

The Monthly Update

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A Call for Revival

Membership Change in the United Methodist Church

Those of us in Concerned Methodists have a great concern for the decline in our United Methodist Church over the past 40 years – over 2,853,198 gone or an average of 77,113 people per year, 6,426 per month, 1,483 per week, or 211 per day, for every one of those years. The yearly summary is as follows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Membership</u>	<u>Net Loss</u>
1969	10,789,624	1 st Year Tracked by CM
1970	10,671,774	117,850
1971	10,509,198	162,576
1972	10,334,521	174,677
1973	10,063,060	271,461
1974	9,957,710	105,350
1975	9,861,028	96,682
1976	9,785,534	75,494
1977	9,731,781	53,753
1978	9,653,711	78,070
1979	9,584,771	68,940
1980	9,519,407	65,364
1981	9,457,012	62,395
1982	9,405,164	51,848
1983	9,332,712	72,452
1984	9,266,853	65,859
1985	9,192,172	74,681
1986	9,124,575	67,597
1987	9,055,145	69,430
1988	8,979,139	76,006
1989	8,904,824	74,315
1990	8,849,538	55,286
1991	8,785,184	64,354
1992	8,723,034	62,150
1993	8,646,466	76,568
1994	8,584,199	62,267
1995	8,534,891	49,308
1996	8,499,744	35,147
1997	8,457,227	42,517
1998	8,405,746	51,481
1999	8,356,816	48,930
2000	8,334,204	22,612
2001	8,303,561	30,643
2002	8,257,495	48,646
2003	8,192,495	65,000 (est.)
2004	8,135,806	56,689
2005	7,989,875	84,822
2006	7,936,426	53,449

Revival- What will it take?

Wouldn't it be great if the Holy Spirit swept across the General Conference assembly meeting in Fort Worth? In actuality, the Holy Spirit can sweep across the United Methodist Church at any time. How could this happen?

Great revivals of the past have started with honest confession of sins, usually starting with one or two individuals and then spreading to others, the two revivals in the 1800s and the one at Asbury College in the 1900s – to name just these. Confession is something that we all need; we all are sinners (Ro. 3:23) and need regular, sincere confession of the sins that plague our lives as humans. In reality sin separates us from God – it is like a wall that blocks our relationship with Him. We can be involved in what we think is work for Him and His kingdom, but if we have unconfessed sin in our lives, it is like we have a shield that keeps us from having a relationship with Him, much less doing what He wants. Isaiah 59:2 says, “But your sins have separated you from God; your iniquities have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear.” This leads to: “For the wages of sin is death...” (Ro. 6:23)

When we confess our sins in earnest sincerity, it is an honest and open admission that we have done things wrong that are sinful and offensive to God. It means that we recognize that we have been living our lives focused on us, our wants and desires, and not focused on God, what He wants, and His will for our lives.

That is why David was still “a man after God's own heart” even after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then treacherously had her husband Uriah murdered. He initially tried to cover it up, but describes in Psalm 32:3, 4, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” Later when confronted by the prophet Nathan he admitted what he had done. In one of the great confession psalms of the Bible, he said, “Have mercy on me, oh God, according to your great compassion. ...Against you have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...” (Psalm 51:1-4a)

Evil? How many of us think that anything we might do is “evil” in God's sight? We might not – but God does. That is why it is important to be ruthlessly honest in facing our sins. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9 To cleanse us of our sins. That is what each of us need.

What are some of the sins we might have? In our church? Among the laity? Among the clergy? Among the bishops? Let's see if we can identify and admit those that might exist....

Who or what is responsible for our church's decline?

In the General Church

We need to be honest with ourselves. We as a church are riddled with “\$10 religion” – spiritual anemia. If it were not, we would have a passion for “saving souls.” This is exemplified in the “Open doors, open hearts, open minds” advertising campaign that talks about the UMC but has never to my knowledge given the clear message that people everywhere need the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. I have not seen one that even mentions His name, for that matter. Is this because those in charge of the campaign didn't think about it or don't believe it is even necessary?

