

# **Leading the Church Into a Future With Hope**

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Report of the General Secretary  
Meeting of the Board of Directors  
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry  
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This is my first report as general secretary of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to this newly formed board of directors. It comes at the end of a current quadrennium and anticipates the beginning of a new one, and what will be the beginning of my eighth year as general secretary! As such, this report is at once an opportunity to invite you who are new to rehearse with me the mission and vision that has guided and undergirded the work of the prior board of directors and to engage all--both new and returning directors--in at least a balcony view of the great work that lies before us. Here and now, as we commence our work together, directors and staff, I want to attempt to capture in compelling, and yet succinct terms, some of my understanding of the great challenges and opportunities that await us in the work that we will do in behalf of the whole church.

First, a retrospective glance. In my first address to the board of directors in this current quadrennium now ending, I told the, then, new and returning directors that, in signing on with this board, “you will be doing some of the most important, the most challenging yet most inspiring work you will ever be called upon to do.”<sup>1</sup> Further, I asserted that “. . . [t]his is not hyperbole, for as staff and directors we are entrusted with the sacred responsibility of leading--I believe it says in our Strategic Plan “leading and serving”--The United Methodist Church in recruiting, preparing, and nurturing leaders for guiding our denomination amid the bewildering complexities of our twenty-first-century world. This means that, for us, the question of leadership is always front and center.”<sup>2</sup>

Other general agencies rightfully claim leadership development as ancillary to their primary mission. That is, it may not be merely secondary, but it is not at the core; it is not at the heart and soul of the organization. It is, however, for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. This means then, that other general agencies which have some commitment to developing leaders, that commitment is not in the final analysis their reason for being.

Only GBHEM is charged by the General Conference with, and here I quote *The Book of Discipline*, “. . . preparing and assisting persons to fulfill their ministry in Christ in the several special ministries, ordained and diaconal [as well as licensed]; and to provide general oversight and care for campus ministries and institutions of higher education, including schools, colleges, universities, and theological schools.” (§1404) This is a distinctive charge to which we all have agreed to respond. My hope and prayer is that we are committed to do so with creativity, competence, energy, humility, and faithfulness.

When a bishop of the prior board preached at the organizing meeting of the board, he asked a question that some, if not many, of you are asking as we embark on this new part of the journey. He asked: “What in the world am I doing here?” It is a question that, at first hearing, should be readily answered. You, the directors, and we, the staff, are here because we have signed on to enable this agency to lead in addressing on behalf of the whole church the myriad challenges about the nature of leadership and the form it should take at a time when the world is experiencing changes of seismic proportions.

Yet, in the aftermath of the recent General Conference that declared our future as a church to be one of hope, it is clear, at least to me, that our mandate has been enriched, if not made more explicit and challenging. Yes, just as with the board for the quadrennium now ending, so it is with you, as directors, now that you will be doing some of the most important, the most challenging, yet most inspiring work you will ever be called upon to do. And I am strongly persuaded that that work, in all its specifics and particulars, must entail **leading the church into a future with hope.**

I submit that the General Conference’s clarion call for a kind of leading by this agency that enables the church to have leaders capable of envisioning and reaching for a future with hope is cause and reason enough for all of us to be here! Even for those among us who did not choose to be here, but in the wisdom of your jurisdiction and the providence of God, you were conscripted to be here, your presence and opportunity to make a lasting contribution are no less important--I hope you believe that--and compelling as, together, we ask and address the question that has guided and will continue to inform our work in the coming quadrennium.

That question is: **What does it take to form and nurture leaders who have the vision, the spiritual and theological grounding, and the intellectual and practical skills to lead The United Methodist Church in faithful ministry in a twenty-first-century-world?** This critical

question has occupied considerable time, energy and resources, both financial and human, during the quadrennium now ending.

You heard Dr. Trudie Kibbe Reed, chair of our boardwide Strategic Planning Advisory Committee, say earlier that it is going to be a challenge for us to have a plan, a Strategic Plan that is going to be embraced by all those who are jumping on the train four years after the fact. And that's alright! That's just the way life is, and in our shared work together we're going to make it all good.

What I want to submit to you is that this critical question remains prescient for us as we engage our work because it invites, if not drives, us to take seriously that our yearning quest for leaders who are capable of envisioning and reaching for a future of hope must come from a world that is changed and is changing.

