? Is this what we mean by the global nature of The United Methodist Church? If that is not what we mean, then the World Methodist Council should probably be playing a far greater role in the life of The United Methodist Church than it presently does.

Do the smallest of the United Methodist churches located in Asia, Central America, and Europe find formal integration with a rich, powerful church based in a rich, powerful country more inviting than being one of many (and perhaps one of the smaller) independent churches with a national or regional base? Do we United Methodists in the United States, in turn, relish

the opportunity to reward these churches' determination to be "free" from the institutions, like some state churches in Europe, that dominate religious life in their nations?

What about the twenty-seven million Methodists who are not United Methodists? Do sizable numbers of Methodists who are not United Methodists in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific receive less attention (i.e., partnership possibilities, time, money, exchange of points of view) from us as a United Methodist Church because they are institutionally separated from us?

Moreover, issues of power, control, and justice inevitably arise when people and institutions with more money attempt to form partnerships and/or Christian community with those who have less money. These complex issues can be addressed with more or less honesty and integrity. The integrity and honesty with which we address them is *not* dependent on being institutionally integrated. That is, the integrity of The United Methodist Church's relationship to the Methodist Church of Bolivia or Argentina or Brazil does *not* depend on our being organizationally independent of one another. By the same token, the integrity of the relationship between The United Methodist Church in the United States and The United Methodist Church in the Philippines does not depend on us all being members of the same church. Issues of power, control, and justice must be addressed whether or not we are organizationally integrated into the same institutionalized expression of the church.

From a practical point of view, one of the most pressing issues has to do with how members of the U.S.-United Methodist Church treat non-English speaking United Methodists in the formal conduct of our meetings. Those of us from the United States do not routinely and conscientiously organize our meetings as though we genuinely expect careful scrutiny of the denomination's work by members or delegates from outside the United States, especially those who are not fluent in English.

In contrast, although they do not always succeed, genuinely global institutions seek more carefully to capture the participation of all delegates, representatives, or members of a board of directors. Such organizations usually determine how many working languages they will support and then pay for all the services necessary in those languages. For example, the World Council of Churches has five working languages. All the major documents, plenary presentations, drafts of reports, and other basic materials are translated into all five working languages. Moreover, simultaneous translation by professional interpreters is provided in these languages. Those presiding deliberately try to keep the rhythm of the business at a somewhat slower pace that matches the need for translation, often pausing between speakers so that interpreters can catch up. This makes a global gathering function more appropriately as a meeting of hearts and minds across differences of language and culture.

In contrast, because many of our meetings are held in the United States, we in The United Methodist Church frequently forget to ensure that such services are provided. Moreover, we get shocked at how expensive they are! I must admit that I get angry when I see or hear calls for *volunteers* to provide *last-minute* help in translation for United Methodist Church meetings. If we from the United States really want to know how United Methodists from outside the United States deliberate on important matters of faith in church meetings, we should treat them as partners, not decorative guests who receive badly organized, half-hearted consideration in deliberations about the serious business at hand. But does our denomination really want to assume this responsibility and the costs for such inclusiveness?

The Elephants in the Room

I know that I have already “gone to meddling,” as we Southerners sometimes say. Again, my intention is simply to raise important questions that are sometimes tough to tackle. I want to point out two more that are particularly difficult. I raise them at the risk of being misunderstood or misquoted. I hope I am not. My goal is to bring out in the open for careful and compassionate consideration some issues that many United Methodists speak about in the hallways and across meals. We have a name for these. They are the “elephants in the room” because they loom large, but no one wants to risk dealing with them openly.

I regularly speak to United Methodists all over the country. During one discussion, I reported on the decline in membership for United Methodist Women. Our statistics demonstrate the same trends overall as those of the United States portion of The United Methodist Church, i.e., the numbers are going down.

I indicated to this group that we in the Women’s Division had launched several initiatives to try to stem the tide—or, better yet, to reverse the trends. We eagerly seek to cultivate new members. In response one man sympathetic to United Methodist Women tried to comfort me. “Don’t worry. There’s a solution to your problem. Just count all the women in the new million-member United Methodist Church of Côte d’Ivoire as new members of United Methodist Women,” he said. “That will make your statistics look so much better.”

