

Meeting of the Board of Directors
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church
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A Vocation to Lead

When the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry launched its strategic planning process four years ago, it signaled that faithfulness to the gospel in the face of our emerging twenty-first-century reality demands nothing short of a new paradigm for how we formulate, interpret, and carry out our mission and ministry as an agency. No doubt some will interpret this move as a desperate attempt by yet one more mainline religious institution anxious about its fading relevance in a radically changing world to secure a slice of the increasingly competitive religious marketplace. Others may wonder aloud about the appropriateness of invoking concepts and language commonly associated with the dog-eat-dog world of corporate business to interpret the mission and ministry of an institution of the church. Still others, sufficiently jaded by years of observing the often-grinding pace of general church bureaucracy, will likely consider pronouncements about “strategic plans” and “new paradigms” as tantamount to putting a Band-Aid on a fatal wound. It simply won’t help. For these folks, the general agencies are bloated, complacent, dysfunctional, and out of touch with the seismic demographic, cultural, socio-economic, and religious shifts that are redefining our world today. They are relics, designed to respond to a world long gone. Thus, efforts at strategic planning and talk of paradigm shifts are simply too little too late.

While uncompromising and bleak, such criticisms and misgivings are a gift to us. For they prompt us to reconsider questions that go to the heart of our existence as an agency. Just what is

our reason for being? Do we really know? Do we truly *care* to know? Do we in fact have the breadth of vision, the openness, and the honesty to read the signs of the times truthfully? Or has fear turned vision into survival, openness into self-preoccupation, and honesty into self-promotion? Do we truly have the imagination and creativity, the nimbleness and agility—and, above all, the courage—to follow the ever-unpredictable Spirit, no matter what such obedience requires of us? Or have we exchanged imagination and creativity for the myopia of institutional maintenance, nimbleness and agility for the strangely self-assuring predictability of bureaucratic inertia, and courage for the cynical impotence of jaded dreams and weary hopes?

It is questions like these—uncompromising, truthful, and courageous—that prompted our strategic planning process four years ago; and they remain the *only* appropriate rationale for our continued pursuit of a new paradigm of mission and ministry. For you see, at heart these are questions about *vocation*, about how this agency interprets and lives out its calling amid the immense cultural, economic, political, and religious forces that are redefining our global reality. The journey on which we embarked in 2002 is no more and no less—nor dare it ever be more or less—than our yearning to read the signs of our times humbly and prayerfully so we may discern what God is calling us to be and to do in the world that is taking shape before us. Thus, for us strategic planning is not an end in itself. And it certainly is not an attempt to use clever business tactics to shore up our failing fortunes or to give ourselves an edge in an increasingly competitive religious marketplace—although at times that temptation is all too real. Instead, placed in the context of our ongoing discernment of God’s calling, strategic planning is best understood as a *spiritual practice*—a discipline for understanding, clarifying, and interpreting our divine calling; and our strategic plan becomes a way of concretely living out that calling in the church and in the world.

As we all know, seeking to discern God's will requires trust, humility, openness, and a genuine willingness to listen. This is particularly challenging in an environment that is undergoing massive, rapid, and often-unpredictable change. Our all-too-human tendency is to seek our security in the familiar, the taken-for-granted, even if this means returning to the fleshpots of Egypt. Seeking to discern God's will sincerely and truthfully is risky business. More often than not we will find ourselves in the wilderness, parched, hot, and weary, unsure whether the glimmerings on the horizon are mirages or glimpses of the Promised Land. As father Abraham knew so well, responding to the divine call means embarking on an adventure into the unknown, fraught with uncertainty, risk, and even danger. There are no certainties and no guarantees; there is only the promise that the God who called us will never leave us or forsake us. That is why we work out our salvation not by the certainty of sight but by the assurance of faith—and that is no less true for general agencies than it is for individual believers.

