

# **Global Leaders for a Global Church**

Report of the General Secretary

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**I**t is a blessing to join with you on a journey that I have not been on that long myself. The remarks that I want to make this morning not only are rooted in conversation with the staff but also relate very deeply to my own journey. The son of a United Methodist pastor and, in terms of my formative years and experience, a product of the former Central Jurisdiction, I have committed my life to pastoring in local churches and to teaching as an avocation. I am profoundly persuaded that God has allowed me this opportunity to serve The United Methodist Church in this way. So, as our various journeys merge into the common journey of this great agency, it is my hope that together we will forge an unbeatable team in addressing the issues before us. Together, we will strive to enable this great church to gain its bearings in the twenty-first century.

To those of you who are first-time directors, let me say, and to returning directors, let me reiterate, as part of this community you will be doing some of the most important, the most challenging yet most inspiring, work you will ever be called upon to do. This is not hyperbole, for as staff and directors we are entrusted with the sacred responsibility of leading 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 front and center. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that you are joining a community whose singular preoccupation is wrapped up in this question: *What would 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 the twenty-first century?*

This is a critical question. Everything we do and say hinges on it. It sums up the rationale that gives our work its meaning and the centrifugal force that helps us keep the main thing the main thing—or, as Bishop Joe Yeakel is prone to say, the passion that binds us together. Indeed even a cursory review of our Strategic Plan will reveal a vision, mission, and set of core values and strategic aims focused unambiguously, unwaveringly, and unapologetically on the formation, support, and development of leaders equipped to lead a global church in a global world.

The reason for our passion about leadership is that The United Methodist Church is experiencing, if not a crisis in leadership, then, at the very least, a deep ambivalence and confusion about the kind of leadership it needs now and in the years ahead. Now, the sources of this crisis, this confusion, ambivalence, and reticence in many circles of the church are multiple and complex. I will not attempt an exhaustive accounting of them here. However, for those of us with ears to hear and eyes to see, there are some definite clues.

Take, if you will, the decision by the last General Conference to refer to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry a petition calling for the establishment of “a four-year study commission to theologically discuss and clearly define the ordering of our shared life together in The United Methodist Church,” to address the “continued ambiguity in the denomination’s understanding of lay, licensed, and ordained ministry.” Would you not agree that this assignment represents the people’s cry for leaders who can articulate what God is up to in the world with such theological clarity and spiritual integrity that they will abandon themselves unreservedly to God’s dream for the world?

Or consider the fractious state of our church and its discourse, so painfully displayed at the General Conference just past. Is the resolution for unity and against separation, albeit “amicable,” that final Friday morning not

a yearning for a leadership that can inspire and model a form of holy conferencing that represents Methodism at its very best—that refuses to reduce a rich diversity to simplistic categories, hurtful slogans, and politically driven agendas? What about the steady erosion of our United Methodist connection, evidenced by the myopic fixation on the local church as the be-all and end-all at the expense of a vision for the welfare of the denomination? Would you not agree that this pernicious tearing at the fabric of our connectional life simply cries out for leaders whose vision for the mission and ministry of our church is as expansive as the connection itself?

## **Leading in a Changing World**

This ambivalence, confusion, and uncertainty about the nature of leadership and the form it should take come at a time when the world is experiencing changes of seismic proportions. Ours, sisters and brothers, is a world in which the forces of globalization and the technologies that accompany them have awakened us to a dizzying diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and languages, allied with mind-boggling plurality of political, economic, social, and religious expressions and commitments. It is a world characterized by migration of people, goods, capital, and services on a scale and at a rate unimagined—and perhaps unimaginable—only fifty years ago. This global movement is setting adrift forever the national, political, and economic boundaries and the social and religious certainties that have provided for so many of us, especially in the Northern Hemisphere, a sense of “place,” of personal and communal identity. These seismic shifts in our global village are embraced by some as marking the dawning of a “postmodern” epoch in which everything from running shoes to personal and communal identities to political, social, and religious loyalties are subjected to the free play of the market and the logic of a rapidly expanding global consumer culture. And yet, the globalization juggernaut and the disruption and realignment of political, social, economic, and religious boundaries and relationships that follow in its wake are experienced by millions of people as profoundly unsettling, leading many to respond in fear, resentment, anger, even violence.

