

REFLECTION PAPER

“The Plan for Congregational Vitality”

Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton

“The next time you’re in a meeting and folks are discussing how to bring another increment of performance out of your workforce, you might ask: ‘to what end, and to whose benefit, are our employees being asked to give of themselves: Have we committed ourselves to a purpose that is truly deserving of their initiative, imagination, and passion?’”

-Gary Hamel, professor at London Business School and director of MLab

I. Remembering Why We Do What We Do

Last summer I had the privilege of traveling to Zimbabwe to be a part of a joint Clergy/Lay Training School jointly sponsored by the Western Pennsylvania and Baltimore-Washington Annual Conferences. During one session of that school, a Zimbabwean pastor stood and told this story. It seems that this pastor had such a good worship experience at one of his churches that he was running late for the next service on his charge. In Zimbabwe, few pastors have a car at their disposal. But this man did. And, as is typical for anyone in the human family who has a car at her/his disposal, traveling at an excessive speed to make up for lost time is a logical solution.

As the pastor was speeding down the highway to his next destination he was pulled over by a police car that was monitoring the road. When the two policemen approached the car they inquired of the pastor why he was traveling so fast. His answer: “I am late for church!” But the policemen didn’t believe him. Pleading his case, the man explained that he was a pastor. But the policemen didn’t believe him. Asking him to get out of his car, the police finally became convinced of his story when the man pulled down his sweater to reveal his clerical collar.

The pastor made a simple inquiry of the police officers. “Why didn’t you believe me?” he asked. Their reply was simple: “You didn’t have anyone in the car with you.” You see, in Zimbabwe people believe that if you are going to church you need to be taking people with you so that others can hear the good news of God’s love. For these two police officers it seemed incompatible that a person late for church, let alone a pastor, would be going to worship alone.

If two secular police officers believe that Christians should be taking others to church, then why don’t we?

This story illustrates the real issue before us as we face the dilemma of restoring the church’s vitality. Faith in the 21st century has become an individualized pursuit. A good friend of mine has coined the phrase, “We have gone from *The World is Our Parish* to *The Parish is Our World*.” To sense that every moment we interact with the world around us is an opportunity to invite someone into the heart of God and fulfill the Christ

given mission of “*making disciples*” seems to be quite foreign to the modern United Methodist Christian. Yet this very basic and fundamental approach, seeing the world as our parish and the individuals in that world as potential disciples, is the key to any revitalization effort that our denomination will undertake. To put it simply, a plan without passion is no plan at all. If we can’t remember why we do what we do and who do it for, then what whatever we do will only acting be out the motions to fulfill the obligations.

In the last decade of the 20th Century, I had the distinct and overwhelming joy of serving a congregation that experienced rapid and significant growth in all of the predictable categories (membership, worship attendance, baptisms, and professions of faith). Fourteen years later there are e-mails and Facebook messages that confirm to me that we didn’t just bring in members, we grew disciples. Those members and the numbers they represented on annual statistical reports were our goal, not because we were obsessed with our growth but because we were obsessed with our calling to spread God’s love and intentionally invite people into the heart of God’s love.

My staff met once a week in that local church. Those staff meetings were comprised of everyone who was a paid employee of the church (including secretaries and custodians). Once a month our staff met with our volunteer leaders. It was a group we called L.I.G.H.T. (“Leadership in God’s Holy Training). In those monthly meetings we would re-state our vision, revisit our ministry plan, review the spiritual health/activity of our volunteers (we had a requirement that each person in leadership either be involved in DISCIPLE Bible study, a weekly study, or a small group ministry) AND set our goal for discipleship development for the next month. As a part of that meeting, my retired associate would report (as an example), “*For the month of November, Tom & I have set a goal of 25 visits to new visitors, 5 new members, and 2 new professions of faith.*” Each month we would report to the group how we had done in reaching our goal and invite accountability from the group when we didn’t achieve it. After a while, everyone became participants in helping to fulfill those goals. Each month we made sure that everyone understood the theology behind our goal-setting and the history of how spiritual organizations used goals like that to build the momentum of their movement. Every month we would pray for the souls we had reached by name and pray for the ones who were yet to be named in our minds and hearts. At the end we would pray for ourselves, that we would have the courage to go out to reach people where they were and invite them into a place where we believed they needed to be.

What happened as a result of those intentional conversations was that our leadership understood why we desired a growing, vital congregation. Those leaders eventually committed themselves to helping our congregation understand the same thing and equipped themselves to help us reach the practical goals we believed God had placed on our hearts.

