

## CHAPTER 12

### SORTING YOUR DENOMINATION'S WINESKINS

Despite the burgeoning growth of the independent or post-denominational church all over the world, the vast majority of professing Christians still affiliate with denominational churches. Over 1.5 billion believers (one quarter of the world's population) associate with denominational churches, and 1.2 billion affiliate with major denominations such as Roman Catholicism and other more bureaucratic entities.<sup>1</sup> The temptation to abandon these denominations and their people for freer and more fruitful ministry outside them must be tempered with the knowledge that the greatest potential for world evangelization today continues to lie within the denominations. It is prudent for visionary leaders to stay within the bureaucratized denominations, mobilize existing local churches, and cultivate replicable models of church renewal and mobilization. The challenge is more difficult, but the reward will be far greater.

To see renewal and mass mobilization in denominational churches, the local church leader must be fearlessly committed to the mission of disciple making. He or she must cultivate systems and structures that support that mission and then confront any that do not. The parish leader must sort through the local church and denominational structures that mobilize believers as well as those that immobilize believers. The wineskins of rules, regulations, and practices must be thoroughly inspected. Some must be discarded or ignored; others must be passionately, persistently and relentlessly challenged. At this stage in history, the presiding leader of a denominational church must become a reformer. It is our work to be trendsetters.

#### **Capitalizing on Itinerancy Rather than Capitulating**

Trend-setting rather than trend-riding is critical for visionary leaders in declining organizations. Consequently, pastors within the declining United Methodist Church must

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<sup>1</sup> *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, 10.

become very discerning with their denominational structures. They must consider with critical eyes how they can deal constructively with the time-honored practice of moving preachers.

Clergy may opt out of the itinerancy by requesting “Honorable Location.”<sup>2</sup> By doing this, they will no longer be subject to a move. In most cases, however, they will be unable to retain their assignments to their current churches. Furthermore, they surrender their voice and vote in the denomination.<sup>3</sup> With approval of a district superintendent, they can work freely under the supervision of an itinerant pastor and be accountable to the pastor’s church.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, if that pastor moves, they may find themselves restricted by an unsympathetic pastor and may be unable to obtain the superintendent’s approval in keeping their accountability with the pastor who moved. “Honorable Location” could lead to a whole new set of restrictions and problems. Nevertheless, leaders who feel a lifetime call to evangelizing a specific community may under certain circumstances want to consider this option. Associate pastors, appointed by the bishop to a multicongregational church, may also wish to consider “Honorable Location.”

An alternative to opting out of the itinerant system is to lobby within it. Any agreement reached with one’s supervisors is complicated by the fact that district superintendents serve a maximum of eight one-year terms,<sup>5</sup> and bishops are permitted a maximum of three 4-year terms in one area.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, a series of denominational leaders must each be convinced of the value of long term or lifetime commitments to a congregation and territory.

A third and equally difficult course is to rewrite *The Discipline*. Incremental changes are easier to achieve than massive reforms, and a general improvement could be accomplished by changing most restrictions to recommendations. Andy Langford and William Willimon recommend new disciplinary language (see Appendix A) that would change the consultation process that bishops employ in making appointments. Their proposal would give both clergy and local churches more voice in the assignment of new

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<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 357. Honorable Location.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 357. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 357. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 418. Limitations on Years of Service.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 407. Assignment Process.

pastors, although the bishop would surrender no power. They hope that such a process would improve and lengthen the stay of pastors in local churches.

Other disciplinary changes might permit bishops to explore creative and experimental leadership development and deployment by developing pilot projects with growth goals, where up to one-tenth of an annual conference's churches and clergy may test concepts of leadership succession and terms different from what *The Discipline* mandates currently. For example, experiments could be done with pastoral succession from within a church rather than the appointment of a leader from outside it. The Bishop, church and pastor may agree upon ten-year pastoral terms that are renewable or even a lifetime commitment to a congregation and community.

Whatever the case, leaders need not capitulate to the suitcase mentality that cripples the ministry of United Methodist pastors. They can capitalize on their voice, their vote and their relationships with episcopal leaders. They also can explore the original intent of itinerancy and more frequently solicit the preaching and leadership gifts of evangelists, apostles and prophets. They can use the itinerancy of Christian ministers to expand their churches' vision and help them equip their people for greater work.