Any journey, particularly a risky one, requires stops along the way for reflection, reorientation, and rest. Four years into our journey and six years into the new century, it is fitting that we pause—albeit just for a moment—to rest and reflect. In short, it is fitting that we take stock. For in taking stock we regain our perspective, recapture the why, the how, the whence, and the whereto of the journey, and take courage for what lies ahead. Consider the next few minutes, then, as a stopping place along the way where we may remind ourselves why we are on the journey, what is at stake in continuing the journey, or in failing to continue, celebrate milestones along the way, and ponder the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

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We are privileged to do ministry in a truly defining moment in history. To appreciate the import of this moment and thus the significance of our journey as an agency, let me begin to

sketch in broad strokes the contours of the seismic demographic, social, cultural, and religious shifts that are redefining our global reality and reshaping the nature, practice, and center of gravity of Christianity in the twenty-first century. This reordering of the religious landscape—and of Christianity in particular—leads one scholar to observe, “It is no exaggeration to state that the current changes in world Christianity are as significant as the Reformation [of the sixteenth century] or the conversion of Constantine [in the fourth].”¹ The statement refers not only to the demographic shift of Christianity from the global North to the global South but also to the impact of this shift on the theology, worship, and practice of the faith in the coming decades. Western Christianity’s fifteen-hundred-year experiment with Christendom, which began with Emperor Constantine’s installment of Christianity as the faith of the empire, is fast coming to an end. Philip Jenkins, author of the celebrated *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, puts it bluntly: “In our lifetimes, the centuries-long North Atlantic captivity of the church is drawing to an end.”² The upshot of this dissolution of Christendom, says noted missiologist Andrew F. Walls, is that it “made possible a cultural diffusion of Christianity that is now in process of transforming it.”

Africa, Latin America, and Asia are emerging as the new “heartlands” of Christianity; so much so, says Jenkins, that by 2050 Africa and Latin America “will vie for the title of the most Christian continent.” He notes that Africans and Asians already represent 30 percent of all Christians; and by mid-century only about one-fifth of the projected 300 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites.³ Which leads Walls to this penetrating conclusion: “[W]hat Christianity of the twenty-first century will be like, in its theology, its worship, its effect on society, its

¹ Mark Laing, “The Changing Face of Mission: Implications for the Southern Shift of Christianity,” *Missiology: An International Review* 34/2 (April 2006):165.

² Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

³ *Ibid.*

penetration of new areas, whether geographically or culturally, will depend on what happens in Africa, Latin America, and some parts of Asia.”⁴ He adds with characteristic understatement, “We need to reflect on the implications of Africa and Latin America and Asia becoming the home of representative Christianity, that is, mainstream, norm-setting Christianity.”⁵ What are the implications of these sea changes for our commitment to preparing “global leaders for a global church”? Could anyone possibly still believe that business as usual will do? We certainly do not.

The impact of the dying of Christendom is no less significant for its traditional heartlands of Europe and North America. Nowadays it is commonplace to refer to Europe as “post-Christian.” Yet the end of the Constantinian era is no less visible in North America, even if many Christians still behave as if the church’s marginalization is the rhetoric of a cadre of anti-Christian secularists. Christianity’s decades-long role as the dominant force shaping the religious and cultural ethos of American life, as the source of a distinctively Christian civil religion, complete with visions of a “Christian America,” is nearing its end. The fact is, says Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, until recently Christianity has enjoyed a *de facto* cultural establishment in North America, the famed “wall of separation” between church and state notwithstanding. And yet the demise of North American-style Christendom—the cultural disestablishment of the church—is as undeniable as it is inexorable.⁶ Witness the steady erosion of the authority of cultural symbols derived from a Christian civil religion now slowly fading. Note the diminishing influence, prestige, and privilege of so-called mainline denominations in the public square and

⁴ Andrew F. Walls, “Christianity in the Western World: A Study in the Serial Nature of Christian Expansion,” in *The Cross-Cultural Progress in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 32.

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, “From Christendom to World Christianity: Missions and the Demographic Transformation of the Church,” in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 68.