Is our system in the UMC “broken”? Is the *Book of Discipline* irrelevant? I ask these questions because of what happened to St. Paul (UM) Church in Fairbanks, Alaska. Despite the fact that this laity-formed church did the “right things” and always paid their apportionment, they were disaffiliated and the Alaska Missionary Conference still took the property from the people and tried to close them down for no discernible reason. If that happened to them, it can happen to any

church within the polity of the UMC. Dr. Robert Carlson made this point in his letter to the Judicial Council during their appeal process (page 92 of the book *We've a Story to Tell...*):

“First, the procedures leading up to the discontinuance of our church by United Methodist clergy within the AMC have flagrantly violated multiple provisions of *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church - 2000*. If this practice is allowed to stand and if it becomes even more widespread, it seems that this would cause the life within our denomination to degenerate into anarchy - with each bishop determining what is ‘right/wrong’ or what is ‘allowed/disallowed’ within his conference. I believe that this portends a serious problem.”

To reiterate, he wrote “anarchy - with each bishop determining what is ‘right/wrong’ or what is ‘allowed/disallowed’ within his conference”! This does indeed portend serious problems. When basic rights are violated within our church, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions. What are our true priorities? If we do not obey the *Book of Discipline*, we might as well throw it into the trash can. Even more seriously, when we pursue an agenda that is not in obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ, are we really even being a Christian church?

Again, Dr. Carlson compares the “Open doors, open hearts, open minds” advertising campaign with reality,

“Finally, in a broader context, how does this action in eliminating the existence of St. Paul UMC compare with the present publicity campaign of the United Methodist Church of ‘Open doors, open hearts, open minds’? There appears to be a conflict here. The discontinuance of our church is a reality; does this reflect the true nature of the polity as it exists at present in the United Methodist Church? It would appear to be so. If it does, then this publicity campaign presents to the public a false image of the reality in our denomination. On the other hand, does the ‘Open doors’ campaign reflect the reality of life in our denomination? If so, then there has been a grave injustice done to the membership and ministry of our congregation by ending the life of St. Paul United Methodist Church. If the latter is the case, I ask that you would correct this injustice.” (p. 93 of the book)

Needless to say, this injustice was not corrected, and their property (church & parsonage) were taken by the conference.

So-called “God language” – refusing to refer to God in the masculine is a problem. It is as if those who write and speak in this way have never taken a third grade course in English and learned to use pronouns. This is silly. More seriously, even though God is above mere gender, not referring to Him in terms that He has chosen, given to us through the Bible, and in Jesus’ example means that we are redefining God in accordance with our image. God defines who He is; we do not. At one annual conference I heard John 3:16 in gender-neutral terms used as the text. Could it be that a person who refuses to refer to God in the masculine is a crippled Christian?

“Working behind the scenes” is falsehood. It almost seems as if there is in the UMC a hidden polity – a “shadow operation” that is unseen by many of the laity and clergy.

Among the Laity

The laity suffer from the “\$10 religion” spiritual anemia that riddles the UMC; we do not have a passion for saving souls.

The sins contained in the Bible: disobedience, idolatry, heresy, greed, pride, lying, murder, gossip, (gossip has been compared to the murder of another person’s reputation), slander, strife, deceit, malice, arrogance, boastful, resentment, hatred, anger, sexual sin, et. al. This last offense is

especially egregious because it is sin against the “temple of the living God” (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Ro. 1:28-32, et. al.).

Jesus referred to the people as sheep in his parables; all too often, we act as lemmings. He was not being degrading when he referred to us as “sheep” but realistic as to our nature. We are easily led and put our preachers on a pedestal. They are led to operate from “consensus” putting great importance on agreement rather than people being self-thinkers, lending itself to the “herd mentality.” There are too many “get-along, go-along” people as Bill Fishburne had to face in his church.

