

CHAPTER 7

DENOMINATIONAL MANDATES AND RESTRICTIONS

Leaders of denominational churches, whether they are clergy or lay, encounter a maze of mandates and restrictions that command their attention, restrict their action, consume their time, steal their energy and hijack their potential. Those, who are fruitful, could be transforming the culture, and those, who are not, could be producing and blessing their communities. The mazes these leaders encounter differ substantially with each denomination. While this chapter focuses on the labyrinth that United Methodists encounter, leaders from other churches may discover parallels to their situation.

Itinerant tradition

Concerned about denominational decline and prompted by the words and faith of the Korean delegation, the 1984 General Conference of The United Methodist Church, set a goal of growing to 20 million members in eight years. Assuming that all 9.5 million members were active and healthy, was not the goal doable? Could not each one reach one by 1992?

In United Methodist fashion, a committee was formed; and Bishop Richard Wilkie was elected chair. From the outset, the Bishop believed the church was too unhealthy to reach that goal with an “each-one-reach-one campaign.”¹ Statistician Dr. Warren Hartman had informed him that many were appalled by the magnitude of the goal and the assumption that the church could legislate an end to a 23-year downward trend; and Lyle Schaller, in “an extremely pessimistic letter,” warned that the membership decline was not a brief phase in

¹ In retrospect, little of Bishop Wilkie’s work has influenced either the ethos of the denomination or its legislative agenda. His prophetic witness has given United Methodists permission to be self-critical, and that may produce fruit in time; however, if the Koreans were moved by charisma (inspired by the Holy Spirit), a national “each-one-reach-one” campaign may have been the appropriate vehicle for exposing the systemic problems and enlisting support for change. Heeding charisma is our life.

church life but systemic in nature.² Among the unique problems facing United Methodism, then and now, is our tradition of itinerancy.

In United Methodism, the area bishop appoints annually an ordained elder or a licensed pastor to lead a parish (or multiple parishes). When elders or pastors arrive, their term is one year. Each year the bishop may reappoint them. On average, they are reappointed three or four times before they move to another assignment. In 1995, United Methodist clergy averaged 4.3 years in their current appointments.³ This brevity is not just a function of the bishop's power. Presbyterians with the call system last only slightly longer, and Southern Baptist clergy stay with their congregations an average of two years and three months.⁴

What is considered here is not whether an appointive process is inferior or superior to a call system. What must be examined is the itinerancy, the movement of leadership for it has long been known that limited pastoral tenure hinders the ability of congregations to effectively minister in their sphere of influence.

One reason for that is that North Americans no longer place great trust in institutions and offices. All leaders must earn the trust of those they wish to lead. That process takes far more time today.⁵ As a result, less good can be accomplished now during short tenures.

A second reason why the itinerancy is ill advised is that frequent pastoral changes elongate the time frame for a pastor to earn trust by undermining the level of trust in the position of pastor.⁶ When there is a history of pastoral change, laity question, "Why should we take this risk when the pastor will not be around that much longer and the next pastor may see things differently?" Clergy find it increasingly difficult to mobilize people in their parish around any goal. It takes much more time to rally them. Moreover, clergy influence is confined to what they can do for the congregation now, the chaplain services they provide, and does not extend to how they can lead the congregation into the future. The pastor is seen as an employee who is evaluated for the quality of services immediately

² Wilkie, *And Are We Yet Alive*, 26.

³ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 82-83.

⁴ Elmer Towns, C. Peter Wagner and Thom S. Rainer, *The Everychurch Guide to Growth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 91.

⁵ Schaller, *Discontinuity and Hope*, 107.

provided. Control of the congregational direction in this leadership vacuum oscillates between imposing personalities within the congregation; and the character, spiritual commitment and informed judgment of these de facto leaders may be less than adequate. Compounding the problem for United Methodist clergy is the lack of episcopal commitment. Parishioners say, “We know that you are committed to stay, Pastor; but when will the Bishop take you away?” Consequently, frequent moves and lack of episcopal commitment not only handicap the clergy in earning trust, but also they prevent many United Methodist congregations from ever experiencing the benefit of trusted and competent leadership.

A third reason clergy moves greatly hinder the mission of congregations is that they undercut the vision that motivates and mobilizes the people of a congregation. Vision flows from the person preaching and speaking at the main worship services. That leader is uniquely positioned to motivate and mobilize people. Guest speakers and lay leaders can reinforce a vision, but they do not set the spiritual agenda for the community as it gathers for worship weekly. Every time there is a pastoral move, the vision must be recast. Why? Each leader’s grasp of the big picture is different. Each leader’s personality and gifts differ. Each leader fits into the big picture differently. David and Solomon’s positions were the same. God’s vision for their leadership and the nation, however, was different. Similarly, the road that each leader takes the congregation on will be unique. It is axiomatic. The more often one shifts direction in pursuing a destination, the longer the journey. The end result is that the itinerancy causes United Methodist churches to wander back and forth in a leaderless wilderness.