### **Encouraging a Different Method of Denominational Funding**

A second major wineskin that must be addressed is the apportionment process. In June of 2000, the Minnesota Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church received a report from a two-year study of different methods for funding its ministry. The Connectional Funding Project Team forwarded two proposals. One adjusted the formula by which the conference budget was apportioned to the local church. The other mandated that the annual conference adjust its budget to a tithe of income received by local churches for their operations (see appendix B). It further directed the annual conference to tithe its income to the General Church rather than automatically pay what the General Church apportioned. That latter proposal makes the local congregation, not the denominational hierarchy, the center of the church's vision and mission. In funding, the local church's mission comes first. If the local church is blessed, the denomination is blessed. If the local church suffers, the denomination suffers directly and proportionately. The new funding method gives visible priority to the local congregation as the chief mission agent of the church. The denomination's budget rises and falls with the financial vitality of its local churches.

The proposals will be presented for action by the annual conference in June of 2002. However, there are three major concerns about changing the United Methodist funding pattern from apportionments to tithing.

The first issue is whether something essential about the nature of United Methodism is lost when apportionments are abandoned. This takes us back to our discussion in Chapter 3 on what defines a denomination. It is helpful to remember that nearly every denomination was started to advance a mission, not perpetuate a tradition. That was especially true with Methodism. Furthermore, The United Methodist Church identifies itself as a church, not a system. It is a people in covenant together with God and one another through the work of the Holy Spirit. That is what is essential, not a single method of funding. Moreover, Langford and Willimon see a timeless genius in the work of early Methodism. They assert that with John Wesley “form follows function.” Structure was based upon the mission of the church, not the other way around.<sup>7</sup> As a result, changing systems and structures to further the mission may actually put United Methodists closer in touch with their history, original vision and passion.

The second issue is whether an annual conference of The United Methodist Church may change to tithing. The disciplinary restrictions are daunting. *The Discipline* clearly does not contemplate the use of any other system other than apportionments. It mandates that annual conference and local church leaders interpret apportionments to their constituencies.<sup>8</sup> It directs a subunit of the annual conference to apportion.

*The council, on receiving from the General Council on Finance and Administration a statement of the amount apportioned to the annual conference for the several general funds authorized by the General Conference, shall apportion [italics mine] the same to the several districts, charges, or churches by whatever method the conference may direct, but without reduction.*<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, it gives the power of funding and the decision of funding method to the annual conference.

The council shall recommend to the annual conference for its action and determination the methods or formulas by which the approved budgeted amounts for clergy support, administration, World Service, Conference

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<sup>7</sup> Langford and Willimon, 80.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 246.13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 613.1.

Benevolences, and other apportioned causes (§§ 612.1–4) shall be apportioned to the districts, churches, or charges of the conference.<sup>10</sup>

Such language grants the annual conference the right of determination in funding, yet offers a directive only to a subunit of that body. Ambiguity then results: one unit, the annual conference with authority to raise funds, receives no direction from the General Conference, while a subunit of the annual conference, a committee on finance that has no authority to raise funds, is directed to apportion. Is an annual conference bound by restrictions placed on a subunit of it? Certainly, many rules and mandates directing local churches, which are subunits of the annual conference, do not apply to the annual conference. *The Discipline*, for example, requires that local church leaders submit their building plans to a district board and a district superintendent for approval. Property cannot be acquired, sold or transferred without their approval.<sup>11</sup> However, the plenary body of an annual conference is bound by no such restrictions.<sup>12</sup> Its vote is final on all matters of conference owned property. If directives to those subunits, then, do not restrict the annual conference, how then can restrictions on other subunits bind an annual conference? If there is no specific language compelling the annual conference to authorize apportionments, then its failure to do so does not violate any of the restrictions or mandates the General Conference has placed on it. Is it not fully free to decide its own funding method? This no doubt will be a question the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church must resolve if the tithing legislation passes in Minnesota.

Regardless of what happens in the Minnesota case, significant rethinking among leaders and rewriting of *The Discipline* must occur if local church leaders are to free themselves from this philosophical, theological, organizational and financial albatross.