⁶ Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* (The United Church Publishing House, 1989), 12.

the halls of power. Observe the explosion of ethnic, cultural, and religious pluralism in our society, further dissolving an erstwhile Christian hegemony. Most important of all, witness the growing dominance of consumer capitalism as the heartbeat of American life and with it the erosion of denominational loyalty, the privileging of individual satisfaction over communal goods, and the trading in religious ideas and practices as commodities for individual self-fulfillment. With the steady demise of predictable religious traditions and well-defined denominational identities, says United Methodist theologian Jackson Carroll, more and more congregations, both inside and outside the mainline denominations, will experiment with new organizational forms and ecclesial practices, often finding themselves in tension with the beliefs, patterns, and practices of their denominations. The growing diversity in congregational forms and practices, notes Carroll, has less and less to do with denominational distinctives and much more to do with the influence of “local circumstances, de facto congregationalism, borrowing models that others have found to be successful, and competition in the religious marketplace.”⁷

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For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, times of upheaval and change, however unsettling and disconcerting, are gifts of grace, for such times always prompt us to ask the question of vocation. As I said earlier, for us, our journey in strategic planning is a process of vocational discernment. And so we ask, what is God calling the people called United Methodists to be and to do in this new circumstance? What is God calling the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to be and to do in order to lead the church in fulfilling its mission with courage and integrity? For me, borrowing from my address in October 2004, *the vocation of the*

⁷ Jackson W. Carroll, *Mainline to the Future: Congregations for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 7.

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry is to prepare global leaders for a global church.

Given the global landscape that is taking form in our post-Christendom world, this is indeed an awesome and awe-inspiring calling. Lest anyone be tempted to interpret the phrase *global leaders* here to refer only to United Methodists serving beyond the United States, let me quote Andrew Walls's salutary observation about the strategic place of the United States in the emerging post-Christendom context: "The principal Christian significance of the United States may now be the fact that . . . nearly all the main Christian discourses have functioning Christian congregations here. More than in any other nation in the world, the body of Christ could be realized—or fractured—in the United States."⁸

Walls's observation underlines in dramatic fashion an assumption that permeates our strategic plan, from vision to mission to core values to goals to strategies: Assisting The United Methodist Church to participate faithfully in realizing rather than fracturing the body of Christ in the United States and around the world depends vitally on the quality and kind of leaders we are able to help the church recruit, educate, form, nurture, and deploy.

Just what should such global leaders for a global church look like? In my 2004 address, I identified three characteristics that make up the profile of such a leader. I believe these three characteristics accurately reflect the contours of leadership that are emerging from the goals and objectives of our current strategic plan.

1. Global leaders for a global church are guardians of the connection.

"Perhaps the most striking feature of Christianity today," observes Andrew Walls, "is the fact that the church now looks more like that great multitude whom none can number, drawn from all

⁸ Walls, "From Christendom to World Christianity," 69.

tribes and kindreds, people and tongues, than ever before in its history.”⁹ A church that dares to be a global body, knit together in a connection of breathtaking diversity, needs leaders with uncommon vision, spiritual maturity, theological dexterity, and practical creativity. For, while this global covenant makes possible extraordinary opportunities for ministry, it also harbors very real possibilities for fear, mutual suspicion, misunderstanding, and fragmentation. This commitment to our global connection in its rich diversity finds unequivocal expression in the goals and objectives of our strategic plan. Take the unambiguous call in Goal II for lay and clergy leaders, educated and formed in the Wesleyan tradition, “who reflect the global community and strengthen the diversity of the denomination.” This board expresses its commitment to this value in myriad ways through its work. I highlight just a few.