A fourth reason itinerancy retards our work is that most United Methodist churches are declining and plateaued. In the preponderance of parishes, clergy cannot arrive and simply bless what is already going on. Significant change must occur. The congregation must not simply improve what they are doing or add a new program; it must head in a new direction that requires working through difficult changes. Gary McIntosh writes:

Understand that in urban and suburban areas of the United States, it normally takes five to seven years to turn an existing church in a new

⁶ Ibid., 107.

direction. In more rural settings it often takes ten to twelve years and sometimes longer.⁷

Accordingly, when the leaders move on in the more transitory urban setting before eight years, most of their tenure has been consumed in negotiating change. Little headway has been made in a direction. In the stable rural setting, substantial headway may be seen at a decade and a half. Who's committed to stay that long? If it is not a seminary-educated elder, then a licensed local pastor may be the best choice regardless of any alleged advantages the former brings.

A fifth problem with the itinerancy is that it encourages careerism in clergy. Local congregations becoming stepping-stones as the clergy advance their career. "I've mastered this size," the elder thinks, "I'm ready to move up." The mission of the local congregation is subjugated to the clergy's desire for experience and advancement. Consequently, the congregations do not advance; the clergy do.

A sixth concern is the renter's mentality. A renter's investment is far different than an owner's. A renter takes risks that he or she does not have to live with. An owner is more cautious. A renter looks for immediate results. An owner looks long range. Renters hurry, owners deliberate. A renter is much less willing to sacrifice than an owner. In an itinerant system, clergy seldom unpack all their bags emotionally. Although they may believe the very same things as clergy who are committed long term, their emotional responses are different. For the visionary, it leads to impulsive, often self-defeating behavior rooted in impatience and fear.

A seventh problem is that itinerancy fosters a sectarian vision. United Methodists may pride themselves on being ecumenical, but their itinerancy focuses on congregations not communities. Clergy are appointed on the basis of how they perform in a congregation not a community. The growth of the congregation is central in the itinerant vision rather than the growth of the Christian movement in a community. It may be assumed that if the congregation grows, the church in the community grows. That is a false assumption that we considered earlier. In most cases we are only rearranging chairs from one congregation's campus to another on Sunday morning. A completely different strategy is being used to actually add chairs within a community. Clergy that are committed to a community long-term,

⁷ Gary L. McIntosh, *Three Generations: Riding the Waves of Change in Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revel, 1995), 202.

even for life, are the ones leading the transformational movement. That is why the most effective pastorates average between 15 and 50 years in length.⁸

When itinerancy is attacked, it is often assumed that the critics are requesting a call system. This is not the case here. There is little evidence to suggest that bishops making appointments are inherently inferior to congregations calling their leaders, even though there is ample evidence of episcopal ineptness and abuse.⁹ What is of concern is the reason for clergy movement. Why do United Methodists believe that moving their clergy advances the mission of making disciples? Especially when statistically they know better? The charisma, the fruit, the growth, literally the works of God, all shout “Stay!” but the church numbly moves their leaders about; and many clergy happily comply.

Frederick Norwood notes that Wesley’s first missionary in the United States, Joseph Pilmore, felt the itinerancy was a handicap. Asbury complied with John Wesley’s grand principle of keeping the preachers moving.¹⁰ However, Wesley’s reason for iteration was clear. He believed it would multiply disciples. He told his preachers:

It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.¹¹

Even though these are the words of a visionary leader who is helping his troops keep their focus, it is obvious from his charge that Wesley envisioned his preachers as evangelists, prophets and apostles. They were proclaiming and bringing people to faith. They were laying bare the secrets of people’s hearts. They were raising up shepherds in each station to form people in their relationship with God. They were not itinerating shepherds. They were not pastors. One would go to a station, or circulate through several, and evangelize for six months or a year. The lay leadership would appropriate whatever administrative gifts the circuit rider

⁸ See Wagner’s discussion of lifetime commitment in *Churchquake*, 92-93.

⁹ Appointive mismatches are generally rooted in distrust by the episcopacy. Schaller in *Tattered Trust*, 51-52, suggests that episcopal appointment is inherently distrustful of the clergy and congregation’s judgment in selecting leadership. Although distrust is the Achilles heel of the appointive process, it need not be. We will examine later a proposal by Langford and Willimon to infuse trust and the grace of “relationship” into ministerial appointments.

¹⁰ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 77.

¹¹ John Wesley, included in the “Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury, and Others, at a Conference Begun in Baltimore... in the year 1784,” *Composing a Form of Discipline for the Minister, Preacher, and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785), 12. These *Conversations* became the first *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

offered. Another would come and evangelize and fill in some of the gaps left by the other. In each case, lay pastors would be further equipped by whatever leadership gifts the evangelizing prophet or apostle brought them. If the circuit rider was an apostle, new preachers would be produced. If the preacher was an evangelist, the station would experience an exceptional harvest of souls. If the minister was a prophet, people would be greatly encouraged in their growth and ministry.

There is much room for that kind of itinerancy in United Methodism. The church needs itinerating apostles, prophets and evangelists. That charisma needs to be called forth and honored. However, the term, itinerant shepherds or pastors, is an oxymoron (unless the flocks move with them).