A chief problem is that the average layperson is unaware of over 99% of what happens in the denomination. What is even more troublesome is that many don’t want to know.

Among the Clergy

Too many clergy suffer from “\$10 religion” spiritual anemia that riddles the UMC; no passion for “saving souls.”

Failing to preach the clear message that people are lost in sins; Jesus paid the price by dying for our sins on the cross; if we accept this free gift of salvation, we can have the assurance that our sins will be forgiven; we can have a richer, fuller life on this earth; we will be with Jesus in heaven when we die.

Failure to confront church members with sins they may have.

Playing the “company man/woman”: some clergy have as an unstated goal to be “upwardly mobile” in the system for that next higher position – district superintendent and ultimately bishop. In order to do this they adopt a “go along to get along” mentality that they believe is forced on them by the system.

For some clergy: lying, manipulation, pride, intimidation, falsehood, slander, character assassination, idolatry, anger, hypocrisy, hatred, pornography, sexual immorality, etc.

Among the Bishops

The leadership of St. Peter’s United Methodist Church in Morehead City, North Carolina wrote the following letter dated November 30, 2007, to Bishop Alfred Gwinn (North Carolina Area) out of a “compelling concern for United Methodism today”:

That concern is based on the sense that, in the United Methodist Church, there is “no place for truth” (David Wells).

Think with us, about the recent initiatives coming from various quarters of the United Methodist Church. As you well know, the Council of Bishops has named “seven pathways” to renew United Methodism: develop new churches, transform existing congregations, minister to and with racial/ethnic minorities, develop leaders, evangelize children, minister to and with the poor, and advance the United Methodist way of discipleship. Then there is Bishop Robert Schnase, of the Missouri Area, who writes about the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations (Abingdon Press, 2007), which are: “radical hospitality,” “passionate worship,” “intentional faith development,” “risk-taking mission and service,” and “extravagant generosity.” Next are the four “provocative proposals” from the denomination’s Connectional Table, for moving the church forward: develop and strengthen leaders, establish new congregations, partner with the poor, and implement a global health initiative.

These “pathways,” “practices,” and “proposals” are well and good. All of them, if earnestly undertaken, would accomplish much good. However, I would submit that the “one thing needful” (Luke 10:42 RSV here and below) - - truth, understood as Jesus Christ and what is consistent with Him – is missing. Indeed, today many United Methodists seem to assume that our denomination can get organized, busy, and renewed without reference to the truth. Again, many seem to believe that, in principle, the denomination and its congregations can accomplish ministries without the foundation of truth. We believe that is mistaken.

Jesus promised: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) Since Jesus Christ is understood as the truth, one could surmise that truth builds the Church....It makes no sense then to separate the Church’s ministry from truth.

A recent Council of Bishops meeting illustrates this phenomenon. First, wanting to stay focused on its main agenda and to avoid being distracted by other matters, the Council decided not do discuss homosexuality and the church. (This matter, as you well know, is now threatening to bring schism to several oldline, Protestant denominations. Therefore, it is – or should be – of urgent concern to United Methodists today.) Then the Council agreed to allow one bishop, who wants morally to legitimate homosexual behavior, to speak. Following that speech, there was no rebuttal, which would have amounted to reassertion of church teaching; rather, silence on this topic once again became the order of the day. Notice, it is truthful teaching, in this instance, that was not offered. Why? Is “political correctness” an unnamed censor at Council meetings?

Before doing anything else, The United Methodist Church would be wise to deal with what could be called a “crisis of truth” within the household....