The third major concern about tithing is an anticipated immediate drop in funding the General Church. Under the tithing proposal, Minnesota would automatically send on to the General Church only a third of what it currently contributes. Such an action would undoubtedly be condemned as disloyal, contested as illicit and cast as catastrophic, especially if replicated in other annual conferences. There is no doubt that there would be immediate pain as ministries would need to consider alternate forms of fundraising. However, it is the contention of many observers that partnerships with local churches and individual groups

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., § 613.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., §§ 2539 and 2540.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., § 2515. Sale, Transfer, Lease, Mortgage, or Purchase of Annual Conference Property.

are clearly a healthier and more meaningful way of funding mission. Lyle Schaller observes a revolution in financing the life and ministries of denominational systems. He states:

Instead of depending on the old hierarchical structure to secure undesignated dollars from member congregations, the successor plan calls for identifying and enlisting the support of partners. These partners in ministry may be individuals, family foundations, congregations, corporations, governmental agencies, larger foundations, or other philanthropic and religious organizations... The gradual disappearance of the generations born before World War II has undermined that old reliable system of financing hierarchical institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Seeing this phenomenon as well, Langford and Willimon advise:

Annual conferences should eliminate all structures, staff, and budgets that are not directly supportive of congregationally based programs. The only programs that deserve support are those that the connected congregations voluntarily fund. The church best acts through persuasion rather than coercion, even if that coercion is based on some allegedly democratic vote from those at the top. If the gathered annual conference cannot find the means to encourage congregations to support a given program, then it should not short-circuit the need for persuasion and conversion by resorting to various apportionments and requirements by the annual conference.<sup>14</sup>

Rather than crippling the mission of the church, the Minnesota proposal on tithing reflects the innovative and practical spirit of United Methodism, capitalizes on ambiguity in *The Discipline* and initiates serious and needed reform in our relationships and giving as United Methodists. Instead of bringing collapse, the funding proposal lays the foundation and motivation for more effectively funding and advancing the worldwide mission of Jesus Christ.

### **Challenging the Mandates and Systems that Hinder Growth**

To fully unleash local congregations of The United Methodist Church, visionary leaders must confront, at the least, five more specific challenges presented by the rules and practices of the denomination. They must evaluate and respond to the mandated committee structure, the restriction on visiting evangelists, the restrictions on church planting, the reversionary clause regarding property and the hierarchy-controlled mission system.

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<sup>13</sup> Schaller, *Discontinuity and Hope*, 102-103.

<sup>14</sup> Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 80.

### The Mandated Committee Structure

The critical task of local church leaders is not to restrict or check but empower their people to use their gifts and fulfill their call. Unfortunately, The United Methodist Church mandates a committee structure that values uniformity over creativity and caution over “cause.” In other words, structures are not determined by the cause or mission, but by the fear of mistakes without input by large numbers. This structure, evaluated in Chapter 7, misleads people about the nature of church work. It suggests that administrating church life rather than ministering to the community is the primary task of church people. Furthermore, streamlining our decision-making structures is critical in order to both have flexibility and timeliness in meeting people’s needs.

It is possible to restructure significantly in The United Methodist Church without rewriting *The Discipline*. Instead of convincing General Conference, pastors currently must convince only their local congregations and their district superintendents. *The Discipline* states:

The charge conference, the district superintendent, and the pastor shall organize and administer the pastoral charge and churches according to the policies and plans herein set forth. When the membership size, program scope, mission resources, or other circumstances so require, the charge conference may, in consultation with and upon the approval of the district superintendent, modify the organizational plans; provided that the provisions of ¶ 242 are observed.<sup>15</sup>

The provisions of ¶ 242 do not restrict or structure the church life; instead they outline responsibilities that churches must embrace and attend to.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, any structure that addresses those responsibilities and has a convincing rationale for its development may be adopted if it wins the approval of the charge conference and district superintendent.

The church council of a United Methodist congregation could be as small as five voting members: Finance Chair, Trustee Representative, Staff-Parish Relations Chair, Lay Leader (who also is a Lay Member of the Annual Conference and oversees lay ministries) and Pastor (as Council Chair). Furthermore, the council members could be expected to be spiritually healthy people who are disciplined in prayer and Bible reading, tithe to the local church, grow through participation in a small group, serve in some life-giving ministry and

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<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 246.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 242. Primary Tasks.

pursue insight through personal reading and study of churches growing today. Such a small structure would certainly allow for very high expectations that produce spiritually discerning and highly informed decisions. It further would communicate that the work of the church is ministry not administration. It also suggests that the church (like God) entrusts people with responsibilities.