Disciplinary Restrictions

In addition to the itinerancy, there are growth-retarding mandates and restrictions in The United Methodist Church that slow the parish leader's work. Four seem especially relevant in this discussion.

Mandating Committees to Lead

The United Methodist Church mandates an unnecessary committee structure. Each local church is required to have a charge conference, a church council, a committee on pastor-parish relations (PPR), a board of trustees, a committee on finance, and a committee on lay leadership.¹² In turn, each of those committees has mandates in regard to membership and/or size. Although most United Methodist congregations would do well to reduce both the number of committees to the minimum mandated and the membership of those committees to the minimum mandated, and then place most responsibilities for spiritual ministry and corporate tasks on passionate and gifted individuals who develop their own ministry teams, this basic structure already breeds distrust and fosters redundancy (and clergy and laity must comply or face charges of "disobedience to the Order and Discipline of The United Methodist Church"¹³).

This redundancy is exemplified in the mandate of both a church council and finance committee to oversee finances. Thus people must oversee the people who oversee; and of course at the charge conference, more people oversee the people who oversee the people who oversee. This duplication of responsibility is mandated. It is not optional. Moreover,

¹² *The Book of Discipline* 2000, ¶ 243.

¹³ *Ibid.*, see ¶ 2702.1 for clergy and ¶ 2702.3 for laity.

mandates seem to grow every four years when the General Conference meets. For example, the church council was required at the General Conference in 2000 to raise the number of its members from a minimum of 8 to 11.¹⁴ Not only that, it specified who those members are. Two of the eleven are the lay leader and lay member to annual conference; however, *The Discipline* recommends they be one person.¹⁵ Still the council must have eleven members. Suppose other individuals fill multiple mandated positions on the council. The council must continue to add members—not because of those additional members' gifts and responsibilities, not because this pattern is producing great fruit all over the world, but because The United Methodist Church distrusts individuals to lead and local churches to create their own structures. Thus a nominations committee, entitled the Committee on Lay Leadership with a minimum membership of five (at least one being a young adult¹⁶) and structured in three year classes¹⁷ must be formed to nominate a total of 16 people¹⁸ (although it is conceivable with multiple responsibilities—like trustees serving on PPR and the church council while one chair is also the lay member and lay leader—that it could be pared down to 10 plus the pastor who meet in a council and three other committees.

The point is that what United Methodism considers as an essential, bare bones corporate structure is actually cumbersome, redundant and subverts individual creativity within and among the congregations.

Ted Haggard leads New Life Church of Colorado Springs. When I visited its campus in July of 1998 the church was averaging 3,000 in worship and still growing 20 percent annually. Although the church meets in hundreds of small groups for spiritual formation and ministry tasks, it has only two committees. A board of trustees oversees the property and is limited to 35% of the budget. The other committee is a board of elders. This group functions like a pastor-parish relations committee with a radical twist. They settle disputes between members rather than between parish and pastor.

¹⁴ Ibid., ¶ 251.5 and *The Book of Discipline 1996*, ¶ 246.

¹⁵ *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 250.1c.

¹⁶ Young adults appear to be defined as people between the ages of 18 and 30 (Ibid., ¶ 255.2).

¹⁷ Ibid., ¶ 258.1.c-d.

¹⁸ *The Discipline* requires 10 plus the pastor(s) in the church council (¶ 251.5). An additional person plus some of those serving on the council are required to serve on a Finance Committee (¶ 258.4). An additional 2 trustees are required beside the one on the council (¶ 252.4), and an additional 3 members beside 2 on the council must serve on pastor-parish relations (¶ 258.2a). Remember, however, that any of those serving on PPR can also be trustees or serve in some other responsibility.

The elders are to serve the congregation and the senior pastor for the development of the spiritual life of the church. These people and their spouses are to help create a positive spiritual climate within the church body. They are neither a governing or corporate board, but a spiritual body called to create and maintain stability in potentially negative situations.¹⁹

Outside the church exists a board of overseers who are peers of the senior pastor. They meet only if elders request them to investigate and discipline, if necessary, the pastor for issues like immorality, heresy and malfeasance.²⁰

Rick Warren, who leads Saddleback Valley Community Church in Mission Viejo, California, administers with a five-member board a congregation that surpassed 6,000 in worship in 1993. Warren chairs the board. The four other members are key staff that he hired and can fire. "I want only fulltime thinkers making decisions," he said. The congregation meets annually, and at that time can vote his removal.²¹

At New Life Church and Saddleback, the organization is pared to empower leaders. It is developed on the basis of trust in the grace of God at work through individuals that God calls to leadership. C. Peter Wagner notes that the most revolutionary principle in the churches that are driving the expansion of Christianity is the trust and empowerment of the individual. He puts it this way:

Of all the radical elements of change in the New Apostolic Reformation, I regard one of them to be the most radical of all. It is so important that I have chosen these words very carefully: *The amount of spiritual authority delegated by the Holy Spirit to the individuals* [italics his].²²

He notes that effective and healthy congregations invest authority (trust) in individuals to make decisions as opposed to committees, boards, vestries, bureaucracies, judicatories or sessions; and he observes that two "outstanding advantages" result: vision is focused and creativity is released.²³

In contrast, Lyle Schaller declares:

¹⁹ Haggard, *The Life-giving Church*, 255.