Leading by “Connecting the Dots”

I have been, and will remain, an active supporter of our church’s recent “Call to Action” and the subsequent “Congregational Plan for Renewed Vitality.” Yet, while I understand

much of what is being addressed in the “Call to Action” and subscribe to many components of that plan, I will confess to you that there are some parts of the plan which create significant “dis-ease” within me. Stories like the one I shared above continues to convince me that until we motivate our people to find passion once more for the “making of disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” on all levels of the church’s life and work, no structural change, vitality assessment, revitalization plan or metric reporting system will achieve our desired outcome. This is not to say that they are not valid issues that need discussed and implemented. They are and I fully participate in their implementation. They cannot, however, be seen as “stand alone” solutions to the deeper problems we face.

Let me use as an example the conversation about the denomination’s impending “Death Tsunami.” When I first heard the presentation on the unsustainable future of The United Methodist Church, my fingers grew tired from the notes I took. I immediately returned to my Annual Conference and put together a presentation to share with each of my districts. After the first presentation, three e-mails arrived in my inbox suggesting that a potential hole in the presentation was its lack of theological “grounding.” In other words, “*tell us bishop why God is calling us, both biblically and spiritually, to do anything about this problem. Convince us that this isn’t just a numbers game.*” Those were great suggestions and the presentation was altered. I felt good about the content and pleased with the initial response.

Yet, months after the presentations ended, I have discovered that many who heard it have been unable to make the conversion from a reality-based presentation about our impending decline to a motivation-based attempt to stir the waters with hope, purpose and creativity. My assumption was that those who heard it would or could make the transition and use the “death tsunami” as a motivation for action. Instead, it has driven many into a spiral of resignation and regret.

As a result, I framed my 2011 “State of the Church” address at the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference around the theme, “*What’s Right with the Church.*” In a direct, concise manner, I attempted to tell “*the rest of the story,*” the story of how we can find hope, direction, and revitalization in the midst of any Tsunami that may hit our shores. There IS a way through. God IS NOT through with us yet.

I have discovered that the role of leadership is to help our people “*connect the dots*” in a way that many cannot do on their own. The absence of focused leadership that casts a vision and connects the present reality with the desired outcome will lead to a free for all of theories and practices that may, or may not, achieve the end result we desire.

The absence of theological groundings, roadmaps of possibility, and clear, concise, achievable steps for revitalization of the church on all levels of its work have opened a “Pandora’s Box” of responses, postings, and legislation that I don’t believe are healthy, either now or at the upcoming session of the General Conference

As an example, look at the fear and anger that has been generated around the potential loss of security in receiving an assignment in our church. Legislation using the platform

of “guaranteed appointments” has been created on a variety of subjects that, I believe, indirectly address the issue at hand.

The real issue before us is how we breed effective leaders, maintain excellence in leadership, and provide our churches with leaders who are well equipped and empowered. However, the box has opened and there are those who want, either consciously or unconsciously, to move the conversation into more complicated and ill-advised directions. A conversation around effective leadership, leads to a conversation about guaranteed appointments, which leads to a conversation about ill-equipped leaders on all levels, which leads to a conversation about hierarchical distrust, which leads to a conversation about cultural drivers that determine leadership, which leads to a conversation about congregationalism verses denominationalism, which leads to a conversation about, . . . Get the point? Good intentions lead to convoluted conversations that get us off track and before we know it we are traveling down a road that may benefit the agenda of some but is not good at all for the whole of the body.

Bishop Mike Coyner (Indiana) recently compared this conversation with the game “Angry Birds.” In this game the player launches various birds in the air to attack and destroy the structures which have been created by the pigs. Bishop Coyner writes, *“As we approach General conference of 2012, it seems that the ‘angry birds’ who are upset about our UMC are flying high and fast. . . . It makes for an interesting time for anyone who wants to be centered and focused upon our mission. That’s how I would describe myself, and frankly I get a little irritated with all the angry birds that seem to want to attack, tear down, and demean either our UMC or the US. It is fine to debate our future, to propose changes, and to work for any particular political agenda. However, when those actions and ideas are turned into “angry birds” which fly around seeking to destroy, then it is no longer a game I want to play.”* To launch accusations at various aspects of our institution based on the thought that if we tear down this part of our church we’ll be better off seems to have little wisdom attached to it. I don’t believe that we need legislation about the future of guaranteed appointments as much as we need more honest and authentic relationships with pastors and colleagues who are ineffective. More than that we need leadership that provides theological groundings, roadmaps of possibility, and clear, concise, achievable steps for revitalization

I believe that any successful system needs a hierarchy and if it doesn’t have one, it will eventually. Our challenge is not to dismantle our hierarchical system but rather find a way to allow “movements” to be just that in the midst of a hierarchical system (read the book [The Starfish & the Spider](#)). In that vein, we don’t need a legislated “Call to Action” as much as we need a life-styled “Call to Action,” one that seeps into our souls and drives us in the same way our initial “Call to Ministry” drove us into sacrificial, servant leadership. What is needed is a spiritually motivated invitation to re-claim a passion for ministry that will motivate clergy and laity alike to win souls for Christ as much as many are motivated to preserve the padded pews and stained glass windows of the building.