One of the most dramatic and far-reaching of these seismic global shifts and one that will have a profound effect on how this board under-

stands and conducts its work in the years ahead has to do with the demographic and population changes brought about by migration, immigration, and voluntary and forced relocation. Let us look at the United States as an example. 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 ministry in the twenty-first century that it bears 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. By 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 and followed by New York and Florida. Indeed, most of the net growth in the United States population will occur in the South and the West, led by California, Texas, and Florida.<sup>1</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 mentioned 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 still tend to think of our religious landscape as relatively stable and well delineated between the so-called major religions—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 reli-

gions. 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>2</sup>

Christianity is by no means exempt from this phenomenon. On the contrary, as Barrett points out, “new movements are not only a part of Christianity but an enormous part of it. . . . According to estimates, the specifically new independent churches in Christianity number about 390 million [members], which is getting on for 20 percent of the Christian world.”<sup>3</sup> Pentecostalism alone is estimated to comprise more than one billion adherents globally by 2050.

These facts have led Philip Jenkins, author of the startling book, *The Next Christianity*, to conclude that Christianity is experiencing a moment “as epochal as the 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 than many of their fellow Christians in the North will resist as outdated, superstitious, and authoritarian. This leads Jenkins to conclude, “It’s 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>4</sup> Now, 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>5</sup>

## **Toward Global Leaders for a Global Church**

The question I asked at the outset now returns with greater force and urgency to us who are a part of this board. What would it take for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to lead in preparing leaders equipped and ready to guide The United Methodist Church in visionary and prophetic ministry in these revolutionary times?

With the staff, I am persuaded that to lead the church beyond the current confusion and ambivalence about its leadership will require of this board to be a community with a clearly articulated, biblically and theologically grounded, and missionally appropriate vision of leadership. We cannot afford to be guilty of the sin of low expectation. We the staff, and now you with us, have taken on the challenge expressed in this vision of leadership.

The contours of this vision are evident in our Strategic Plan. When we began the journey toward a boardwide Strategic Plan, I told the staff that the Plan would not be ultimately for the circular file—we had a plan to work the plan. I am thankful that this staff is moving with all deliberate speed in that direction. The conversations into which you as directors will be invited and the staff you will engage in these conversations in the coming years will further clarify, deepen, and enrich that vision. Together, we will need to be able to have conversations that are going to help us understand whether we need to make correctives as we go. Those conversations are important and we plan to have them frequently.

Meanwhile, allow me to share with you the contours of the vision of leadership we feel is right for The United Methodist Church in our revolutionary times. Stated succinctly, *ours is a vision of global leaders for a global church*. It is a vision of United Methodist leaders inspired once again by a wily eighteenth-century Anglican priest who, in his encounter with the Bishop of London, had the audacity to claim the whole world as his parish. Ours is a vision of leaders who, with Wesley, dare to dream big about the reason for which God has raised up the people called Methodists and whose vision of the church's ministry is as expansive as the connection itself.

What would a global leader for a global church look like? There are many characteristics that make up the profile of such a leader. I want to share with you just three that I believe are salient and critical.

### ***Global leaders for a global church are guardians of the connection***

Even though baptized into it, I am *intentionally* a member of The United Methodist Church. I am a United Methodist because it has a vision (at least as articulated in its historic understanding of the Christian faith) that is capable of embracing all who would name Jesus Christ as Lord. For

these kinds of leaders, United Methodists dare not abandon their grand experiment of a global church. They dare not shrink the realities that gave birth to us, for they are convinced that whatever the final designs of the divine dream for the church of Jesus Christ, it must look something like the tapestry they are weaving out of the astonishing diversity of hues, languages, cultures, and traditions that is the United Methodist connection.

These leaders also know that keeping this grand dream alive faces enormous challenges in our day; there are many forces, both subtle and overt, that threaten to undermine the connection. Out of the seismic shifts that are now redefining the world we live in emerges a global village rich with possibilities for ministry. It is also fertile ground for suspicion, animosity, misunderstanding, and division that can undermine faithfulness to our mission. For some, suspicion, even fear, of the outsider, the foreigner, the stranger, drains the very desire for a global church. For others, the changing face of the church, the coming predominance of those with unfamiliar skins and languages and traditions prompts them to trim their vision to the local, the familiar, and the domestic.

Yet global leaders for a global church passionately guard this global connection, because this form of church—this commitment to seeking unity *precisely in diversity*—is an extraordinary gift to the emerging Christianity of our day. In ways that he himself could not have foreseen, Wesley’s creation of the Methodist connection laid a solid foundation for his heirs in the twenty-first century to be able to engage the kind of world I have described earlier.

In our revolutionary times, when the dangers of fragmentation and fissure are greater than ever, United Methodists hold before the church ecumenical a vision of the body of Christ that refuses to believe that a day might be coming when Christians in the North and in the South will no longer recognize one another as fully Christian. Yet, nurturing and sustaining such a vision requires leaders of extraordinary spiritual maturity, theological dexterity, and practical innovation. You and I have an awesome responsibility in leading our beloved church in forming, preparing, and deploying just such leaders. Let me reiterate. Together we will be doing some of the most important, the most challenging yet most inspiring work we will ever be called upon to do.