²⁰ The by-laws of New Life Church, which define the membership and duties of trustees, elders, overseers and the pastor, are found in complete form with commentary in the *Life-giving Church* (Haggard, 225-268).

²¹ Rick Warren, a field interview at Saddleback Church, "Foundations of Church Growth," Fuller Theological Seminary, March 1993.

²² Wagner, *Churchquake*, 75.

²³ Ibid.

The European traditions, especially Roman Catholic, Methodist, and to a lesser extent, Presbyterian, are built on the assumption that the laity in general and congregational leaders in particular cannot be trusted. Younger generations and new immigrants tend not to be attracted to any institution that is organized on the principle that people cannot be trusted.²⁴

Distrust is not limited to laity and clergy who work in the parish. It is intrinsic to the entire United Methodist organization. There are 30 pages of *The Discipline* addressing issues with the local church and 220 pages written for general boards and agencies.²⁵ Is there any question that United Methodism is hierarchal and distrustful? Rather than vesting individuals with responsibility, we multiply rules and group decision-making at every level of the church. In the end, no one is responsible, and no one is accountable.

Without a leader and a focused vision, there is paralysis. Such is the case with United Methodism as a translocal church. There is no one empowered to lead. Lyle Schaller says that we have no wagon master, no one who gets up in the morning on our journey together and points the way for our wagons.²⁶ (A small group of clergy hearing this responded to his point with a derisive laugh and exclaimed, “We need a pope!”) Their obfuscation, notwithstanding, a leaderless people have no direction. (And the only biblical parallels for leaderless people are groups in rebellion.) “It is axiomatic,” according to Wagner, “that the more diffused the vision, the weaker the organization.”²⁷

Bishop Wilkie found his efforts to turn around United Methodism enormously frustrating because he, as a bishop of the church, was a mere voice floating in the wind. He had no power but his vocal chords. No one had to listen. He could not reorder priorities for the denomination. He had no authority over its money and leadership. He could not hire or fire a soul. He was a mere blip (an articulate and gracious blip) on a denominational radarscope that was filled with other activity.

That is the denominational ethos that mandates and models structures for leading local churches. Is it any wonder that the vast majority of United Methodist congregations find it difficult if not impossible to grow even in demographically favorable areas? Then we pierce our demoralized United Methodist clergy with all kinds of invectives and judgments.

²⁴ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 51-52.

²⁵ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 112.

²⁶ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 42.

²⁷ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 75.

Or, we overcompensate and act as if fruitlessness is no big deal. Well, from this observer's vantage point, even the best and most gifted are struggling. However, they do not need criticism or pity. They need freedom and trust to lead.

Restricting Leaders' Resources

A second restriction hinders local churches more because of its posture than its actual ability to restrain. *The Discipline* states:

Pastors shall first obtain the written consent of the district superintendent before engaging for an evangelist a person who is not a general evangelist, a clergy member of an annual conference, a local pastor, or a certified lay speaker in good standing in The United Methodist Church.²⁸

Strictly interpreted and enforced, a pastor, as part of a ministerial association, could not "engage" Billy Graham or any other non-certified United Methodist to preach at an ecumenical, citywide crusade unless or until the district superintendent agrees and puts that agreement in writing. (Perhaps, this is not enough of a safeguard; a district superintendent may not always exercise adequate care to protect United Methodist congregants from the lapses in judgment of United Methodist pastors and the unscrupulous speakers they "engage." Maybe, the Bishop and entire cabinet should process all requests, review all credentials and decide whether to approve all non-United Methodist certified evangelists and speakers who visit local churches.) This United Methodist rule demeans United Methodist pastors and communicates blatant distrust of their judgment. It declares that they, despite their training and review, do not have the judgment to decide who can benefit a local congregation. If the term, evangelist, is broadly applied to any speaker, it isolates United Methodists from the charisma being expressed through believers in the territorial or global church. Suppose the prophet Elijah arrived in town. "Well, we have our list of approved prophets. They have been certified by the appropriate district or conference committee," the superintendent advises. "But Elijah's good," the pastor protests. "We need to use our United Methodist prophets," the superintendent intones, "That's why they are certified." The clause sows apprehension and resentment in parish leaders. It promotes an attitude that wounds the body of Christ. This clause breeds suspicion, oppresses United Methodist leaders, hinders renewal and isolates United Methodist congregations from the love and power God expresses through the rest of the Church of Jesus Christ.

²⁸ *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 332.1 Unauthorized Conduct.