- At an event on August 11-13, 2006, in Chicago, the Women of Color Scholars program, initiated through the Office of Loans and Scholarships and the Division of Ordained Ministry, celebrated its eighteenth year. This visionary initiative aims to create a pool of United Methodist women of color, many of them clergy, who are committed to infusing United Methodist educational institutions, and especially our thirteen theological schools and seminaries, with the diverse voices and perspectives they need to help prepare leaders capable of ministering effectively in our multicultural and multiracial society. The deep commitment of these women to diversity, their passionate commitment to academic excellence, and their astute engagement with the salient issues facing the church today simply reinforced their indispensable role in creating a United Methodist Church that looks like the “great multitude whom none can number.”

⁹ Walls, “Christianity in the Non-Western World,” 47.

- Held on August 13-17, 2006, in Chicago, directly following the Women of Color Celebration, the International Clergywomen’s Consultation convened to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of full clergy rights for women. Speakers, workshops, and worship services reminded us of the heroic journey of clergywomen toward full inclusion in The United Methodist Church. In celebration of the historic 1956 decision, the Office of Interpretation released *Courageous Past–Bold Future*, a landmark work by Patricia Thompson that chronicles this poignant story of passion, struggle, courage, and hope. How infinitely impoverished would The United Methodist Church be today without the immense contribution of women to the diversity of perspective, vision, and practice of its leadership. And how far do we yet have to travel to make this journey complete!
- A further investment in the education and nurture of leaders for our increasingly diverse church and world came with the publication of *Meeting God at the Boundaries: A Manual for Church Leaders*, by Lucia Ann McSpadden. Building on her earlier volume, *Meeting God at the Boundaries: Cross-Cultural–Cross-Racial Clergy Appointments*, Dr. McSpadden provides church leaders and groups involved in cross-cultural-cross-racial ministry with basic concepts in cross-cultural competency as well as practical tools for engaging in this cutting-edge ministry with integrity and faithfulness. This resource, enabled by this board’s vision, is a promissory note for the future that our church must embrace if it is to have a robust presence and mission in the cause of Christ in a society and world that requires “meeting God at the boundaries” of racial and cultural diversity if we are serious about making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Indeed,

if authentic discipleship and real-time transformation are to be more than glittering generalities, resources such as this will be essential in enabling us to confront and overcome the menacing reality that “11:00 o’clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America” and in The United Methodist Church in the United States.

- The remarkable efforts by staff to support Dillard University in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina not only deserve our sincere thanks but also reinforce once more this agency’s commitment to strengthening the educational ministry of the denomination’s historically Black colleges and universities. The contribution of these institutions to a more diverse leadership in church and society has been immense and promises to increase as these schools explore ways to reach out to the burgeoning Hispanic/Latino population in the United States.

2. Global leaders for a global church are bearers of a renewed vision of the church.

There is a vision of a United Methodist Church that recovers its uniquely Methodist ethos—a disposition that brooks no self-interested denominational navel-gazing or myopic preoccupation with institutional maintenance and survival. Rather, like their eighteenth-century Methodist forebears, they strive for a church that embraces a vision of holy love, spent with abandon for the sake of God’s vocation in the world.

What would such a vision of our church look like for our day? And what would leaders look like who bear that vision with assurance and competence? Among the myriad ways in which this great agency labors to respond to this task, let me draw attention to just a few.

- Charged by the 2004 General Conference to bring clarity to the nature, theology, and practice of ordered ministry in The United Methodist Church, this agency convened the Commission on the Study of Ministry. Through the Commission's work, we hope to offer United Methodists a vision for ordering our life and our leadership with the nimbleness, flexibility, and creativity needed for faithful ministry in our day. The fruit of the Commission's work—a report authored with the able assistance of Dr. Thomas Frank of Candler School of Theology—will be presented to you for study and decision in the next few months before being submitted to General Conference in 2008.
- Scheduled for April 19-22, 2007, and celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Order of Deacons, *Celebrating Diakonia* is part of our ongoing effort to lead the church in understanding the revolutionary potential of this new order for recovering United Methodism's historic commitment to the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded.
- Our commitment to social holiness finds further expression in a criminal justice summit planned for fall 2008, following a highly provocative summit held in September 2005 under the auspices of the United Methodist Endorsing Agency. The summit will be accompanied by a book exploring United Methodist prison ministry in the context of criminal justice, authored by leading United Methodist scholars and practitioners in the field.
- There is no doubt in my mind that a renewed vision of our beloved church and a reinvigorated ministry will not happen without the energy, hopes, and gifts of young people—a conviction affirmed in Goal I of the strategic plan. However,