These remarks saddened and to some degree distressed me. They suggest a superficial way of understanding membership in United Methodist Women and in The United Methodist Church. I explained to this supporter that, although we work closely with women in central conferences of our church, both women in the United States and those in central conferences have expressed strong preferences for not being institutionally integrated into one, large, churchwide women’s mission organization. Almost all women’s organizations in the Methodist tradition across the world are organized nationally. We like it that way, particularly because issues related to women and children are so culturally conditioned. Our separate organizational diversities are a great gift to us all. We find more productive relationships with one another when we do not try to forge one set of rules and regulations for governing ourselves in a single institutional embodiment across the vastly different cultural experiences women encounter. Moreover, the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women brings us all together periodically to meet as a whole.

The point here, however, is not really about United Methodist Women, the Women’s Division, or our partnerships in mission with women across the world. Rather, the point is about the perspective of U.S. members of The United Methodist Church and our possible reasons for wanting to expand our church outside the United States. A great deal of attention has been focused on declining membership and eroding budgets for so-called mainline churches in the United States. Are members of the U.S.-United Methodist Church tired of dealing with institutional decline within our country and thus have become eager to incorporate independent Methodists in other countries? If we are not doing very well in the aggregate at attracting more members in the United States—even though the population of our country and the openness to religious attachments here are growing—should we compensate by attracting more members outside our country? Moreover, is numerical growth the best or only way to measure success in mission and evangelism?

The second elephant in our midst I want to point out relates to claims about cultivating a voting bloc of Africans on contentious issues in the church. You are probably familiar with The

Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD). The IRD has become famous over the past twenty years for its clever media and political work. IRD's mission statement says that it seeks to reform the churches, with emphasis on three particular ones: Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and United Methodists. These denominations need reform, the statement says, because

*particularly in the historic “mainline” Protestant denominations, but also in other churches, many leaders and institutions have lost their focus on the gospel, the basis of their existence. They have turned toward political agendas mandated neither by Scripture nor Christian tradition. They have thrown themselves into multiple, often leftist crusades—radical forms of feminism, environmentalism, pacifism, multi-culturalism, revolutionary socialism, sexual liberation and so forth.*⁹

Do you see yourself in this picture, you leaders of The United Methodist Church who govern the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry? Does this caricature resemble the leaders with whom you work? I don't see myself or other United Methodist leaders in this derisive description; but it helps us all understand the work of the IRD.

In a 2004 article entitled “Light from the Dark Continent,” in *Touchstone* magazine, IRD staff person and United Methodist layman Mark Tooley wrote that African General Conference delegates' “orthodoxy” steadied our church by voting essentially as a bloc in 2004 on two key sets of issues: matters related to homosexuality and conservative candidates for the Judicial Council. He welcomes the entry of the “one-million-member Methodist Church of the Ivory Coast” into The United Methodist Church because it will enlarge the non-U.S. component of the voting delegates to nearly 30 percent, thereby saving the church from the so-called unfaithful voting tendencies of delegates from the United States.¹⁰

Cynthia B. Astle, the former editor of the *United Methodist Reporter* and a journalist not associated with any deeply partisan cause like IRD, wrote in a recent article for *United Methodist NeXus*:

*Another significant factor in General Conference politics has been the growth of international delegates' participation in General Conference. . . . Most influential within this constituency has been the increasing alliance between conservative Americans and conservative Africans.*¹¹

Astle claims that this will be “a key voting bloc to watch” in the next General Conference, forged in part by funding for some African delegates' personal needs from “like-minded annual conferences, large congregations and special interest groups.”

These are very strong, contentious claims made by, on the one hand, a writer promoting a special interest group and, on the other hand, a more dispassionate journalist. I do not believe the basic issue here has much of anything to do with homosexuality. Rather, these articles suggest a potentially intentional and counterproductive politicization of our church's geographic differences and an “us versus them” mentality that has nothing to do with the substance of any issue.