For those who were here in the last quadrennium, some of this might be familiar to you. One of the most dramatic and far-reaching of the seismic global shifts (to which I referred earlier) and one that will have a profound effect on how this board understands and conducts its work during the ensuing quadrennium is the demographic and population changes brought about by migration, immigration, and voluntary and forced relocation. A cursory glance at the United States is exemplary for our purpose.

According to population projections based on recent census data, the United States population will grow dramatically larger, reaching a staggering 392 million by the year 2050. It will be older, as baby boomers start to retire; and it will be vastly more diverse. This last fact alone will have such significance for leadership in church and society in the twenty-first century that it bears brief elaboration.

In 2002, the Hispanic population became the largest minority in the country and is projected to constitute one-quarter of the nation's population by 2050. By the same year, the Black population of the United States will have doubled its present size and the Asian and Pacific Islander populations will have increased to more than five times their current size. In contrast, by 2050 the White non-Hispanic population will have declined from 69 percent of the total population in 2000 to just over 50 percent. Add to this the staggering demographic changes in population growth that are projected to occur due to continued immigration and increased mobility in the population.

It is estimated that between 1995 and 2025 nearly one-quarter of a billion people will move from one state to another, while international immigration will add millions of new inhabitants, topped by California with 8 million, a state that is part of a jurisdiction where our church is committed to reducing rather than increasing episcopal leadership.

As a church we claim to be committed to starting new and revitalizing existing local churches and yet the General Conference temporizes with the need for episcopal oversight! While this is not my point in this report, it is a significant anomaly in our church's view of the relationship between leadership and church growth, not only in the western United States, but also in New York and Florida where record population growth is projected. Indeed, most of the net growth in the U.S. population will occur in the South and the West, led by California, Texas, and Florida.<sup>3</sup>

Now add to this landscape the truly mind-boggling shifts that are taking place both in this country and around the globe in approaches to religion and religious experience and thus in religious understandings, commitments, and practices. These shifts rival the demographic and population changes I noted earlier in terms of the implications they portend for how the church--and, thus, this agency--interprets and lives its mission in the world of the twenty-first century.

While we tend to think of our religious landscape as relatively stable and well delineated between the so-called major religions of the world--Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.,--the reality is that our world is witnessing an astonishing explosion of new religious movements, as well as dramatic mutations in the old-line religions. As David Barrett, long-time editor of the authoritative World Christian Encyclopedia points out, "[T]here is enormous religious change going on across the world, all the time. It's massive. It's complex, and it's continual. We have identified close to 10,000 distinct and separate religions in the world, increasing by two or three new religions every day."<sup>4</sup>

Specific to Christianity, again according to Barrett, ". . . [e]stimates [are that] the specifically new independent churches in Christianity number about 390 million [members], which is [approaching] 20 percent of the Christian world."<sup>5</sup> Pentecostalism alone is estimated to comprise more than one billion adherents globally by 2050.

The critical import of these statistics is brought home by Philip Jenkins, author of the yet startling book, *The Next Christianity*, who concludes that Christianity is experiencing a moment

“as epochal as the [Protestant] Reformation itself . . . Christianity as a whole is both growing and mutating in ways that observers in the West tend not to see.”

Indeed, not only have the vital centers of Christianity shifted to Africa, Asia, and Latin America--from the global North to the global South--but in terms of both theology and moral teaching, Southern Christianity tends to be far more conservative and moving toward forms of supernaturalism and Christian orthodoxy that many of their fellow Christians in the North will resist as outdated, superstitious, and authoritarian. This leads Jenkins to conclude: “It is very likely that in a decade or two neither component of global Christianity [North or South] will recognize its counterpart as fully or authentically Christian.”<sup>6</sup>

Even though it is tangential to our immediate purpose, it is salutary, nonetheless, to ask if our recent flurry of legislative amendments to our church’s constitution that would regionalize our church structure might be driven, wittingly or unwittingly, by a desire to avoid and evade the stark differences that Jenkins describes between Northern and Southern hemispheres? An exploration of this we will leave for another time.