A major task is leading people and district superintendents, acculturated to a bureaucratic system, to see the merits of a highly streamlined and high-expectation council. It is advisable for leaders to consult and visit churches that are experiencing a high level of effective and fruitful ministry, to study both their structures and expectations that enable rather than restrict their growth, and to expose other congregational leaders and district superintendents firsthand to those models. Without personal exposure to effective congregations, it will be exceedingly difficult to lead a congregation in significant, positive change.

#### The Restriction on Speakers

The rule that requires United Methodist pastors to obtain the written consent of a district superintendent before “engaging for an evangelist” any non-United Methodist-certified person<sup>17</sup> (see discussion in Chapter 7) has been largely ignored. The restriction still represents a sizable hazard for pastoral leadership and vision if one’s district superintendent and bishop are unsympathetic. Clergy can be prevented from exposing their congregations to the most visionary and gifted speakers from the global and universal church.

Three strategies are possible. The first is to cultivate a close friendship with a district superintendent. Such a relationship may include informing the district superintendent of every non-certified speaker who addresses any portion of the congregation, if not requesting written consent. Such a course makes the district superintendent an integral part of the total church ministry and more inclined to respect the judgment of the pastor and even take risks with the congregation when the pastor suggests. A second course is to narrowly define the term *evangelist*. This may allow far more latitude in obtaining speakers and in avoiding legal sanctions from *The Discipline*; however, it can quickly lead to trouble within the local congregation and with the district superintendent if the speaker is found provocative by some constituency. A third path is to work to eliminate the restriction in *The Discipline*. Is it

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., ¶ 332.1.

necessary for supervisors to micromanage the decisions of their congregational leaders? Are denominational leaders really that suspicious of their pastors' judgment?

Continually consulting one's supervisor and lobbying for change will not provide quick relief, but over time they can yield the greatest fruit. Friendship and communication are building blocks in the Christian church and almost always are better choices.

#### The Restrictions on Church Planting

The regulation causing the greatest damage to United Methodist congregations and the severest crippling of their potential is the restriction on church planting. By creating a hierarchical process for church planting,<sup>18</sup> the denomination removed authority and responsibility for church planting from the local pastor and congregation and clogged the arteries that feed the heart and life of a congregation with bureaucratic procedures. Consequently, United Methodist congregations are improperly focused, ineptly organized and inadequately equipped to fulfill Christ's mandate to make disciples of all nations. United Methodist congregations suffer a debilitating, truncated vision of their work and blindly pursue a way of life that makes them inherently unhealthy. That is because it is axiomatic: *only churches that plant churches are healthy!* Only churches that spawn new churches are vital. Only churches that plant churches reproduce, which is absolutely necessary to fulfill Christ's commission. All others miss what is vital and essential in any Christian community. Their spiritual fellowship, which is their essential life, radically disconnects with what the disciples experienced with Jesus and what the believers experienced with the apostles. In contrast to those model communities, the life of these inert fellowships fails to develop leaders and teams with vision, passion and the gifts to advance the Great Commission into the tribes where God's lost children belong. In their interaction these congregations somehow fail to fully and strategically incarnate Christ in his mission today, which suggests that despite their sincerity they do not fully welcome or heed Christ's Spirit today.

It is essential that church planting become the heartthrob of every church council. Because the current denominational restrictions will not help foster this, visionary leaders will need to network together in order to reinforce a church-planting vision in their leaders.

In the preceding chapter, a strategy was outlined for creating satellite congregational units. Every congregation can become multigeographical, with multiple congregations

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., ¶ 332.3 Unauthorized Conduct and also ¶ 259.

worshiping and ministering, if it develops leaders with vision. Furthermore, lay people and lay teams are the key to new congregations. They also are under no restrictions in developing new autonomous congregations. Those new congregations, led by United Methodist laity, can charter with The United Methodist Church or remain independent while affiliating with another association or even a single United Methodist pastor. (There are no restrictions on pastors encouraging and mentoring non-United Methodist pastors.)

The critical strategy is learning to develop church-planters in the local congregation. Each congregation must become an incubator for church-planters. Whether small groups, seminars, ministry teams or Sunday school classes become the system where these leaders are developed and deployed, laity must be motivated, trained, and supported in planting satellites or independent congregations. If outreach to God's lost and wandering children is the mission, then church planting must be prominent in the local church's vision.

Rewriting the *Book of Discipline* is a secondary concern. Local leaders must seize the vision and the opportunity they have now. Waiting in this regard may be the greatest hazard to the soul of the congregation.