I have studied and written about various parts of Africa for much of my academic career. I have not witnessed a reference to “the dark continent,” as Mr. Tooley uses the phrase, for some decades, and then only by those who openly claimed that the former white colonial control over Africans was a good idea. I am surprised that someone who expresses pride in claiming Africans as allies would allow this title to be used for an article.

Moreover, I have never known Africans as a group to be all of one mind on any issue. Africans are no more mindlessly manipulated for political purposes than are Americans, Europeans, Asians, Latin Americans, or anyone else. Like any other region of the world, Africa is a complex continent of many countries, with multidimensional social, political, and economic realities. Church politics inside and across the various nations of the world can measure up to the standards to which Christ calls us, or not. When we fall short, the failures are usually ones of principles and ethics held by individuals and not by nationalities, cultures, or other group characteristics.

Whatever the truth of these writers' claims, they demonstrate most vividly that we desperately need to get to know one another better as individuals, as people of various cultures and nationalities, and, most important, as people who all claim salvation through Jesus Christ in the Methodist tradition.

Conclusion

In preparation for this presentation, I enjoyed reading several documents sent to me by staff of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. In March of this year you adopted a statement of your mission, vision, core values, and goals that charts a faithful course for your future. The language is eloquent at points and demonstrates careful, hard work. You should be proud of this accomplishment. Every board and agency should be so clearly focused!

I also read the document "Introducing the Methodist Global Education Fund," which presents an exciting opportunity for leadership development. Again, I congratulate you on your strategic vision!

However, I want to ask you some questions that one part of the Methodist Global Education Fund (MGEF)¹² document raises for me. Under the vision, you indicate that the MGEF will "be the catalyst for transforming the UMC into a global church." I have indicated in this presentation some of what I think this phrase means and does not mean. What do you mean by it?

Do you mean that you intend to help transform this denomination called The United Methodist Church into a genuinely global organization with members drawn in roughly equal proportion from virtually every continent, like the Roman Catholic Church? Do you mean that you want to expand the membership of The United Methodist Church primarily by folding other Methodist churches and other churches in the Wesleyan tradition across the world into this denomination? If this is what you mean, I hope that my contribution will provide some food for thought and some new analytic insights to probe the various implications of such a project.

Or do you mean that you will partner with any and all other churches and institutions of the Wesleyan or Methodist tradition to ensure future generations of leaders with "intellectual excellence, moral integrity, spiritual courage, and holiness of heart and life"? This last phrase, of course, is a wonderful quote from your board's vision statement. If this is what you mean, I can only applaud and encourage you. It is a grand, inspiring dream that through your leadership and God's help can become a reality. If, however, you mean to confine yourself to The United Methodist Church when you say "global," you are leaving out the majority of Methodists in the world, all of whom are also very important to higher education.

Or do you mean that you will serve The United Methodist Church and the wider global Methodist confessional family to "generate a new generation who will inspire and transform people of the world," to borrow another phrase from your documents; or, to use another one, to transform "the world by spreading the gospel and making disciples of Jesus Christ"? If so, then

lead on! The world and the Christian family desperately need such transformation. With God's help in such an endeavor, you could transform not only The United Methodist Church but also the entire global Methodist movement—indeed perhaps the whole world.