United Methodists might recall the strong words of Archbishop Joseph Naumann Kansas City: “Without the acceptance of objective truth, everything becomes negotiable. The moral conscience of society and the individual are impaired. There is confusion in the recognition of good and evil. We become uncertain about such fundamental institutions for family and society as marriage. From the denial of natural truth, a nihilism emerges that we find expressing itself today in art, literature, and films. We become confused about what is good and noble. We question what is worth devoting our life to....” (“Woe to Those Who Call Evil Good,” 10/29/07, www.firstthings.com)

In this societal context, the Council of Bishops is situated and charged to teach and to teach the truth. According to The Book of Discipline (2004), the bishops of The United Methodist Church are, among other things, “[t]o guard, transmit, teach, and proclaim, corporately and individually, the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and tradition, and, as they are led and endowed by the Spirit, to interpret that faith evangelically and prophetically.” (Paragraph 414.4) In other words, bishops are to teach the truth – not opinions, not perspectives, not prejudices, but the truth of the Church’s faith.

The insight of St. Peter’s UMC’s leadership points to a glaring omission of Jesus Christ being in the bishops’ priorities. Have the bishops somehow gotten off track? I think – definitely so. Otherwise, why did they completely forget to incorporate into their priorities the areas of evangelism or faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus Christ? Jesus tells us, “If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” (Matthew 15:14) Is it then any wonder that we as a church have been in consistent decline over the space of the past forty years?

In addition with their deeply flawed letter stating that “homosexuality is not a bar to membership in the church” and other actions, we cannot help but conclude that, despite public pronouncements to the contrary, the 50 bishops in the United States favor normalizing this practice in the United Methodist Church. This is not written with any malice nor rancor, but as an

observation. A general under whom I once served, LTG Hal Luck, said, “If I see something that looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck – then it’s a duck.”

Regarding the subject of homosexuality often being mentioned in the context of debate within the United Methodist Church, the St. Peter’s UMC leadership provided additional insight in an earlier letter to Bishop Gwinn dated November 10, 2006,

Yes, many of us United Methodists are quite weary of discussing the issue of homosexual activity. However, as Martin Luther declared: “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except that little point which the world.[is] at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.” Likewise, the Church gets to choose neither the issues over which the battles will rage nor whether or not she will enter the battles.

The bishops seem to operate from “consensus” where they put great importance on everyone agreeing on a matter. This is not a good leadership skill. Someone has said, “When everyone thinks alike, no one is doing much thinking.” Again, consensus lends itself to a “herd mentality” where everyone follows along with the group without thinking for himself.

More than any other group of people, the responsibility for the decline of The United Methodist Church in the United States over the past forty years rests squarely with the fifty bishops in the United States. I have heard some of them try to put the blame on the pastors of the local churches, but this is clearly a leadership function. This is their responsibility.

Why is revival important?

Quicksand!

Steve and John* were out for a weekend camping trip and were hiking through a swampy woods in the Southeastern part of the United States with Steve in the lead. Suddenly, he was bogged down in the soft ground beneath his feet; he started sinking. He hurriedly took his pack off and tried to turn around and get back to John. He did succeed in turning around but could not get back to firmer ground. John tried to reach out to him but could not get close enough to grab his hand. Helplessly, he watched as Steve sank lower and lower.

The last thing he saw of Steve was his terror-filled eyes as his head slowly sank below the muck. John sat down on the ground, put his head down on his arms, and cried.

* The teenagers were real; their names have been changed.

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Tell me, if you were passing by someone who was sinking in quicksand and, for some reason, he did not know what it was nor the danger he was in, would you stop and try to tell him? Would you reach out your hand and tell him to take it? Would you try to convince him of the importance of taking your hand so you could pull him out? I don’t think there is anyone in the United Methodist Church who would ignore the peril this guy faced or who would hurry by because he had other things to do. As tragic as this quicksand episode was – and it is indeed a really frightful thing that happened to this teenager – then why don’t we have a similar concern for the people in our daily lives and others that we meet who might be lost spiritually? Could it be that we don’t know the tremendous importance of this to people? If, in fact, we don’t know this – then why not? Could this be related to the decline in our denomination?

Look at the membership statistics on page 1. Our United Methodist Church has been in decline for forty years – and we need to find out why. What happened? How did we get off track? What is wrong?