To be sure, it is not necessary to accept Jenkins’s foreboding prognostication about the ultimate effect of the growing hemispheric divide in Christianity to acknowledge the truth of his statement when he says, “We are living in revolutionary times.”<sup>7</sup>

But, as we begin our work as a board, it *is* necessary to ask the question: **What are the lengths to which this board is willing to go to give the kind of leading by this agency that enables the church to have leaders capable of envisioning and reaching for a future with hope?**

This question throws into sharp relief the challenges and opportunities that are made explicit and, I hope you will find, compelling in our boardwide Strategic Plan. You have already received some orientation to the plan in a prior presentation by Dr. Trudie Kibbe Reed on behalf of the Strategic Plan Advisory Committee. The history of the Strategic Plan’s evolution over two quadrennia is a metaphor for understanding the particular and distinctive culture of this board that has been nurtured and, in the main, faithfully transmitted to us since its initial organization in 1973.

To understand and appreciate our particularity and our distinctiveness, I want to re-visit briefly what F. Thomas Trotter, founding general secretary of the GBHEM, said in his first report to a

newly organized board. Rejecting the notion of “efficiency for its own sake [binding the board to strict rules of bureaucratic engagement]” while calling for “efficiency for the gospel’s sake [freeing the board to do primary work with creativity and passion that leads to good news],” Dr. Trotter states:

. . . The bureaucracies [of the church] simply survive. But our tasks are now too urgent for this accustomed style. The velocity of history has so increased in the recent past that comfortable curial mannerisms are inadequate for the vastness of the task [of this board]. It is in that context that I want to suggest just where this board is located in the range of The United Methodist Church’s ministry [and mission]. **We are not a “program board” in the easily understood sense of that term.** Our board’s mission seems to me to have a wider angle. Our principal clients are schools, colleges, universities, and theological seminaries, and the professionals in the church’s ministry. **We are responsible for morale, definition, implementation, hope, models, courage, imagination, outrageous suggestions, energizing, translating, advocacy, explaining – in short, our basic responsibility is for the very life of two institutions that society deems so critical for the nation’s survival that important immunities are granted to them.** Tradition in our society grants these immunities to the law, the university, and the church. It demonstrates this sanction by permitting these estates to wear robes in public, to set apart individuality, and assert the supremacy of law, justice, truth, reason, and integrity in our social fabric. This board is directly involved in the warfare against those who would, for whatever purpose, frustrate the sanctions [emphasis added].<sup>8</sup>

And then, in the aftermath of our recent General Conference’s affirmation of a future with hope, it is salutary that Dr. Trotter concludes his “hair-raising definition [of this board’s task]” with what might properly be termed as a “back-to-the-future” declaration of this board’s *raison d’être*, its purpose, its wider task:

. . . I have . . . unbounded hope, [he said], that the church’s schools and the professional ministry of the church may be mobilized to turn our nation around. That is our task. We are to provide the leadership for The United Methodist Church in giving reasons for hope that we may have schools and colleges committed to something more than survival and a [set-apart, both ordained and licensed] ministry committed to something more than professional self-interest.<sup>9</sup>

Spoken over three decades ago, this salient thought brings us face-to-face with this board’s greatest challenge and opportunity in the coming quadrennium: **to lead our beloved church into a future with hope by focusing and exploiting our already considerable resources--human, financial, and institutional--in the making of global leaders for a global church.** Such a commitment is no mere pious aspiration, nor is it an invitation to dream impossible dreams. We are a people, on pilgrimage, beckoned and guided by a promising God who, in the words of Jeremiah, “. . . has plans for [us], plans for welfare and not for evil, to give [us] a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

To be sure, our leading must be done in a changed and changing world. A world--indeed, a nation that is ours to know--that is experiencing economic melt-down, where “. . . five million people have fallen into poverty during the last eight years, where the number of Americans without health insurance has grown by seven million, and the principal domestic achievement of the current administration has been to shift the relative burden of taxation from the rich to the rest. . .”<sup>10</sup> A world where war rages globally and the H.I.V./AIDS pandemic alone has devoured multiple generations on the African continent, and the sustainability of all life on earth itself is threatened by melting polar icecaps and rising oceans.

Leading the people of God, leading the people called United Methodist into a future with hope will require us as a newly organized board to achieve common ground and to achieve it quickly on some critical dimensions of our work. I want to suggest several.

