

A global identity: Can United Methodism restructure itself?

by [Robert J. Harman](#) in the [April 4, 2012](#) issue



Knox United Methodist Church in Manila, Philippines.

United Methodists may be excused for being a bit confused about their denominational identity these days. Though it is the second largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.—behind the Southern Baptist Convention—the U.S. membership of the United Methodist Church has been declining. In response, the church's bishops are presenting a proposal to the 2012 General Conference titled "Call to Action." They have been listening to church growth consultants like Lovett H. Weems Jr. of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., who says: "There's no future for the UMC in the U.S. unless it can demonstrate that it can reach more people, younger people and more diverse people."

Meanwhile, the United Methodist Church is growing globally. While U.S. membership dropped 1.2 percent to 7.8 million in 2009, the worldwide membership rose above 12 million for the first time. The major growth areas are Africa and the Philippines. Methodist membership in Africa, Asia and Europe grew from 3.5 million to 4.4 million in the five-year period ending in 2009, according to the United Methodist News Service.

The bishops' proposal for increasing the U.S. membership implies that the declining U.S. membership threatens the church's ability to sustain and strengthen the church's growing global ministry. The mechanics of the proposal empower the bishops to downsize the governance structure and redistribute church benevolences

to promote church growth in the U.S.

That proposal raises the question of whether it is wise to centralize authority in order to achieve growth. The latest organizational theories suggest that decisions are best made at the edges of organizations that are growing and increasingly diverse.

The larger issue is the nature of the church's calling. Is the United Methodist Church primarily an American Protestant denomination with extensions overseas? Or is it a worldwide communion in which every national particularity is submerged for the sake of a common witness?

The 2012 General Conference will be the sixth successive General Conference to receive recommendations on restructuring the UMC as a global church. So far, little progress has been made. For the North American members, denominational identity is deeply rooted in national history; moving toward a global church means considerable soul-searching and pride-swallowing. For conferences beyond the U.S. with a history of financial dependency on U.S. churches, any structural change threatens their security.

Membership vows are administered in local churches, but they entitle each United Methodist to full participation in any and every congregation within the denomination. Because membership in the UMC is portable, the church is already a church without borders. But the distance between the image of a global church and the reality is troubling.

With church membership comes privileges, but also commitments. New members pledge their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness in support of the whole church. Church leaders concerned about the future of the UMC would do well to consider how to inject global relevance into these traditional vows.

"Will you support the UMC with your prayers?" This question in the membership pledge calls to mind Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper, when he prayed for the gift of unity among his disciples. May they "all be one . . . so that the world will know that you sent me," he prayed (John 17:20). For Jesus, unity (or "inclusiveness") among his disciples is more than an organizational issue. It is a spiritual calling that can be an instrument of the evangel itself.

Uttering this prayer for unity will take some attitude correction for most American members. Our casual conversations often reveal attitudes of cultural dominance.

Religious beliefs and traditions get blended with our national history, our cultural preferences and even our perspectives on global politics.

In his novel *Cutting for Stone*, author Abraham Verghese includes a dialogue between two Indian doctors who receive preferential immigration treatment that enables them to serve medical internships in a poor section of the Bronx. Both immediately observe the absence of white physicians at the hospital and deftly identify this as a manifestation of American hedonism: "Whatever America needs, the world will supply. Cocaine? Colombia steps to the plate. Shortage of farmworkers, corn detassellers? Thank God for Mexico. Baseball players? Viva Dominica. Need more interns? India, Philippines *zindabad!*" (*Zindabad* is Urdu for "Long live!")

Likewise, a dominant and wealthy North American contingent within the global UMC gets whatever it wants: a shortage of pastors to serve churches in growing Hispanic neighborhoods—thank you, pastors from Latin America. A shortage of pastors to serve churches in racially transitional neighborhoods—thank you, African Caribbean pastors who speak English with British accents. A shortage of pastors to save rural churches from extinction—thank you, Korean-American women pastors.

Then there is the treatment of the evangelists who produce much of the membership growth worldwide. They are routinely deprived of being fully credentialed conference members because of their lack of formal training.

Taking the vows of membership in the UMC means embracing equity and unity in a global faith communion. "We are all members," writes Paul in Ephesians, "one of another." An arm can't live without being part of the body. This imagery was invoked to persuade early Christians that they belonged to one another in a profound way.

Historically, the churches begun by Methodist missionaries were confined to a special governance niche called Central Conferences, and that's where those choosing to remain in the UMC still reside. In a truly global church their place at the table would include full empowerment. The formula for representation at the 2012 General Conference, reflecting global membership patterns, allocates 40 percent of the seats to delegates coming from Africa, Europe and the Philippines. The conference agenda, however, will be shaped entirely by the interests of the North American majority. And when the African delegates return home, they will lack the juridical structures to implement actions of the General Conference. They have

trouble even enforcing their local renditions of the Book of Discipline—as in the failure to prevent the recent unauthorized election of a rogue bishop in Burundi. Until sustainability of all units of the connection is addressed, equity and accountability will remain elusive.

