

“Transformed by the Renewing of Our Minds”

Report of the General Secretary
Meeting of the Board of Directors
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
Thursday, August 23, 2007

Beginning with my address to you in October 2004, I have been speaking about the seismic demographic, social, political, economic, and religious shifts that are refiguring the global landscape and the new challenges and opportunities these shifts hold for the mission and ministry of this agency. At that time, I suggested that our changing world context requires nothing less than global leaders for a global church. Three years later, I am more convinced than ever of that vision.

Today it pleases me greatly to be able to say that this vision is not mine alone. It is *ours* as a board—a fact made very clear by your endorsement of the Strategic Plan in October 2006. The fact is the vision of global leaders for a global church permeates the Strategic Plan, from vision to mission to core values to goals, objectives, and strategies. And this commitment has begun to bear fruit in some truly exciting ways, at times through new initiatives, at other times through the restructuring or expansion of existing efforts and programs.

Consider just a couple of examples. The Methodist Global Education Fund for Leadership Development, a bold new initiative under the leadership of Dr. Ken Yamada, promises to strengthen dramatically the role of 775 Methodist-affiliated secondary schools, colleges, universities, and theological schools in 69 countries as vehicles for developing dynamic, high-quality leadership. Or take Africa University. As its second phase of development gets under way, the university is creating a distance-education infrastructure, system, and program that will provide higher education access to people in Mozambique, Angola, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Also, GBHEM and Africa University are partnering with United

Methodist Communications to develop distance-education digital communication systems in the Africa central conferences using satellite and radio technology to transform local churches into dynamic places of worship and for education.

Yet, as we know, in our increasingly interconnected world, we are all impacted by the forces of globalization, no matter whether we live in the suburbs or the inner city or the countryside. What happens in Beijing or Johannesburg or São Paulo or New York affects our lives, from the clothes we wear to the jobs we do to the food we eat to the religious, ethical, and political views we hold. And so the church in the United States—perhaps *particularly* the church in the United States, given this country’s place in our world today—must prepare leaders who appreciate the complexities of our emerging global reality and can guide congregations and institutions in faithful ministry in the midst of it. In other words, even in the United States we need to prepare global leaders for a global church. It is because this board and its staff grasp this crucial point that a global perspective is reflected in even those goals in the Strategic Plan aimed largely at the church in the United States. This means 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 or lay 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 and IsGodCallingYou.org, and recently released publications such as the sixth edition of *The Christian as Minister* and *Answering God’s Call for Your Life*.

It took many months of careful thought and tireless effort on the part of both board members and staff to translate our vision for leadership into a concrete plan of action. No one can come

away from reading our Strategic Plan and not sense our passion for preparing leaders, both clergy and lay, trained and equipped to lead the church with spiritual conviction and intellectual integrity in our complex times. Indeed, I believe that, as the new century unfolds, the Strategic Plan will prove prescient and prophetic. For this investment in foresight and creativity, I thank you. Surely the next board of directors could not have asked for a more fitting gift as it takes up its task in October 2008.

Perhaps it is the way the Strategic Plan has crystallized leadership development as our singular focus that has prompted the Connectional Table to assign GBHEM as lead agency for the interagency collaboration on leadership development for the denomination. Cumbersome and at times convoluted as this process has been, the effort affords GBHEM an opportunity to bring to this venture the careful thought about leadership that undergirds the Strategic Plan. For preparing GBHEM, albeit perhaps unwittingly, to lead the general church in this way, I thank you.

I am also deeply grateful to directors and staff for the dedication, professionalism, and grace with which they responded to a budget process initiated by the Connectional Table and the General Council on Finance and Administration that can only be described as flawed, chaotic, and dangerously close to undermining the responsibilities of this board's directors to fulfill their financial fiduciary responsibilities. The fact that this agency spent in excess of \$100,000 dollars in staff time, travel, and other services in meeting the requirements and demands of this undertaking is a clear indication that something is drastically wrong. Staff and directors showed remarkable flexibility, creativity, patience, even dexterity in meeting seemingly ever-shifting deadlines, confusing information, and conflicting instructions from the Connectional Table and the General Council on Finance and Administration; in completing a process of evaluation and

review; and in addressing the usual compliance requirements. It is not in the least surprisingly then that, the disarray of the budgeting process notwithstanding, GBHEM received a clean external audit for four years in a row. I have given staff my commitment that, as long as I am general secretary, this agency will not be subjected to this kind of process again.