Far greater than numerical decline in our denomination is the spiritual lostness of people, a tragedy that surrounds us. The ugly truth is that this “lostness” is someone dying in their sins without the salvation through Jesus Christ and going to hell. That is the ultimate tragedy for every living human being who goes there. Some people don’t believe in this as being real. Their unbelief does not take away from its reality. Indeed, it is said that Jesus spoke more about hell than He did heaven – and I can understand that; He didn’t want anyone to go there. This is something that makes us a little uncomfortable to discuss – so we tend to avoid it. But should we?

When I had faced my “near death” experience (NDE) when choking to death, that was the ultimate “reality check” for me. While in the Army and a paratrooper, I have been in combat and almost been killed several times – but this NDE caused more terror than all of the other fear in my life combined. A question I have is, “Why didn’t my UM preachers ever tell me the clear gospel message of salvation?” Where were they?

Do you think that this lack of concern for true evangelism by a majority of United Methodists is a serious problem? Do you think that this may be one of the reasons that we have been in decline for 40 years? Since our church is declining and other “charismatic” Bible-based churches are growing, I’d say yes.

What could revival look like?

Think back to the beginnings of Methodism. John Wesley, who had his heart “warmed” and entered a “Million Dollar Relationship” with Jesus Christ, had a burning desire to save souls. A by-product of his concern was helping them resolve their physical and social needs as well. Through his efforts, British society was transformed in such a way that prevented the revolution that devastated France. When Methodism came to the New World, it was a civilizing force in the development of our country. As the frontier swept westward, Methodist circuit riders took the gospel message to settlers and lives were changed. Methodism was known as “America’s church.”

Now think about today. What if we could, by some miracle, change the 8 million members of the United Methodist Church into 8 million John Wesleys? What would happen? We would turn our church and this country upside down for Jesus Christ! Do you know the problems we have in our church and in the country? As lives were changed, these would disappear, and our society would be changed for the better. It wouldn’t stop at our borders, but would erupt out of our country. We would have United Methodists taking the message of Jesus Christ all over the world - and you would see the world changed!

Just think about it! Isn’t that exciting? Wouldn’t it be great?!

What is needed?

Confession Repentance Obedience Faithfulness Holiness

The great Methodist missionary Dr. E. Stanly Jones is reputed to have once said, “I believe that fully half of the people in the Methodist Church are not saved.” Another man of God said, “If you are not concerned for those who are not saved, then you are not saved. You can be assured of that!” Strong words.

The most urgent need we have is for our everyone – laity, pastors, district superintendents, and bishops – to truly come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Then we could lead others to Him and a richer, fuller life. Then we need:

+ Confession of our sins is a first step.

- + Repentance from our sins is next; this means to change our ways and not do those things which the Bible calls sin.
- + Obedience to the Bible's teachings and the orthodox Christian faith as clarified in our Wesleyan teachings. This needs to be our compass in our journey through life.
- + Faithfulness to our Lord Jesus Christ and to the Bible's teachings. Each day we should strive to know Christ better.
- + Holiness is keeping ourselves from sin, to the fullest extent we can. This is helped by our daily time with Him in the morning when we read our Bibles & pray.

A solution for the crisis in the American UM churches is to be found in the Council of Bishops. Bishop Nkulu Ntambo has given his testimony of how his ancestors were cannibals. Yet Jesus Christ transformed them; they lived completely different lives as Christian. Nigerian Archbishop Ayo Ladigbolu is another example. He was studying to be a Muslim evangelist and was involved in persecuting Christians, but was transformed by that same Jesus Christ and is tireless in telling others about Him in the Methodist Church of Nigeria.

We need to recapture that "old, old story" that is ever current, powerful, & applicable to us today. Jesus Christ changes lives!

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It is out of a deep abiding love and concern for our United Methodist Church that I offer the above.
– Allen O. Morris