

**The Church and Its Institutions in Changing Times:
Power, Promise, and Peril**

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The financial meltdown over the past year has brought home to us in a dramatic way the indispensable role of institutions in our wellbeing as individuals and as a society. Perhaps equally compelling, we witnessed the significance of institutions for our flourishing as a global human community. In rather startling fashion we discovered the extent to which multinational and transnational institutions are weaving together our interests, hopes, and fortunes as individuals and as societies—indeed, our shared fate—into a common global project. And in the process we are exposed to both new opportunities and new risks and vulnerabilities. How many of us would have thought that unscrupulous decisions in what seemed an entirely domestic context—the U.S. sub-prime housing market—would precipitate a global financial crisis? Institutions matter; they have power; they shape our lives. And they do so for good or ill.

It is perhaps this power to impact our lives for better or for worse that explains, at least in part, our deep ambivalence toward institutions. We resent their power to shape and limit our opportunities, choices, and hopes—frequently without our input or consent; even as we recognize their essential role in providing the structures and means for individuals to pursue their dreams and for societies to advance and prosper. And when things go wrong, we are quick to lay the blame for our woes at their feet—and often for good reason, as the recent sub-prime debacle amply illustrates. Yet, particularly during times of upheaval and uncertainty such as we are experiencing today, we are tempted to

treat institutions *as such* as the problem, perhaps begrudgingly acknowledging them as a necessary evil, but viewing them as encumbrances and impediments to our purposes, nonetheless.

The same ambivalence toward institutions and the same responses toward them manifest themselves within the church also. Perhaps this should not surprise us, since, of all Protestant denominations in the United States, the Methodists have been quintessential builders of institutions—from schools to universities to hospitals to nursing homes to churches to an elaborate infrastructure that reaches around the world, connected crucially by a set of institutions we call “general agencies.” The United Methodist Church is, whether we like it or not, a multinational, transnational corporation, with all the possibilities and the shortcomings, the capacities and the foibles that accompany such an entity. Nor surprisingly, then, during times of transition, uncertainty, and change, the church’s institutions—frequently its general agencies—bear the brunt of our discontent over what ails the denomination. And, at times, our dissatisfaction with the status quo leads us to question whether the problem is not “the institutional church” as such. After all, the “non-denominational” churches, notably the freestanding mega-churches, seem to flourish, while we denominational types, with our elaborate institutional machinery, suffer relentless decline.

In recent years, United Methodists’ ambivalence about their institutional life has taken on more subtle expression. Many now locate the problem in the relationship between the local church and the general church: The denomination’s woes, we are told, lie in an overburdened general church bureaucracy that siphons off much-needed resources required for local church ministry and impedes by precept, rule, and regulation

the creativity and innovation they need to flourish. Often the unstated assumption that accompanies this view is that the local church is where *real* ministry happens, while general church work, removed as it is from the local context, is optional at best and redundant at worst. The decision by the 1996 General Conference to designate the local church as “the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶120) did much to encourage this drift toward localism—and the consequent devaluing and diminishment of the general church institutions.

At their best, certain institutions in society act as carriers and stewards of a group’s or a people’s collective memory, their values and traditions, and their deepest convictions. As such, these institutions provide the space and the infrastructure that allow people to negotiate the tension between tradition and change, inheritance and innovation creatively and productively in the midst of rapid societal change or disruption. I am persuaded that institutions such as universities and theological schools—and also, I submit, general agencies—may play a similarly crucial role in The United Methodist Church as it seeks to discern God’s will in these complex times.

And so the question confronts us as staff and directors of this great agency: How can the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry *as institution* be a source of renewal and growth for the church rather than an impediment or an encumbrance in the years ahead? I suggest to you this afternoon that we do so best by enabling and supporting the health and wellbeing of institutions, systems, and networks that are critical to the mission and ministry of our church around the world. Our strategic plan clarifies this approach to our work: *The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry assists The United*

Methodist Church in preparing global leaders for a global church by developing and supporting systems, institutions, and networks.

A few examples from our work over the past year will illustrate what I mean. In each case we have striven to assist in strengthening infrastructure, networks, and institutions. Take our work in ordained ministry. We have made great strides in working with individuals and systems toward a culture of call, with particular attention to youth and young people. We have expanded our capacity to provide Web-based and print resources, consultations with boards of ordained ministry, theological schools, and boards of higher education and campus ministry. This work has been strengthened, in part, as a result of our decision to develop two cross-divisional positions, providing for a rich intersection between the Division of Ordained Ministry's work with the candidacy process and the Division of Higher Education's work in campus ministry. Nurturing a "culture of call" calls for creative partnerships across the church as well as within the agencies. To call forth a cultural change in The United Methodist Church is properly our work. To engage this important and urgent task requires that GBHEM be and act as a catalyst with a clear plan to sustain its initial action even over several quadrennia.