#### The Restrictions on Church Property

A veritable tangle of United Methodist legislation (in "Section VI. Local Church Property" of *The Discipline*) restricts local churches in acquiring, using and disposing of property. United Methodist churches do not own property. They hold property in trust for the denomination.<sup>19</sup> The district superintendent and a district board must approve plans for the purchase, use, sale, transfer, lease or mortgage of property.<sup>20</sup> The complex of restrictions complicates the process of managing local church property and also dampens the confidence, independence and trust necessary for local churches to creatively and freely propagate in their locale.

It is difficult to fathom how these restrictions on property advance the mission of the local congregation. They appear self-serving and protective of the denomination.

Langford and Willimon write:

Deep within us, we United Methodists know the story of a church that was born out of John Wesley's Spirit-induced irritation with an established

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<sup>19</sup> See discussion in Chapter 7.

<sup>20</sup>*The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 2543. Planning and Financing Requirements for Local Church Buildings, ¶ 2539. Unincorporated Local Church Property—Sale, Transfer, Lease, or Mortgage and ¶ 2540. Incorporated Local Church Property—Sale, Transfer, Lease, or Mortgage.

church that was no longer in touch with the masses, a church that cared more for its own privileges and prerogatives than for the mission of Jesus Christ. Our church in its inception can be our church again, if we test all polity, all denominational structures and institutions on the basis of how effectively they enable the local congregation to be in mission.<sup>21</sup>

If local United Methodist churches run into an unsympathetic hierarchy, especially in their church planting mission, or find their lay leadership adversely effected by the imposing presence of denominational restrictions, alternatives must be explored. The United Methodist Church has yet to restrict the free association and giving of their laity. Independent foundations can be established outside the local church. Although the denomination has guidelines and restrictions for local church foundations,<sup>22</sup> laity are free to establish, promote and solicit contributions for any independent nonprofit corporations and foundations they form. These entities can assist local churches in their mission by acquiring, developing and leasing property. Moreover, local churches are free to rent facilities without hierarchical approval.

The preferable course, though, is a revision of *The Discipline* that eliminates hierarchical ownership and offers to local churches both individuals and groups with expertise who support rather than control local church action. District superintendents and district boards can be helpful resources rather than restricting hierarchy for local congregational leaders. However, that requires a change in *The Discipline*.

#### Denominationally Controlled Missions

The problems that the Western Church is suffering in deploying missionaries were discussed in Chapter 7. Three fundamental principles were also outlined there and must be applied here to realize our potential as local churches. First, *God builds his kingdom through persons*. Thus, missionaries are central in our mission. Second, *God calls missionaries to a mission*. God calls missionaries to a people or territory. Thus, agencies and institutions are mere support systems that are developed to support missionaries and enhance their effectiveness rather than control their deployment. Third, *people are best developed through a spiritual body* because people are spiritual and are sent on a spiritual mission. Because the only spiritual body that meets continually and develops people fully is the local church, leaders must recognize that the local church is the primary entity for developing and sending

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<sup>21</sup> Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 2534. Local Church Foundations.

missionaries. Other associations and groups can only augment and supplement what first happens in the local church.

The result is that the missionary movement can explode if local churches recognize their calling, develop missionaries, and partner with them in their work. Since like begets like, local churches need partnerships with existing missionaries, so that they can develop their people as missionaries. As pastors become less itinerant, parsonages can be turned into missionary residences rather than houses for moving clergy, so that missionaries gain higher visibility and greater accessibility in congregational life. Moreover, short-term projects are great breeding grounds for lifetime missionaries. However, existing missions should not be the focus of churches. Their role is to develop missionaries who receive their unique calling and become instruments of God's entrepreneurial work.

Even though there are imposing systems, restrictions and mandates that hinder leaders in their local churches, Christian leaders need not be discouraged. They possess with the Holy Spirit an entrepreneurial ability and calling. We can pioneer. We can explore new territory. The God of the Bible took our ancestors in the faith down new roads. Indeed, they blazed trails. When we follow the God of Abraham, the God of Moses, the God who came in Jesus Christ, we live as new creatures creating a new history. Acceptance of things as they are does not appear to be a work of the Spirit in the Bible. Instead, sorting wineskins is biblical. Wineskins must be examined, sorted and used or discarded based on their current service, not their history. That is the chore of every generation.