Prohibiting Church Planting

Another restriction prohibits a pastor from “arbitrarily” organizing a pastoral charge.²⁹ The new church or mission must be established only with the consent of the bishop in charge and the bishop’s cabinet, and then only after consulting with a conference committee.³⁰ Following that, a district superintendent is put in charge. A district board is consulted about location, an official meeting is called and members are received (if it fulfills the minimum membership required by an annual conference for the organization of a local United Methodist church).³¹

The effect of this regulation is to transplant the responsibility for church planting from the congregation to the episcopacy. In effect, the United Methodist hierarchy hijacked church planting. They swiped “the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven”³² from their congregations and then wonder why they have trouble fulfilling “the Great Commission!” No doubt, there are horror stories behind some of this legislation; but instead of working through those relationships, the church legislated the pastor and the parish out of the equation. Bishop Wilkie observes:

Integral to denominational growth or decline is the establishment of new churches... Since the early 1960s we have been closing more churches than we have been opening—five or six times more!³³

In a nutshell, there is the reason for three and a half decades of decline. The Southern Baptists, despite schismatic debates, regulatory expansion, paralyzing bureaucratization and hostility toward many expressions of charisma, have managed to pass the United Methodists and creep up to 15 million members in that same time frame because church planting is expected not co-opted.

In contrast to the educated elders and local pastors, uneducated circuit riding preachers were expected to plant missions and congregations. If they did not, something was wrong. In fact, a layman, Robert Strawbridge, was the first American Methodist preacher. Wesley did not commission him; Asbury did not send him; and this strong-willed Irishman saw no reason to

²⁹ Ibid., ¶ 332.3 Unauthorized Conduct.

³⁰ Ibid., ¶ 259.1.

³¹ Ibid., ¶ 259.

³² Wagner, *Churchquake*, 190.

³³ Wilkie, *And Are We Yet Alive*, 23-24.

ask permission. He began preaching on his own because he recognized a need. He also decided that people needed the sacraments, so he administered them. When this offended the European sensibilities of the Methodist preachers as they gathered for their first preachers' conference in 1773, they decreed that no one should administer the sacraments (because at that point they were all lay preachers). However, Asbury added in his journal, "Except Mr. Strawbridge, and he under the particular direction of the assistant." Asbury later wrote, "He appeared to be inflexible. He would not administer the ordinances under our direction at all." This stubborn, recalcitrant layman might have been excommunicated by many groups; but not by Asbury or the young Methodists. The charisma signaled that this man was both devoted to Christ and ordained by God to lead. (Is not that what is important?) Norwood reports that Strawbridge stood way out front as an early planter of Methodism. He founded new societies throughout Maryland and Virginia and raised up some of early Methodism's most effective leaders.³⁴

Rather than restricting church planting, the church must empower it. Church planting skills must be imparted as a normal part of leadership development and congregational life. The multiplication of congregations must become an expectation for every church and every church leader. Congregations that do not produce new churches contribute little to the Christian mission regardless of how large their facilities grow and how many new members they receive. Any congregation not spawning new fellowships is barren and unhealthy; for it suffers, at the least, from an inadequate vision and a diluted passion. Not all United Methodists will lead the planting of new churches, but nearly everyone can be involved. Most can be called, encouraged and equipped to assist.

Hierarchal Ownership

One of the most insidious rules of United Methodism is the reversionary clause in *The Discipline*. All properties acquired by organizational subunits of The United Methodist Church, including local churches, are held in trust for the denomination. When a group disbands or withdraws from United Methodism, the property continues to belong to organizations within the denomination.³⁵ It is falsely assumed that this is a sign of our connectedness and unity. Instead, it is a signal of mistrust and disunity. It comes from our European heritage rather than any theological or biblical pattern. Lyle Schaller writes:

³⁴ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 66-67.

³⁵ *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 2503. Trust Clauses in Deeds.

The current American version of that medieval heritage was designed on the assumption that while people cannot be trusted, institutions and superior officials can be trusted. John Wesley expressed that distrust by keeping title to Methodist chapels in his name until shortly before his death. One United Methodist version of that distrust is the reversionary clause in the title to property and the requirement that congregationally initiated proposals on real estate must be approved by a district committee.³⁶

Although *The Discipline* declares that the church is organized as a “connectional structure” in justifying this clause, this actually is *hierarchical* rather than *connectional*. It is a legalism and a manifestation of suspicion. It is self-serving, unChrist-like and has left a wake of needless pain among believers over the years. Law can never maintain unity. Only grace creates it. The cross of Christ and the gift of the Spirit unite believers. However, this law damages the body, shackles the entrepreneurial work of the Spirit, and sows a needless fear and apprehension in our work. Instead of moving ahead in faith risking all, the body creeps along in fear questioning one another.

The Apportionment Process

Its Definition

Every four years, delegates from various entities of United Methodism gather in a conference. Entitled the General Conference, it creates a budget to fund its meeting and various ministries. This budget is then divided up or apportioned between its subunits. The General Conference adopts a formula that it judges to be fair to help it spread this burden among conferences of clergy and laity that meet annually and are responsible for the ministry of a specific territory. Each of these annual conferences is then responsible to fund the portion of the denomination’s budget they have been assigned. The Minnesota Annual Conference’s portion of the General Conference’s budget for the year 2000 was over 1.7 million dollars.³⁷

The General Conference, which writes the *Book of Discipline*, mandates that each annual conference establish a council on finance and administration or another structure that provides for its functions.³⁸ It, in turn, directs that this subunit of the annual conference recommend to the annual session of clergy and laity “methods or formulas by which the approved budgeted

³⁶ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 51.