with a church population whose average age is 56 and with fewer than 900 clergy under age 35, the urgent need for concerted, focused attention to encouraging young people to pursue lay and ordained ministry is abundantly evident. Thus, GBHEM took the lead by creating a cross-divisional position in student ministries, vocation, and enlistment. Through this office, we support a wide variety of ongoing and new initiatives, such as EXPLORATION 2006 (held this year on November 17-19 in Jacksonville, Florida), aimed at encouraging high-school seniors and young people to consider ordained ministry; and an exciting new venture ExploreCalling.org—a website for youth, college students, seminary students, young adults (and those who work with them) who are considering how God may be calling them to ministry (lay or ordained).

- While handed down in a case dealing with a United Methodist pastor's refusal to take an openly gay man into membership, Judicial Council Decision 1032, issued last year, advertently or inadvertently opened up crucial theological issues about the nature of the church and the integrity of its appointed leadership. To offer a hospitable place for in-depth, vigorous discussion of these church-defining issues by persons representing the spectrum of United Methodist theological persuasion, GBHEM is hosting a consultation on February 15-16, 2007, here in Nashville.

3. Global leaders for a global church are advocates for a learned leadership.

In preparing global leaders for a global church, GBHEM continues Methodism's historic commitment to clergy and lay leadership that embodies the union of reason and vital piety, intellectual excellence and holiness of heart and life. For us, this historic commitment is

expressed in three interrelated values: (1) education must be of the highest quality; (2) education must be accessible to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, or social, economic, or political standing; and (3) education must be global. These values, as reflected in Goals IV and V of the strategic plan, are embodied in every effort to recruit, educate, form, and nurture clergy and lay leadership intellectually equipped to lead church and society in our complex times. Consider just a couple of examples.

- The Methodist Global Education Fund for Leadership Development, under the guidance of Dr. Ken Yamada, is an education fund that helps to improve, strengthen, and advance Methodist schools, colleges, universities, and theological schools on five continents. This audacious undertaking has the potential not only to support high quality education and enable access to superior learning to thousands of people around the world but also to be a major catalyst in The United Methodist Church's effort to be a global church. This initiative is born of the conviction that it is not possible as heirs of Wesleyan Methodism to claim a global commitment if there is no defined and sustainable infrastructure to develop leaders—the ingredient other than the gospel itself that is most integral to the church's pursuit of its mission in the world. This is surely the most exciting global initiative to emanate from this board since the founding of Africa University.
- From the beginning of the Methodist movement, literature has been fundamental to preparing clergy and lay leaders. Take John Wesley's response to a Methodist preacher who complained that he had no taste for reading: "Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade." The need for clergy and lay leaders with a passion for learning has never been more critical than today. Douglas John Hall is surely

prophetic when he observes, “The only thing that will prevent the churches, in the midst of their cultural and social disestablishment, from disintegrating or being taken over by very questionable, one-sided elements within them is a lively and deep *theological* renewal.” For us, renewal of our church’s mission in our emerging post-Christendom context will not happen without deep and sustained theological reflection about the nature and practice of its leadership. The rationale behind the major revision of our publishing and communication’s plan currently underway is precisely to contribute in a decisive way to the theological reflection about the leadership our church needs for faithful ministry in the twenty-first century. And I am very pleased to say that our plan is already bearing fruit. Thus far this year we have published five important books (some of which I have already mentioned), with two more in production. And we have begun a substantial redesign of the board’s website that promises to improve significantly our ability to carry out our mission globally.