Yet challenges remain. The cover story of recent edition of the *United Methodist Reporter* illustrates one such challenge. Titled "New Monasticism," the article begins this way: "Ross Reynolds, 26, felt frustrated with ministry goals after graduating last May from Perkins School of Theology." It tells of his passion for ministry being stirred as a result of an internship experience—a passion that did not fit within the traditional frame of ordained ministry as he had experienced in the local church. And so he, along with others with similar experiences, became involved in a new monastic community whose

members are intentional about serving the poor. How do we respond positively to such movements at the edges of the church's institutional life? What can we as an institution of the church, charged with oversight of its ordained ministry, offer this young man? A key challenge to institutions like us is to be truly open to these movements at the margins of institutional life, viewing them not as threats but as opportunities to listen afresh to the new thing the Spirit may be saying to the church. As our own history as a renewal movement within the "institutional church" of eighteenth-century England reminds us, movements and institutional church always stand in a certain tension. This tension can be destructive or divisive; or it can become the growing point of an institution—that place where new life emerges that eventually reinvigorates the whole body. The challenge before us, as a key institution within The United Methodist Church, is how to use our gifts and resources in such a way that this tension is creative and productive—so that young people like Ross Reynolds can find a meaningful place within the total ministry of our church.

Another example is our work in strengthening the development of leadership for church and world in United Methodism around the globe. We can celebrate great strides in a number of areas. The networking of international educational institutions is proceeding well as expressed in the clearer mission/vision and programmatic work of the International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (IAMSCU). Efforts are well underway in creating mechanisms for sharing scholarship and scholars across institutions within the worldwide Methodist family.

The strengthening of infrastructure and institutions for theological education has also received sustained attention. A very significant example is the convening of a major

consultation on theological education in Africa in Kampala, Uganda, on Aug. 19-20 this year—an effort of collaboration between GBHEM, UMCOM, and GBGM, and the United Methodist bishops of Africa. The theological administrators and educators gathered there delineated a vision for doing what GBHEM considers its primary work: create and nurture structures and institutions of theological education capable of being sustained over time so that the burgeoning United Methodist Church on the continent of Africa will have the trained leadership it needs in the years ahead. I will speak about this project in more detail in just a moment when I present a report of the Kampala consultation. But let me anticipate by mentioning one observation that is particularly relevant to the point I am making here. Both in the needs and the challenges facing theological education in Africa that participants identified as well as in group conversations there emerged an important refrain—namely, the urgent need for assistance in developing institutions and infrastructure for theological education that are sustainable over the long haul. These African representatives saw clearly what we in the church in the United States perhaps do not always grasp as clearly: Sound, healthy institutions matter, and they matter more than ever today, especially in places of volatility, transition, and instability.

Experiences like these are important in affirming the value of our work as an agency in building, supporting, and nurturing effective institutions for The United Methodist Church around the world. However, they also challenge us to continually ask critical questions—the kinds of questions that will keep us honest, growing, and changing, when necessary, so that we may offer our gifts as an institution to the church in fruitful ways. I close my reflection with a few of the questions that I believe we—staff and directors

together—will need to wrestle with continually in order to carry out GBHEM’s mission faithfully in the years ahead.

- How do we maintain a proper tension between innovation and inheritance, between “institution” and “movement”? Our fast-changing world requires institutions that are nimble, adaptive, and innovative—ready to try new ways to meet emerging needs and abandoning ways that no longer seem adequate. How do we listen deeply and responsively to our world while not abandoning our core values in efforts to be “relevant”? How do we honor our responsibility as a steward of the church’s heritage, values, and convictions while attending to what the Spirit might be saying to us in the ministries that emerge at the edges of our institutional life? How do we assist the church in connecting past and present even as we lean into the future?
- In our work of preparing global leaders for a global church, how do we ensure that we are not merely reproducing U.S. institutions and approaches? How do we listen genuinely to the multiple voices of our fellow United Methodists around the world, especially when what we hear is unfamiliar or even disconcerting?
- If the global nature of the church is intended to reflect a transnational connection, how can this be reconciled with an increasing drift toward localism in The United Methodist Church in the United States? In what ways may GBHEM in fact reflect rather than challenge this myopia in our own institutional life as a church?
- In nurturing an educated leadership for the church, how do we keep ourselves open to new, creative ways of learning—ways that may take us beyond the classical means for attaining a theological education, perhaps at times beyond the

academy? What do we mean when we speak of the value of a “Methodist ethos” in the formation of clergy? Are we committed to doing the hard critical work of appropriating our Wesleyan and Methodist heritage in ways that honor its best insights for a new day?

- In our work within an emerging global United Methodist Church, how do we assess “success” in the development and nurture of institutions for leadership development? How do we separate cultural definitions of success from faithfulness to the gospel? How do we allow the voices of our United Methodist brothers and sisters around the world to challenge the predominance of (perhaps, at times, our captivity to) United States culture in our assumptions, values, and our approach to our work?

Institutions matter; they have power; they shape our lives. And they matter particularly during times of transition, change, and disruption, as the recent global financial crisis has brought home to us. Institutions in the church, too, matter; they, too, have power; and they, too, shape lives. And they, too, matter more than ever during times of transition and change, as the church is experiencing today. May God grant us the grace to use our gifts as a key institution within the church to guide it in preparing the kind and quality of leader that can lead the people called United Methodists in faithful and prophetic ministry in the years ahead.