The fact is this board of directors has responded to and accomplished what was required of it with efficiency, dedication, and thoughtfulness. You have guided this agency well in affirming a vision and mission and in setting policy that will stand it in good stead in years to come. For all this work, I am deeply grateful. And to the staff, who so frequently went beyond the call of duty—and at times, it seems, even beyond what is reasonable to expect—to balance an internal workload with often unexpected external challenges: thank you for your commitment, tenacity, and style.

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Yet, despite these considerable accomplishments, the crucial task before this board as we anticipate General Conference is to address the need for a critical course correction. Put simply, it is time for this agency to push back at denominational processes and demands that have diverted us from attending to our core responsibilities as we needed to. Our push back comes not in the form of tinkering further with bureaucratic structure or getting better at denominational power games. We push back by claiming our vision and core values more robustly and resiliently and by refusing to allow anything or anyone to distract us from living them out. For reasons I will spell out below, I submit that the core value that should focus our push back at this time is our Disciplinary responsibility to serve as an advocate for the intellectual life of the church (*Book of Discipline*, ¶1405.1).

I realize that the point of this claim might not be immediately obvious. What I mean is this: I am persuaded that at the heart of the current confusion, dysfunction, and disunity afflicting so many aspects of the church's life—from ministry to structure to morality to money—lies a deep deficit in theological reflection. I am further convinced that adequately addressing these struggles in our life together will not happen without a renewing of our minds as United Methodists, *beginning with those of us entrusted with leading our beloved church in faithful ministry at this crucial juncture in history*. As the Apostle Paul warns, without a renewal of our minds, we risk missing the will of God for the church (Rom. 12:2). Indeed, without subjecting everything we say and do to Spirit-guided theological reflection, we are in danger of being “conformed to this world”—taken in, wittingly or unwittingly, by the values, assumptions, and interests of our culture. Paul goes so far as to claim that the church's transformation into a faithful vehicle of God's will *depends* on the renewal of its mind. For this reason alone, United Methodists need to overcome our ambivalence about the life of the mind in our mission and ministry at all levels of our institutional life. We can no longer afford to act first and think later. The stakes are simply too high, given the massive challenges and the profound opportunities facing our denomination at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

My plea that we focus our push back on calling the church to deep-running theological reflection is nothing new to this agency. Indeed, it has been a stated core conviction of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry for 31 of its 35 years of existence. We have claimed the obligation “to serve as an advocate for the intellectual life of the church” since 1976, when the phrase entered the *Book of Discipline* on the strength of legislation submitted by this board. From the beginning, this agency understood the challenge of such advocacy in a denomination unaccustomed to turning first to theology in addressing ecclesial problems. We

knew full well that insisting that adequate responses to what ails the church will not happen without careful, sustained theological reflection will strike many United Methodist leaders as counterintuitive at best and naïve at worst. We realized that calling for theological reflection in times of denominational upheaval will appear to some as an invitation into abstraction ill suited to dealing with “practical” problems requiring “practical” solutions. Yet staff and directors knew that the theological task is unavoidable, particularly—and *precisely*—in times of crisis. For in the end *every* issue in mission, ministry, and money has a theological dimension that requires careful statement and restatement. Thus, after lambasting the General Council on Ministries and the General Council on Finance and Administration for recommending what he considered wholly inadequate budget increases for the 1981-84 quadrennium, Dr. F. Thomas Trotter, first full-time general secretary, opined in his state of the board address in October 1979:

The theological issues will loom larger in the next period than they have in the past. As we as church get closer to the fiscal bone, the reasons for doing things will loom more important. *The reasons for doing things in the church form the church’s theology* [emphasis added]. When we cannot any longer solve problems by tinkering with the system or when we cannot solve problems without spending more dollars, then we are, as they say, “thrown back on our own resources.” For Christian folk, that is tradition, reason, scripture, and experience, in short, theology.¹

In other words, it is precisely in those times of greatest challenge, when we run out of ways to “fix” the church, that we are compelled to examine our “reasons for doing things.” Contrary to conventional wisdom, then, it is the renewing of our minds after all that promises a path to deep and lasting transformation.

This is the course correction I am calling for today. For we, too, like our compatriots 28 years ago, face a denomination that is “getting closer to the fiscal bone,” that realizes, at least viscerally, that “we cannot any longer solve problems by tinkering with the system” or by merely spending more money (money most of us no longer have). For us, too, “the reasons for doing

¹ F. Thomas Trotter, “State of the Board,” *Yearbook of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry*, 1979.

things” loom terribly important—and only careful, patient, and sustained theological reflection will do. To this end, I envision this board’s intentional enlistment of the considerable resources of the superb community of women and men in our schools, colleges, universities, and theological schools who care passionately for the church and their role in advancing the cause of Christ in the world.

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The theological deficit I identified earlier lies at the heart of most of the issues vexing The United Methodist Church today, and particularly those impacting the mission and ministry of the general agencies. Let me provide just a few examples to illustrate my point.

I begin with the quadrennial budget process, mentioned earlier, which is administered under the auspices of the Connectional Table. At first glance, this seems like an unlikely choice, since United Methodists are not in the habit of using the words “money” and “theology” in the same sentence. In my address to you in October 2005, titled “Faithful Stewards of the Mysteries of God,” I said the following about the newly formed Connectional Table:

The Connectional Table represents a powerful opportunity for revitalizing the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church in the new century. However, ironically, it also harbors the real danger of contributing to the further fracturing of the United Methodist connection. I submit that whether the Connectional Table will be blessing or bane depends vitally on the willingness of the church’s leaders to subject this new confluence of “connection,” “mission,” “money,” and “ministry” to deep-running theological scrutiny. The fact is United Methodism’s unfortunate penchant for a distorted pragmatism that says “If it works, let’s do it” is a bane to our church. It permits us to move everything to the lowest common denominator and so squeezes out opportunities for serious theological reflection.

Unfortunately, our experience with the quadrennial budget process over the past months has provided ample evidence of just such a distorted pragmatism, functioning on the basis of the lowest common denominator and reducing theological reflection to religious platitudes designed to back up a previously formulated framework and process. Missing here is just the thing I had

held out the hope for in my address two years ago, namely, an approach to mission and money grounded in a serious biblical and theological understanding and practice of stewardship. It is a theology of stewardship that should provide the basis for connecting money and missional needs for general agencies, not the logic of the market or the interests of Wall Street, important as these are. Failing this hard theological work, we run the danger of uncritically using—and, in so doing, blessing—financial practices and assumptions that, upon reflection, may be ill suited for advancing the mission of the church in the years ahead. Renewal of the mind of the church in faithful reflection on scripture, tradition, reason, and experience will not easily permit crafting a budget again based primarily, if not solely, on a market and giving trends analysis that yields a view of God and God’s people that says, “Resources are scarce; the church will give only this or that much; so, even though we need \$681 million, the bottom line must be \$641 million.”

Take as a second example the Council of Bishops’ effort at guiding the church in the understanding and practice of its mission by way of seven “vision pathways.” Originally intended to guide the bishops in their respective episcopal areas, the pathways subsequently became the inspiration for the four “focus areas” developed collaboratively by the eight program agencies at the direction of the Connectional Table: leadership development; starting new churches and strengthening existing congregations; ministry with the poor; and global health. While I applaud our episcopal leaders for exercising their teaching office, I fear the proposal lacks the theological orientation necessary for authentic and lasting denominational renewal. My greatest concern is the absence of a clearly articulated ecclesiological framework as the context for understanding how the vision pathways relate and how they impact and support one another. Lacking such coherence, the vision pathways threaten to splinter into so many “options” from which congregations and annual conferences might choose, depending on their purpose and

predilections. As a consequence, the rich understanding of what it means to “make disciples” in the Wesleyan way will have little chance of transforming our ecclesial life, from congregations to seminaries to general agencies.