³⁷ *Official Journal and Year Book: One Hundred Forty-fifth Sesson, Minnesota Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church 1999*, (Held June 2-5, 1999 at St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN), 388-389.

³⁸ *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶ 609.

amounts” from the General Conference and that determined by the annual conference for its own needs and ministries “shall be apportioned” to the annual conference’s subunits.³⁹ These subunits can be districts that in turn apportion to churches or charges, or annual conferences may elect to apportion their budgets directly to the churches. In the end, apportionments are the portion of a denominational budget each local church is assigned and asked to pay.

Its Birth

It is critical to understand that this system of funding arose in the Methodist Episcopal Church at a time when the United States was fighting in World War I.⁴⁰ American sympathies for engagement in this conflict arose from the sinking of the *Lusitania* and several American cargo ships, other German actions against civilians, and an intercepted and decoded message that unveiled a German plot to persuade Mexico to go to war against the United States. Thus Americans were not meddling in someone else’s matters, they were securing liberty. The nation’s economy was directed toward the war effort. The nation’s industries were retooled to produce war materials. All citizens were encouraged to “Beat back the Hun with Liberty Bonds.” With a regular army of only 126,000 men, a draft was organized. Many enlisted voluntarily, including women who served as nurses and office workers. By the war’s end nearly 5 million men and women served in the military. Citizens at home observed “meatless” and “wheatless” days, in order that food could be sent to Europe.⁴¹ This cultural patriotism, all sharing in the burden of war on European soil, provided an emotional rationale for apportionments. The church simply enabled all congregations to do their part, to share the burden of the spiritual war fought on soil beyond their venue. The church was saying, “If you pay this, it will help us do this in our common battle.” In a time of national crisis, people want to do their share, to pitch in for the cause. This funding system was a helpful and voluntary tool in that era. Unfortunately, what was a work of God’s Spirit in one generation became codified and is now an albatross for another.

Its Effect

The apportionment process evolved over time into “a complex system of mandatory taxation.”⁴² As late as 1980, each local church had the right to vote its acceptance or rejection

³⁹ Ibid., ¶¶ 611-613.

⁴⁰ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 34.

⁴¹ Edward M. Coffman, “World War I,” *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 21 (Chicago: World Book, 1991), 464-465.

⁴² Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 34.

of the “asking.”⁴³ The system today, however, has turned the church and the nature of Christian giving upside down. Apportionments, as a mandatory process, violate everything we know about promoting healthy relationships and stray so far from the Apostle’s teaching on giving. Apportionments harm the connection in United Methodism by pitting Christian people against each other. It does so in two ways. It creates unnecessary hostility and tension through hierarchical relationships, and it breeds suspicion and resentment between congregations.

The connection suffers hostility and tension as apportionments pit the interests of the hierarchy against its subunits. When the General Conference establishes its budget and when the annual conferences establish theirs, not a single person knows how this will affect the individual churches. No one knows what percentage of income they are asking from individual churches, how it will affect their ministries and whether, in the end, this appropriation of local church dollars strengthens or hinders the advance of the kingdom of God. However, it is known and undisputable that with the denominational decline United Methodist local churches are progressively becoming weaker, smaller and less influential bodies within their communities. Therefore, the impact of these budgets on each local church’s resources for ministry and effectiveness ought to be assessed. In studies associated with the Connectional Funding Project Team of the Minnesota Annual Conference, the author found that the general church required nearly 3.2 percent of local church income in 1998.⁴⁴ This amount, incidentally, was set in May of 1996. When the 1998 Minnesota Annual Conference budget was adopted in 1997, the amount required from Minnesota churches climbed to nearly 12 percent of their income. (The current Minnesota apportionment formula skews that burden so that some churches are asked for little while others may be asked for 14, 16 even 30 percent of their income.⁴⁵) Of course, none of this was known when each budget was passed, and such an uninformed action seems imprudent, at the least, considering that the local church is the chief mission unit for the denomination.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Local church income is estimated by a report of 1998 local church expenditures from the 1999 Minnesota Conference Journal and assumes that income and expenses are equivalent. Local church income is defined for our purposes as income received by local churches for their local ministry. Attempts were made to exclude mission giving and capitol fund drives in the estimate by excluding mission expenditures and mortgage payments.

⁴⁵ The Minnesota formula assigns churches their portion of the budget based on their expenses and membership. Then offers an adjustment to help smaller churches. The skewing effects of this formula were an unforeseen consequence. The figures above are based on estimates produced by a statistician at a meeting of the Connectional Funding Project Team .

What transpires through the apportionment process is not cooperation with local churches, but their subjugation. They are not full companions in setting the denomination's budget. As a local church, they have no say. They have no more say than individuals have over their taxes. They can lobby, but they are not partners. They can protest, but they are not at the table making the decision.⁴⁶ The hierarchy budgets and then decides what local congregations must pay, and that fosters resentment. "How do THEY know what's best?" ask parishioners.