Given the cursory, yet I hope, compelling description of the seismically changed and changing world in which we are called to recruit, nurture and educate leaders--lay and clergy--who are capable of envisioning and reaching for a future with hope, we need to develop and sustain an informed and tenacious sense of urgency about our task.

In a word, I submit that this is not the time for mild-mannered sensibilities that yield a bureaucratized business-as-usual approach to the crying need for principled Christian leaders in church and society. Contrary to our history since merger in 1968, we can no longer “play it cool” and settle for leadership development that is driven by the accidents of societal and cultural flux.

It is right and laudable that the church welcomed what seemed at the time an influx of second-career persons who, in the minds of some, were an answer to prayer for leaders who would fill the so-called “leadership gap” in the ranks of the clergy, both ordained and licensed. However, it was myopic, at best, to assume that the church could lessen its resolve to identify, recruit, nurture and educate new leaders--lay and clergy--to fulfill the church’s mission.

I’m not suggesting that this board did that, but I am suggesting that this notion was adrift in the land and, because it was, we neglected our obligation to develop and sustain a “culture of call” for young women and men at every level of our church, and most of all, at the level of the local church. We deluded ourselves into believing that our leadership needs were being met, and, as a consequence, we lost at least one generation of the brightest and the best.

GBHEM's mission and vision statements, though not written in stone, must come quickly to be viewed as foundational for our work together and a primary source that gives focus and coherence to how we set our priorities. We cannot do everything. But what we do can make a difference. I believe that if one or both of these statements of mission and vision, do not elicit your passion to engage our changed and changing world, then don't delay in saying so! We must have common ground about the need for passion to do our work.

Remember, this is the board that is charged with maintaining the historic mission of The United Methodist Church in higher education, and to serve as advocate for the intellectual life of the church. Now, I know that *intellectual* is a naughty word in many circles in our society, but we cannot be a part of what a author James Tunstead Burtchaell, critiquing higher education a few years ago called, "the dying light."<sup>11</sup> We can't participate in the erosion of our church-related institutions of higher learning that are sentinels of investment for our future as church and society, and we cannot do so even under the guise of "not enough resources."

Even as the predecessor board grasped conceptually and embraced enthusiastically that, even in the United States we need to prepare global leaders for a global church, we, too, must engage our task with conviction that a global awareness must always inform how we lead annual conferences and congregations in recruiting, forming, and deploying clergy and lay leaders.

This is particularly the case for our efforts at forming young people in Christian vocation, be it set-apart (ordained or licensed) ministry because global connectedness is simply part of the air they breathe. And so preparing global leaders for a global church will be a crucial part of the context in which staff lead and interpret events such as EXPLORATION, new initiatives such as [ExploreCalling.org](http://ExploreCalling.org), and recently released publications such as the sixth edition of *The Christian as Minister* and *Answering God's Call for Your Life*.

We must renew our belief in and commitment to rigorous theological education--both Course of Study and graduate study in theological schools. We must renew our commitment to those as normative, not the exception, for development of global leaders for a global church. To this end, sisters and brothers, we must assert this board's critical role in assisting our schools of theology to redefine themselves as a real and effective delivery system of theological education in the service of a church that does not diminish but increases its financial support through the Ministerial Education Fund and other sources at the annual conference level.



Again, to recall Dr. Trotter's challenge to this board more than 30 years ago, I too, as the current general secretary, "want this board to hold these schools accountable, not merely for rational administration, but for movement toward a more aggressive posture in the church's life . . . the church deserves more than it is getting from the seminaries in breaking old models, tackling different intellectual problems, and leading our people into the Methodist style of thoughtful and vital religion."<sup>12</sup>

The day of rugged individualism in the delivery of theological education is over. And if it isn't, then we have more problems than I have imagined. I don't say this in any way, shape, or form to make anybody feel uncomfortable. I'm simply trying to bring into sharp focus that, in no small way, we got the way we are because we had no rudder and no center of gravity that governed our aspirations for, if not expectations of, our theological schools to address leadership needs systemically. Institutionally, we have not had the kind of focused and committed leadership that is necessary for us to have the strongest possible theological educational delivery system of any Protestant denomination. This assertion may not ring some people's chimes, but I submit that it is a reality which this board must address with knowledge, transparency, care, and commitment.