Third, the absence of a clearly articulated, coherent ecclesiological framework for interpreting and applying the vision pathways has weakened the potential of the interagency collaboration around the four focus areas, initiated during the quadrennium. Predictably, there was much confusion and lack of clarity—still unresolved—in discerning how the four emphases would impact and, if necessary, transform existing agency portfolios and programs. For example, GBHEM has been assigned as lead agency for the focus on leadership development, while GBOD was given responsibility for the focus on new church development and revitalizing existing congregations. Yet, how does the church discern the kind and quality of leaders it needs without considering how and why it wants to start churches? How can we talk about revitalizing congregations without considering the kind of clergy leader needed to lead this task effectively? Alternatively, if the church is serious about ministering to and with the poor and marginalized, then how does that commitment guide decisions about where churches are started and revitalized and the leadership skills and gifts needed to minister faithfully on the margins? Without taking the time to consider questions like these with the theological care they deserve, interagency collaboration will remain superficial at best and fragmentary and ideologically driven at worst.

Many of the church’s “reasons for doing things” begging for theological scrutiny manifested themselves in a variety of other contexts during the past quadrennium—all with significant consequences for our work as a board. Not surprisingly, many of the issues—particularly those dealing with ecclesiology and leadership—cropped up and were debated vigorously in the work of the Ministry Study Commission. Key theological questions failed to be resolved, and it is a

testimony to the integrity of the Commission that it refused to settle for a false consensus. As the Commission has rightly and clearly stated in its report: “[There is a] lack of coherence in our church’s ecclesiology.” And it is this glaring deficit that has impeded the Commission’s ability “to help the church gain clarity about its ministries in relation to each other, particularly to address the standing of local pastors and deacons . . .”

There are those who would contend that the eclectic heritage of Anglican, Reformed, Pietist, and Evangelical views of church that have shaped our current understanding of “being church” should be embraced and that we should get on with it, even if it perpetuates and deepens our malaise. This is an option, of course. But I submit that it is not a viable option if The United Methodist Church, particularly in the United States, is to engage the world with a mission that is more than being a vendor of religious services in a competitive religious marketplace that requires more and more lay and clergy leaders to serve an institution that no longer sees itself as a “sent community” but as a chaplain of the territory in which it once was successful. To overcome this still-perennial temptation to be successful—indeed, in order to be a missional church that knows that it will not always win when it makes an effort to be clear about the directions of God’s justice and the forms of God’s *shalom*—we must recommit ourselves to the renewing of our minds. Only in the recovery of our theological task will our church discern that its calling, when there is promise of successful transformation of society, is an authentic calling of God when success is doubtful, when failure is likely, and when the consequence is suffering.

These examples confirm the urgent need for the course correction for which I have called in the use of this board’s precious resources. Our commitment as directors and staff to be a learning community that takes seriously the intellectual demands of figuring out what it means to be a global church or what is the authority of a pastor in the reception of members into the church

must not be upstaged by the centralizing and regulatory tendencies of The United Methodist Church. We must reclaim vigorously what some may think absurd, namely, to lead the church in its quest for clarity and coherence in our identity (who we are), our mission (what God is calling us to do in the world), and our ordered leadership (those who are set apart). None of these responsibilities can be permitted to be the province of any narrow, angular bureaucratic purpose. By the decision of the people called United Methodists, through the General Conference, the advocacy and care for this enterprise have been given to this board. It is my hope that you agree and that yours will be the last word in this address: “So, Mr. General Secretary, let’s get on with it!” I thank you.