## **Global leaders for a global church are bearers of a renewed vision of the church**

Theirs is the vision of a United Methodist Church that recovers its uniquely Methodist ethos—a disposition that brooks no self-interested denominational naval gazing or anxious preoccupation with its own survival.

Rather, it embraces once again, and for a new day and time, the purpose for which Wesley launched the movement called Methodism. For you see, Methodism began as an “evangelical order” that sought to “quicken the brethren”<sup>6</sup> in Wesley’s beloved Church of England. From the beginning, Methodism existed *not for its own sake but for the sake of a larger catholicity*—for the healing of the Anglican Church and, through it, of the *ecumene* and the world.

As the great Methodist scholar Albert Outler points out, “Methodism’s unique ecclesiological pattern was really designed to function best within an encompassing environment of catholicity . . . the effectual and universal Christian community.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Methodism saw itself as a project that is *ad interim*,<sup>8</sup> provisional,<sup>9</sup> expending itself in the service of a larger purpose. Wesley’s comment on the Methodist mission is both insightful and moving: “We are the most willing ‘to spend and to be spent for them [his fellow Anglicans]; yea, to ‘lay down our lives for our brethren.’”<sup>10</sup> There is, then, deep within the Methodist ethos an impulse to be given away, to be emptied in service to others for the sake of the encompassing intentions of the divine mission in the world.

What would happen were United Methodists to recover anew this ethos—this vision of a body of disciples bent on living not for themselves but for the larger good of God’s kingdom? Would they not refuse to settle for a denomination that exists, in Outler’s memorable words, “*ecclesia per se*”—driven by a desire for institutional maintenance and management?<sup>11</sup> Would they not relentlessly oppose any tendency to let the uncertainty and insecurity, the sense of social, spiritual, and intellectual confusion and malaise that inevitably accompany times of profound change stir an impulse merely to engage in control, to reign in the chaos, to redraw the familiar boundaries, to reach for a past that is gone? Would they not hold forth a vision of a United Methodist Church that is a community of hospitality, a body of believers that sees in the stranger, the other, the different,

the face of the crucified One and in holy love extends a welcome? A body of believers that refuses the distinctions between insiders and outsiders, between us and them, that so easily become barriers that exclude and divide? A fellowship that, in the spirit of Father Wesley, reaches out to those who have been left behind as the inevitable casualties of “progress”? Would they not cast a vision of a United Methodist Church that exists in these revolutionary times as a community of “bounded openness,” to use theologian Serene Jones’s very elegant phrase, given peculiar shape as a body of Christ by the gracious boundaries of doctrine and discipline, sacrament and service. Such a community yet “leans into openness,”<sup>12</sup> transgressing every barrier of fear and suspicion and embracing the stranger, the outsider, the one who is not like us in a confidence that is grounded not in its own ingenuity but in the boundless cosmos-embracing love of God. To this board—directors and staff—falls the sacred responsibility of leading our beloved church in preparing leaders like these. Let me say once more. Together we will be doing some of the most important, the most challenging yet most inspiring work we will ever be asked to do.

### ***Global leaders for a global church are advocates for a learned leadership***

For global leaders, the discipline of “loving God with one’s mind,” to borrow a phrase from Thomas Trotter, founding General Secretary of this board, is neither optional nor ancillary to their calling as leaders. Indeed, it is a “vital expression” of faithful discipleship in the Methodist way, as the Strategic Plan puts it. And so they call for a renewal of a Wesleyan vision of leadership that embodies the union of reason and vital piety, intellectual excellence and holiness of heart and life. For such leaders, any splitting of heart and mind, any denigrating of the “theological” in favor of the “practical” is as un-Methodist as it is pernicious and a practice the church can ill afford in face of the momentous sociological, theological, and institutional challenges looming ahead.

Global leaders for a global church uncompromisingly and unapologetically advocate for *educated and educating* leaders. They realize that healing the painful divisions, the injurious rancor, the false dichotomies and simplistic categories that are fracturing our communal discourse and renewing holy conferencing in the Methodist way calls for leaders with a

vision and a hope borne of the kind of wisdom that is possible only through rigorous, wide-ranging, and ongoing learning. These leaders strive for nothing less than a new public space, where issues that define our mission and ministry can be raised, debated, and resolved beyond the categories, dichotomies, and simplistic labels that now hold the church's conversation captive.