- Thankfully, unlike too many other mainline Protestant denominations, United Methodism has not (dare I say yet) divested itself of essential institutional forms that express its mission and give specific substance to this board’s vocational claims on behalf of the church. We still can claim relationship with the largest number of church-related schools, colleges, universities and theological schools of any Protestant denomination in the world, including, as noted earlier, the greatest number of historically Black colleges and universities. All of these institutions have been integral to our leadership development infrastructure and have contributed greatly to fulfilling our mission. Yet it is clear from the sea

changes noted earlier that this board must lead in new and creative ways to forge interventions that enhance appropriate mutual accountability with these institutions and the church that results in leadership development outcomes which are consistent with the financial resources provided by the church for support of schools, colleges universities, and theological schools. This is not to assert a proprietary interest in these institutions or a veiled incursion on the nonnegotiable value of academic freedom. Rather, it is a first, even if somewhat overdue, step in claiming with specificity the relationship of mutuality, respect, and accountability that the term *church-related school, college, university, and theological school* at least suggests and more fully requires.

- My staff and I are committed to the assumption—clear in the strategic plan—that campus ministry is a linchpin in the educational pipeline. We dare not give short shrift to this ministry; and it will require resources we have not provided in the past. We have a responsibility to extend the gospel into a marketplace of ideas that is far more challenging than the average Sunday school class. We must be prepared to put resources—both human and financial—to this vital ministry if we are going to lead as the denomination and the *Book of Discipline* expect us to lead. No one else in the denomination except the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry is charged with this responsibility. We are open to the idea of partnering with others in the educational marketplace. But make no mistake: no one is going to upstage the work of this board across the nation in regard to church-related schools, colleges, and universities as well as state-sponsored institutions.

The examples I have highlighted are simply a small sampling of the astonishing array of programs, initiatives, and interventions through which this agency seeks to be faithful to its calling in our changing world. I gladly and proudly offer my sincere thanks to the staff for their commitment and hard work, and to you directors for your support and guidance.

I would be seriously remiss if I did not point out that none of this work would be possible without the conscientious stewardship of the board's financial resources by both staff and directors. Not only did we receive unqualified audits for 2005, we are also projected to come in under budget for 2006. Moreover, the investment committee's prudent management of roughly \$125 million in assets makes possible many of the agency's programs, such as student loans, scholarships, and support of United Methodist-related institutions of higher education, including Africa University.

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There are four ways to respond to Christendom's demise and the church's cultural disestablishment, says Douglas John Hall. (1) We could deny that it is happening. (2) We could attempt to recover Christendom. (3) We could behave as if nothing had happened. There are certainly many Christians today, including plenty of United Methodists, who are opting for one of these responses. But, says Hall, there is a fourth, more costly yet more authentic, option open to the church: Accept the church's disestablishment, discern the positive meaning in this historical moment, and use this reflection to discover new ways of being the church in our day.¹⁰ In other words, this historic turn of events affords the body of Christ, including The United Methodist Church and this agency, an opportunity to discern afresh its vocation in the world. As I said at the outset, such rethinking of our calling will require nothing short of a new paradigm for our thinking and doing. And I have sought to identify the contours of the new paradigm that

¹⁰ Hall, *The Future of the Church*, 28-33.

is emerging for us in our strategic plan. What needs to be said once more, and said unequivocally, is this: Embracing and living out of this new paradigm calls for the kind of hope and faith—and above all the kind of courage—that is possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Together, we—directors and staff—have set out on a risky yet exciting journey in a time of upheaval. God is not above us or behind us. Rather, God is in the midst of the tumult, beckoning us to follow. Our only fitting response—indeed, our vocation—is to follow with faith-filled abandon, resisting the ever-present urge to return to the security of yesterday and the safety of the predictable. May God grant us the hope, faith, and courage to lead our beloved church in preparing a generation of leaders equipped to guide the people called United Methodists in faithful and effective ministry in our post-Christendom world.