Notes

1. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 64.
2. David Held, ed., *A Globalizing World? Culture, Economics, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 15.
3. James N. Rosenau, *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance In a Turbulent World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81.
4. For ease of reading and discussion, I use the word *localism* interchangeably with *localization*, as they are in much of the literature.
5. "Is United Methodism a World Church?," in Dennis Campbell, et. al., eds., *Questions for the 21st Century Church. United Methodism and American Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 4: 258-70. For an excellent overview of how The United Methodist Church came to have its current geographic configuration, see Bruce W. Robbins, *A World Parish? Hope and Challenges of The United Methodist Church in a Global Setting* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).
6. I have changed the numbers for one church on the World Methodist Council's list, namely, the Protestant Methodist Church of Côte d'Ivoire, from 1.4 million to 678,243 to reflect the church's most recently published count.
7. Local church members in any country outside the United States (e.g., Mozambique, the Philippines, or Sweden) may not experience their congregations as being typically "American." In the same way, members of local congregations in South Carolina, Indiana, or other parts of the United States may not understand themselves to be organizationally integrated with United Methodists in Africa, Asia, or Europe. Much of the administration and governance of all United Methodist congregations in any country, however, is wedded to institutional structures that are culturally and organizationally identifiable as American, whether members at the local level experience this or not.
8. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).
9. "Mission Statement," The Institute on Religion and Democracy; online at <http://www.ird-renew.org/site/pp.asp?c=fvKVLfMVISG&b=278604>.
10. "Light from the Dark Continent," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (September 2004); online at <http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=17-07-062-r>.
11. "Religion & Politics II: The 'Mokita' of General Conference," *United Methodist NeXus*, 2006; online at <http://www.umnexus.org/context.php?Article=166>.
12. This fund has since been renamed as "The Methodist Global Education Fund for Leadership Development."

Responses from the Central Conferences

Almeida Lemba

Pastor, Igreja Metodista Unida, Luanda, Angola

It is a challenge for someone like me—an African United Methodist pastor for about ten years, raised amid a situation of civil war in a Portuguese-speaking country—to respond to a lecture by an academic and someone who has spoken on a variety of topics for more than three decades, a fellow United Methodist who knows about the Christian experience in more than forty countries and who is a citizen of the most powerful country in the world today. Yet, despite our different backgrounds, I was asked to respond to a lecture that deals with an issue that affects United Methodists living in this one world where one cannot touch a flower without disturbing a star in the sky.

Let me make brief comments about some key points the lecture raises with reference to the mission of The United Methodist Church to make disciples of Jesus in the world.

First, by *global church* I understand the one church that integrates everybody—it is everybody's church. Such unity does not imply uniformity in all details of the church's service to the world. This is true even for the Roman Catholic Church, which Dr. Love takes as an example of a real global church. Maybe it is true that General Conference and our board meetings are organized in an American way; but I do not see typically American cultural and political emphases in the worship and administration of the church in our central conferences. Given that the leadership in the central conferences is local, with few if any missionaries, people do not feel they belong to an American church. And people feel as United Methodist in those conferences as you feel here. From this perspective, I believe the vision of a global church for The United Methodist Church is attainable, if the American and non-American churches work to this end.

Second, the disproportionate geographical distribution of the United Methodist membership, with the huge majority located in the United States, does make an impact. However, the greatest impact on the central conferences has to do with economic power, derived from being part of a church whose majority resides in a country that is economically powerful.

Third, the Institute on Religion and Democracy and the Confessing Movement may have supporters in the African central conferences, but there is no united bloc. I suspect the African delegates at the 2004 General Conference cast their votes in the homosexuality debate for reasons different from those of the IRD and the Confessing Movement.

Finally, I am concerned that we take into account the need for good translation and interpretation to make the non-English-speaking delegates more involved in the discussions of the issues.

Wilfried Nausner

Pastor, Graz United Methodist Church, Graz, Austria

My response is clearly European. This is the context I know. My own story is connected to The United Methodist Church in Europe. I am pastor of a United Methodist congregation and dean of a theological study program for the Balkan countries. But for today's issue my experience and insight deriving from involvement in European ecumenical relationships might be more helpful. From 1995 to 1997 I was local organizing secretary of the Second European Ecumenical Assembly held in Graz, Austria, on the theme of reconciliation. This assembly includes all European churches—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant, with thousands of participants.

I agree with Dr. Love that for any global organization language is a major issue. There is no way around it. People who speak a majority language take it for granted that others understand them. They usually have no idea how difficult it is to express one's thoughts with rudimentary language skills in the majority language. And then they use their own skills in the majority language to their advantage. It would be helpful if some more thought went into how best to serve people whose primary language is not English.

I agree that The United Methodist Church is not a global church. It is a mainstream American church with a number of branches around the globe. But, and this is an interesting fact, these branches are not American. Indeed, they are quite far from being American; but they did receive ideas and core values that have formed the United States of America and modern societies and they live these ideas within their own countries and areas.