Global leaders for a global church embrace a vision inspired by Methodism's proud heritage of providing access to education to all, particularly the poor and those who are underserved. Beginning with John Wesley's founding of Kingswood School in 1748, Methodists have regarded education as a powerful tool for individual empowerment and social improvement. But providing access to high-quality education has also always been a matter of justice. Thus, global leaders for a global church envision an education "pipeline" that stretches around the world, training leaders with the spiritual moral and intellectual wherewithal to lead the church and the society in the midst of profound change.

So, it should come as no surprise that this agency sponsored and got approved a Global Education Fund whose aim is to support the church's higher education needs around the world. It should not surprise you that in passing the resolution on revitalizing The United Methodist Church, in essence General Conference passed the Strategic Plan of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Nor should it surprise anyone that a key strategy in our Strategic Plan is devoted explicitly to the task of rebuilding the United Methodist education pipeline for our day.

Finally, these leaders realize that theological discourse must be anchored in communities of mutual love, trust, respect, and, dare I say, accountability. For as Wesley taught us, for Methodists, theological discourse that transforms and heals is as much a matter of a right heart as it is of a right mind. I beg you, pray with me for leaders with the vision, tenacity, and persistence to lead the church beyond its tired, politically infested stalemate to a hopeful place, where heart and mind, reason and piety can be renewed and reinvigorated.

Global leaders for a global church harbor no illusions about the challenges of calling for a learned leadership in a world in which the sound bite reigns and in a church in which an incipient anti-intellectualism often

undermines the expectation for preaching and teaching that unsettle minds and hearts for the sake of the Kingdom. They know that advocating for the discipline of continued theological and intellectual growth and for a system that holds all United Methodist leaders accountable—from local pastor to deacon to elder to bishop—is perhaps nothing short of countercultural. Yet their commitment to their beloved church and the urgent needs of a complex age demand it. It is the responsibility of this agency to lead the church in preparing a generation of leaders fueled by such a vision. Dare I repeat: Together we will be doing some of the most important, the most challenging yet most inspiring work we will ever be called upon to do.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me bring this whole conversation home, if you will, to the journey on which you and I are embarking together. I do not believe I am indulging in hyperbole when I suggest that our success in leading the church in preparing, educating, and supporting leaders who are global leaders for a global world will stand in direct proportion to *our* willingness and ability to embody and reflect this vision in our own life together as a board. Can we truly expect the church to rise to this vision of leadership if we do not aspire to be leaders characterized by intellectual excellence, moral and spiritual courage, and holiness of heart and life? In the face of the crying hurts and needs of our world, the mind-boggling challenges of our revolutionary times, and the commitment to and love of the church present in this room, I have no doubt that, with the divine wind blowing at our backs, we will not only rise to that challenge but will surpass it.

This board's Strategic Plan, on which the vision of leadership I have articulated is based, reflects a journey of discernment that began shortly after I became General Secretary. The Strategic Plan is the beginning space for understanding the hopes and dreams that inspire the work of this board. But it represents a journey that is ongoing and whose success depends vitally on your wisdom, insight, and skill. This is a felicitous moment for us all to review our journey thus far and to deliberate together how the vision, mission, core values, and aims of the Strategic Plan can become the "blueprint" for our work together in the coming years.

I conclude with two promises from our Lord. The first is this: "From

everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48a). The second promise is this: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and some fell . . . into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundred-fold” (Luke 8:5, 8). In this new century, may we follow the divine Sower to the good soil and under the guidance of his Spirit faithfully cultivate those whom he has called to tend the fields until the time of harvest.

Once again, welcome to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Together, we can forge a formidable partnership that is equipped and able to lead our great church in recruiting, forming, nurturing, and deploying global leaders for a global church.

## Endnotes

1. “American FactFinder,” *U.S. Census Bureau* (16 October 2003), online: [http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/SAFFInfo.jsp?\\_pageId=t9\\_race\\_ethnicity](http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/SAFFInfo.jsp?_pageId=t9_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: <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: <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usintermpoj/>.
2. Quoted in Toby Lester, “Oh, Gods!” *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 2002): 38.
3. *Ibid.*, 44.
4. Philip Jenkins, “The Next Christianity,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2002): 54, 59.
5. *Ibid.*, 68.
6. John Wesley, “Reasons Against Separation from the Church of England,” in *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1882), 13:227.
7. Albert C. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. by Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 26–27.
8. *Ibid.*, 27.
9. Michael C. Cartwright discusses and calls for a retrieval of Methodism’s mission as “provisional” within the larger mission of Christ’s body (“The Pathos and Promise of American Methodist Ecclesiology,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 47/1 (Spring 1992):7-25.
10. Wesley, “Reasons Against Separation from the Church of England,” 228.
11. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?”, 26.
12. See Serene Jones, “Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism, and the Church Today,” *Interpretation* 55/1: 49-60.

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