We will lead this church into a future with hope if we remember that "The United Methodist Church invented the concept of 'campus ministry' [and reassert programmatically and financially our commitment to] the principle that the church must be related to the life of students and faculty in the our colleges and universities through Wesley Foundations and through other appropriate structures."<sup>13</sup> Let us be on notice today that the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry is not retreating one scintilla in regard to our commitment to be involved in effective campus ministry.

And this board, praise God, will be a part of our ability and our capacity to reach for a future that is truly responsive to twenty-first century challenges, and not a replication of the 1960s. That is going to call for theological constructive work and not simply capitulating or giving in to what is the line of least resistance in order that we might be popular again on the campus.

Make no mistake about it; I know that I am nothing but a loud gong and tingling cymbal if this board of directors is not prepared to support and back up this claim that is integral to our leading our beloved church into a future with hope that is characterized by sustainable rather than mere episodic renewal of our life and work as a church.

Again, we will lead the church into a future with hope if we “develop a new sense of institutional purpose for [all of our schools, colleges, and universities]” and enable them to re-engage the long-neglected deep-running conversation about the gift and task of United Methodist higher education and, especially what it means for them to be a church-related college or university and for us, the church--at all levels--to be a college-related church.

In all of the above, I want us to be clear and focused in our commitment to forge radical interventions rather than pursue the outworn and ineffective canons of “incrementalism,” that is, thinking, believing, and doing only that which satisfies the needs of myopic maintenance or masquerades as the solution to change that, in the end, is no change at all. We know how to do radical things as a people called United Methodists. Sometimes they are not on our radar screen, but we know how to do the difficult work of God’s mission in a changed and changing world.

We did it in building a world-class university on the African continent, even when naysayers inside and outside of the United Methodist family said we couldn’t and indeed, some said we shouldn’t do it! We know how to create institutions. We’re doing it right now as Africa University’s second phase of development creates a distance-education infrastructure system and program that will extend its tentacles of learning and research that will provide higher education access to the entire continent: Mozambique, Angola, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and East Africa. We are going to be doing it first, and we will not be doing it for the sake of doing it first, but in order that we will be able to make more vital and more effective the proclamation of the gospel that declares that Jesus Christ is Lord.

What in the world are we doing here? I say again: We will be doing some of the most important, the most challenging yet most inspiring work we will ever be called upon to do! Together, we--directors and staff--have already set out on a risky yet exciting journey in a time of great upheaval. Sisters and brothers, as I have assured a previous board as it began its work, God is not above us or behind us. Rather, God is in the midst of the tumult of our time, beckoning us to follow, standing on the promise that God “has plans for [us], plans for welfare and not for evil, to give [us] a future with hope.”

That you are here and have committed your considerable gifts of time, talent and treasure to advancing the vision of a new generation of Christian leaders--lay and clergy--is sufficient for

this talented and deeply committed staff to take heart and get on with the great work that we will share and accomplish with you.

### Notes

1. Jerome King Del Pino, "Global Leaders for a Global Church," *Report of the General Secretary* to the organizational meeting of the board of directors of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, October 8, 2004, (Nashville, Tenn.), 2.
2. Ibid.
3. "American FactFinder," *U.S. Census Bureau* (16 October 2003), online: <http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/SAFFInfo.jsp?PagelD=19> race ethnicity; Paul Campbell, "Population Projections: States, 1995-2025," *Current Population Reports* (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1997); "National Population Projections," *U.S. Census Bureau*, online: [www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/nat-proj.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/nat-proj.html); "U.S. Interim Projections by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin," *U.S. Census Bureau* (March 18, 2004), online: [www.census.gov/ipc/www/usintermproj/](http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usintermproj/).
4. Quoted in Toby Lester, "Oh, Gods!" *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 2002):38.
5. Ibid., 44.
6. Philip Jenkins, "The Next Christianity," *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2002):54, 59.
7. Ibid., 68.
8. F. Thomas Trotter, *Loving God With One's Mind*, edited and with an introduction by Robert H. Conn (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1987), 245.
9. Ibid., 245-246.
10. Editorial, *The New Yorker* (October 6, 2008):12.
11. James Tunstead Burtchaell, [\*The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches\*](#)
12. Trotter, *Loving God With One's Mind*, 249-250.
13. Ibid., 247.