Take, for example, the idea of “freedom of religion.” This is not a European idea. The European idea is tolerance. Tolerance means that you have a majority church that allows others to exist, gain rights, and so on. Tolerance does not mean that everybody is the same before the law or the state or in civil concerns. It simply means you may do what you want, but that you will always be reminded about who holds the power in the end. Europe has been formed around the idea of nations, with religion and tolerance as a door and with a “room” for minorities. Part of the United Methodist role on the European continent is to bring the idea of freedom of religion to the people. In some parts, Europe did learn.

Or take the idea of the church as a body that is wider and greater than a nation. As I mentioned, in Europe religion is connected to the nation. This is the case with many churches in other parts of the world that trace their origin to Europe. The European approach is to organize churches nationally, and it has been successful. Again and again, it led to churches that subordinate themselves to national interests. United Methodists have always insisted on the fact that the church is more than a nation and therefore it needs to keep at least some independence. In doing so, United Methodists have given something to Europe that could not be developed there. Through Methodism European theology is constantly challenged to rethink its concept of the church.

Dr. Love is right: The United Methodist Church is no global organization. But are other churches global churches? For example, in many ways the Roman Catholic Church is a global church, kept together by an ancient idea—the episcopacy and primacy. The principle that keeps this diverse church together is *obedience*. If things do not work out and discussion comes to an end there is always somebody to obey. This principle is the same everywhere. How is The United Methodist Church kept as one church? Why do most of the small European churches not turn away from a worldwide church? Would it not be better for them to leave The United Methodist Church and form national bodies that relate to the World Methodist Council?

The United Methodist Church in Europe (especially the central conference to which I belong) survived sixty years of Communism and kept its connection and structure in Eastern and Western Europe. It survived, in the first place, because it was not a national church, and in the second place, because it had something to replace obedience. What replaced obedience (I owe this idea to Franz Schäfer, Bishop of the Central Conference of Eastern and Southern Europe until 1989) was the *conscience* of the church’s members. Methodism can only appeal to the heart and conscience of human beings. We are truly United Methodists when we remember that we belong together as a church and are responsible for one another’s well-being. Wesley might have said, “Then we are truly Christian.” This conscience keeps us together in one church. If it is lost and we forget that we are one church, we split up. Methodists have done this often, and every time they did, they lost something. But if conscience is kept alive, it helps us to survive and get stronger. This is how our connectional system works. It only functions if we have a strong will to stay together and have a feeling of belonging. All this is based on the conscience that God gave us. Wherever it is kept and valued, Methodism thrives. This is our special contribution to the ecumenical process. For this reason, Methodism is a culture of conferencing. In some places in Europe we have learned this lesson. The United Methodist Church has non-American branches that keep Methodism alive and are a challenge for the whole of Europe.

I cannot relate very well to the elephants in the room. But let me add this comment: I hope The United Methodist Church starts to discuss more important subjects than the question of

homosexuality. I hope it gets out of the labeling mode, whether one is an evangelical, a liberal, or whatever. I guess God will not ask us who we are, but where our brother or our sister is.

I thank Dr. Love for reminding us that things are global and local and that the same issues are reflected on both sides. If this is true we have a first and foremost duty globally and locally: to build the trust of people. The deadlock that we are in on a global, political level—the loss of trust—is present in our homes, our communities, and our churches. We have to do something about this. And believe me, at every political level we need people in whom we may put our trust. The United Methodist Church and its agencies have established a regular consultation between the United States and Europe (as far as I know, the only church to do so). It has done more for trust and relation building than we might imagine. The strength of this consultation is that there is little political maneuvering; it is built mainly on trust and dialogue. This is a direction in which the church should move, probably on a worldwide level.

The Willson Lectures are designed to contribute to the spiritual and intellectual enrichment of people associated with the boards and agencies of The United Methodist Church and to present to them and the Nashville community the scholarly contributions of distinguished leaders in higher education and educational philanthropy.

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