The United Methodist connection suffers a second blow because apportionments foster hostility and resentment between congregations. *The Book of Discipline* directs a subunit of the annual conference to budget income and expenditures, and then present a budget that fully funds the General Conference apportionments.⁴⁷ The result of this mandate is illustrated in Minnesota. Because a sizable number of local United Methodist churches in Minnesota have not fully paid their apportionments, revenues have annually fallen around 10 percent short of the budget. To fulfill the mandate, the conference apportions 10 percent higher than what would be needed if each church paid in full. This breeds anger and resentment when churches realize they are paying more because the congregation in the next community or down the street did not pay theirs. "We wouldn't have to pay this much if their church paid their apportionments," both clergy and laity bitterly exclaim. This leads to envy and critical attitudes between congregations.

United Methodists suffer with a funding system that was inspired almost a century ago during a national crisis and that now needlessly hurts their relationships with each other and hinders their work together. Just as important, however, is that this funding system obscures the beauty and power of Christian stewardship.

The only biblical parallel for the United Methodist funding system, as it has evolved, is Samuel's warning about a king.

This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will . . . take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants . . . He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the

⁴⁶ A 1994 survey by the General Council on Ministries revealed that 60 percent of annual conference delegates believe that the local congregation must have "more say in apportionments." See Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 55.

⁴⁷ *The Book of Discipline 2000*, ¶¶ 611-613.

king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day. (1 Sam. 8:11, 14-15, 17-18)

If that seems a bit dramatic and unfair, understand that biblical giving is in no way compulsorily. A king's tax is. People do not cry out for relief from giving. They do from taxation, and churches do from apportionments. Indeed, tax revolts are part of American history; there is never a giving revolt because biblical giving always reflects first and foremost what is going on with the donor. If it is tithing, the giving reflects the donor's faith in God's provision. The size of donation indicates the financial blessing of the donor. If it is sacrificial giving, the gifts reflect the vision, passion and resources of the donor. Apportionments, in contrast, reflect the vision and passion of the recipient not the donor. Apportionments are based on the recipient's assessment of the donor's resources not the giver's assessment. This is not biblical giving. It once, in its historical context, may have been, but not now. It sows confusion about biblical stewardship and actually hinders stewardship in the local church by sowing resentment in giving rather than modeling the joy of giving. When a local church spends a million dollars on missions, they celebrate, "Look at how God has blessed us and expanded our reach." When a local church pays a million dollars in apportionments, they fume, "Look at how the denomination has assessed us!" That response is innate. It is genetic. It is inherent to the funding system, and that funding system is harming the spirit and work of United Methodists.

Denomination-Controlled Missions

Three hundred years after Christopher Columbus's momentous trip to North America, William Carey took a voyage of similar importance. He did not pioneer a passageway to a previously unknown continent or begin an immigrant movement. Instead, his trip to India carved a passageway of purpose. His efforts launched the modern missionary movement that has caused people to leave their homelands and fan out all across the globe with the gospel.

In the past century, the mobilization of Christian believers as missionaries has largely been facilitated by denominational and interdenominational agencies. In addition, the mission movement was generally from the Western nations to the East and Third World countries. By the end of the 20th century, however, none of that is true any longer.⁴⁸ For 25 years, the number of missionaries sent by Western agencies has declined. From 1968 to 1992 career

⁴⁸ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 201.

missionaries sent through the agencies of historic denominations (excluding the Southern Baptists) has declined from 8,471 to 3,235.⁴⁹ This steep decline does not mirror the pattern of membership loss. It is much steeper. Furthermore, the decline cannot be attributed fully to the influence of liberal theology.⁵⁰ There are other powerful dynamics at work. For example, career missionaries with evangelical mission agencies total 14,473 but have declined since 1988. Pentecostals and Charismatics lost nearly half of their career missionaries in four years. They declined from 3,838 in 1988 to little more than 2,000 in 1992.⁵¹ Several changes are being signaled both by this decline and the rise of Third World missions. Institutional mission agencies, especially denomination-controlled, should be on alert.

For a long time, the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries has been a lightning rod for ire. The vast majority of United Methodist career missionaries did not serve through denominational channels. Their presence was reflected in the evangelical's statistics as they served through the Oriental Mission Society, World Gospel Mission Society, Wycliffe, WEC, Youth With a Mission and many parachurch organizations. Some years ago, a Mission Society for United Methodists was launched to provide a less obstacle-laden course for those with the passion for missionary service. All of these agencies thrived as they, to some extent, sought to resource those who were called rather than regulate. Nevertheless, even their wineskins for sending missionaries have aged and must eventually be discarded.

The burgeoning mission movement by the Third World indicates at least four things. First, bureaucratic structures are giving way to entrepreneurial relationships. Missionaries multiply in the Third World because of vision and relationships. Second, individual missionaries are trusted, not boards or field committees. With donors personal relationships prevail over impressive credentials. Consequently, donors are unlikely to support agencies unless they are highly relational and visionary. Dollars will follow the missionary and not the mission if there is not a clear and compelling vision that is personally communicated. Generally, donors will trust the missionary's calling more than the agency's judgment. Third, contemporary experience better qualifies missionaries than classroom theory. Finally, Third

⁴⁹ Robert T. Coote, "Good News, Bad News: North American Protestant Overseas Personnel Statistics in Twenty-Five-Year Perspective," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1995), 11.