"Will you support the UMC with your presence?" This second membership vow implies more for the church than just being attentive to institutional agendas, such as reporting weekly attendance figures. For members of a global community, presence requires remaining at the table to face openly the magnitude of differences within a richly diverse fellowship.

Without engaging the world, the church simply cannot be the church. Appropriately, the Call to Action plan of the bishops offers this subtheme: "Making disciples for the transformation of the world." Can delegates assume that the proposal will successfully get beyond shoring up the institution and enable the church to better serve the world Christ came to save?

The church in mission is always about being present to the world and secondarily about sustaining institutional structures. Church leaders in the Southern Hemisphere don't struggle with the institutional images of success that dominate the experience of most North American churchpeople. Church growth strategies and denominational reorganizations get little play in Africa, where the focus is on managing the daily pain of parishioners who live amid economic hardship, environmental degradation and political instability. Dynamic, warmly evangelistic worship is the occasion for celebrating spiritual triumphs over these systemic evils.

Cultural differences deserve a stronger affirmation in a global church community. To understand cultural influences on African Christian experience, one must explore the importance of such practices as healing, exorcisms and ancestral veneration. Then there is the rigid African perspective on homosexuality that is often inserted unfairly and uncritically into the current struggles of North American churches. Will that debate include the challenges that polygamy presents to African Methodists within a global church?

In Matthew 18, Jesus calls for honesty in the faith community. Members are to sit and remain at table with those with whom they struggle and lay down all their cards, naming and clarifying harmful actions, how they hurt and what will enable healing.

"Will you support the church with your gifts?" The UMC must rethink this membership vow in the context of global poverty. The church stumbles over the question, "But how will we finance a global church?" It is obvious that a robust stewardship is required to support the extension of the church in the cash-strapped economies where the largest gains in membership are taking place. However, the question is not being addressed because none of the legislative proposals presented have been accompanied by budget projections.

The last several General Conferences have rejected petitions to permit the election of additional bishops to oversee the rapid growth in the Philippines and Africa. The reason? The salary of UMC bishops is funded and administered by the general church, which is under pressure to contain "overhead expenses" and has already reduced the number of bishops in the U.S. for financial reasons. Thus the idea of empowering a global church and creating greater effectiveness and equality among regional structures serves to heighten the anxiety of budget-conscious, turf-conscious delegates.

Financing the global vision is important, but building a mutually responsive stewardship is a priority. The root word for charity is the Greek *charis*, or *grace*. Grace is the presence of God in the life of the world—freely extended through the ministry of Christ to every living soul. So Christian charity becomes a ministry of sharing God's gifts of grace. It is not a paternalistic act of giving from the abundance of those who have to those who don't; it is valuing all the gifts that God has so generously distributed among every community. Unity within a global church will overcome a stewardship that is donor-driven and controlled. Global church representatives will make decisions and create the channels needed to support one another across the reaches of geography and culture. Members will jettison the divisive notion that some are "absolute donors" and others "absolute recipients." All are the recipients and agents of God's grace that is sufficient for every need.

When that message is taken to heart, a global church will no longer perpetuate a pension system that permits North American pastors and church employees to benefit from the profits of set-aside earnings and investments in the stock market while retired pastors in Central Conferences subsist on small reserve funds and occasional donations. Neither will it allow its North American seminaries to benefit from denominational support while seminaries in Europe, Africa and Philippines are left on their own, helped by only occasional grants from available general church funds.

"Will you support the church through witness and service?" The best way to witness to the gospel is through service. Service means taking responsibility to fix the consequences of sin, especially injustice. The increasingly popular Volunteer-in-Mission teams recruited by local churches and connectional units of the church do well in offering participants opportunities to solve problems. But when service is linked to witness there is a commitment to getting at the root causes of those problems. A global worldview sharpens the focus of that evangelistic witness on systemic injustices and advocacy of social policy formation.

John Wesley's vision for his Methodist movement was reform. His mantra was "to reform the nation (especially the churches) and to spread scriptural holiness across the land." As for reforming the churches, he recommended a path to spiritual holiness that leads through acts of social holiness. Christian holiness is this-worldly. It identifies with the brokenhearted who are eager to hear the good news.

God seems to have a penchant throughout the Bible for using broken people as vessels of the good news. When the church decides to embrace the brokenness of the world—just as members embrace the broken body of Christ in the sacrament—then God's saving grace will be made known to others.

Membership statistics may document the changes taking place in our denomination, but membership perceptions are what really count. For years, the denomination has promoted its public image with the slogan "Open hearts, open doors, open minds." The question for United Methodists today is whether they are open to the uncertainties and challenges of being a global church and are willing to live into that new reality.