⁵⁰ This observation does not mean to dismiss or diminish the influence of liberal theology on the decline of the missionary enterprise of historic denominations. Indeed, John Leith in his study of the missionary decline among Presbyterians fingers theology as a crucial matter (*Crisis in the Church* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997], 3-4). It points, instead, to a fundamental change in how missionaries can best be deployed.

⁵¹ Coote, "Good News, Bad News," 11-12.

World missionaries are mobilized on faith rather than finances. They do not solicit nor require anywhere near the support Westerners judge necessary.⁵²

In view of what we are learning, three fundamental changes must be embraced or mission agencies will go the way of the dinosaur. These are not optional, and they are not purely denominational.

Fundamental principle #1 is that the purpose of a mission agency is to contribute to a missionary's effectiveness. It is not to direct a mission to a people or territory. Mission agencies must organize to resource rather than to regulate. They must become a missionary's partner rather than a missionary's boss. The Board of Global Ministries cannot direct the mission of the United Methodist Church. It never really did. It only highlighted and supported a tiny part of it. Its confused self-identity, however, caused many United Methodists to leave and pursue their calling elsewhere.

Fundamental principle #2 is that the primary mission agency of the Church of Jesus Christ is no structure or organization, but a spiritual body. Missionaries, consequently, are best developed, equipped and sent from where that body continually meets, the local congregation. Commissioning must not occur in New York but in New Hope or in whatever congregation the missionary is formed. In other words, missionaries do not go to where the mission executive is, but mission executives go to where the missionaries are and to whatever local church or churches are sending them. This is essential. The donor base for missions is largely in local churches. Vision must be shared and relationships established there. Mike Regele notes that the primary unit of mission in the 21st century is the local congregation, and the primary agents of mission are individual church members.⁵³ Any agency that wants to contribute significantly to the advance of Christ's mission will need to relate to and support local congregations in developing missions and missionaries. Langford and Willimon echo this sentiment when they call for denominational leaders to assess all their activity on the basis of how it resources and empowers local churches to accomplish their mission.⁵⁴ The local church's mission is worldwide. Agencies will flourish when they both enhance and resource the vision and mission of local churches.

⁵² See Wagner's discussion of the missionary movement in *Churchquake*, 200-205.

⁵³ Regele, *The Death of the Church*, 215-233.

⁵⁴ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 36.

Fundamental principle #3 is that the gospel is advanced primarily through individuals not institutions. The key to every mission is the missionary. The key for every missionary is relationships not resources. Missionaries do not need pounds or pesos as much as they need people. Missionaries are sent and supported by people, not institutions. Moreover, people invest in people. Accordingly, all United Methodist mission projects supported by apportionment dollars or special Sunday giving are in trouble. The African University, the Black College Fund, the Ministerial Education Fund, One Great Hour of Sharing, Golden Cross Sunday to name a few, all of these missions are in trouble unless they can become tangible, relational partners with local congregations and connect local people with their vision. Leaders of these missions must be in local congregations expanding the vision of congregations or the leaders' requests for support will be given little consideration. Again, people trust people, not institutions.

After substituting the term “denominational agencies” or “institutions” for “denominations,” Tony Campolo rightly observes:

There was a time when local churches may have been viewed as instruments for carrying out the grand schemes for ministry to the world that were hatched in denominational headquarters. But in the future, denominations will have to restructure themselves so that they assume the more humble role of helpmates to empower local congregations to think through, plan and execute ministries that those congregations define as relevant. This may take more grace than most of those who have a vested interest in preserving the old bureaucracies can muster.⁵⁵

Until denominational agencies are restructured accordingly, they are more a distraction and hindrance than a help in world mission. The local church was the prime agent of mission in Scripture; it continues to be today, and the wise will capitalize on that.

Parish leaders in United Methodism are thus faced with six strategic and denominationally-specific obstacles. First, their episcopal leaders celebrate a system that was not fully understood by their predecessors. Itinerancy is for church consultants not church leaders, for church equippers not pastors. Eldership frequently is a lifetime call to lead a people in a specific territory. Second, denominational polity does not trust local church leaders or their creativity in organizing and making decisions. Instead, it diffuses decision-making power and accountability. Third, the denomination does not trust their judgment in

⁵⁵ Campolo, *Can Mainline Denominations Make a Comeback?*, 117-118.

networking with the body of Christ in their community or elsewhere. Fourth, the denomination sabotaged their ability to fulfill the Great Commission by robbing them of the authority and relieving them of the responsibility to plant churches. Fifth, the denomination has imposed on them an archaic and culturally conditioned funding system that injures their relationships and hinders their work in modeling and mentoring Christian stewardship. Sixth, their denomination has not paid attention and recognized who the Holy Spirit has signaled to be the leaders and primary agents of world mission.

In the subsequent chapters we will examine what God's Spirit has already revealed about overcoming the four common hindrances all leaders of denominational churches face and the six more specific to United Methodism.