In the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John, the disciples were back at work after the death and resurrection of Jesus. They were once again fishing off the shore when the Lord appeared to them. When Simon Peter realized it was Jesus he wrapped his

outer garment around him, jumped into the water and swam to the shore to see his Lord. Once he recognized him, Peter enthusiastically responded.

It seems to be that we literally need a “*come to Jesus*” call that will motivate us to jump out of our boats and swim to the shore in order to hear with anticipation what the Lord has to say. In John 21 Jesus looked at his disciples and said, “*Feed my Sheep.*” Don’t we need to hear that same call once again so that we can be as motivated to make disciples as we are passionate about pension projections and health care providers?

I continue to be blessed by the words of Pope John Paul II when he said, “*The church today doesn’t need more reformers. It needs more saints.*” We can reform all we want but if we don’t have saints who are living out a gospel that has seeped deep into their soul, those reforms will have little to no impact.

Re-Framing the “Call to Action”

There is no doubt that there are at least two sides to the “Call to Action.” One side adamantly argues that without specific goals and a definitive plan for action, we will only continue our journey of decline and irrelevance. Despite those arguments, the other side remains unconvinced and believes that this plan will further damage morale and will be viewed as another doomed hierarchical plan based on numbers alone. One of my District Superintendents has described resisters to the “Congregational Plan for Renewed Vitality” as “Conscientious Objectors.” These are persons who, for whatever reason, object to the directive to establish S.M.A.R.T goals and numeric projections for their church/charge. Why is it that some have enthusiastically reported that the conversations related to the establishment of those goals have been a hope-filled sparkplug for their congregation(s) while others see it as a mindless exercise that reminds them of a secular plan to simply increase numbers? It appears to me that the drivers for “Conscientious Objection” to the “Plan for Vitality” are centered on at least three “disconnects” with our church.

The Grounding of Theology

First, there seems to me to be a THEOLOGICAL disconnect with the “Call to Action.” From the day that I entered into full-time Christian ministry I have embraced the biblical understanding of God’s claim on humanity in the Old Testament story and Jesus’ incarnation of that claim as found in the testimony of the New Testament. The emphasis placed on the “loners, losers, and lost ones” in Jesus’ practical ministry on earth led him to leave his disciples with two great commandments (Love of God & love of neighbor) and one great commission (make disciples). This commission of making disciples has nothing directly to do with growing the membership or worship attendance in our churches. Yet, membership and worship gains are, in reality, a natural byproduct of disciple making! In the 21st Century this does not demand conformity with our existing programs and worship offerings as much as it demands creativity in reaching people where they are and creating “new places for new people.”

Theologically, I believe that God calls us to lay claim upon those who do not know Christ as a focal point in our ministry. This means that setting numerical goals for

membership, worship, baptism, etc. can and should be a way to motivate disciple-makers to make disciples, especially when framed from a theological, not a metrics viewpoint.

Re-claiming the “Connection”

Second, I believe that there is a CONNECTIONAL disconnect among us. When the discussion around the “*Call to Action*” took place at the Council of Bishops, I was “all in” theologically but not convinced practically. I ended up being on the short-end of the discussion. Further, when the suggestion came to ask for tangible goals as a way of formalizing that “*call to act*” I once again had real hesitations. It was a logical step but had we adequately addressed the spiritual crisis behind our decline? When it came time for a vote, I reluctantly agreed. I had substantial and significant reservations.

Yet, I came home to my Annual Conference and shared with our leadership that we were going to fully support this movement. Why did I do that in the midst of significant hesitations? The answer was simple: I believe in “*connectionalism*” and understand completely the clear need we have on all levels of the church’s life to hold leaders “accountable” to the covenant we share within that connection.

While there is plenty of room in our system for independent thinking, there are also some clear historical and theological premises that drive us to a more intentional alignment within our connection. The pace was set from the beginning by our founders. John Wesley had requirements for those who would be involved in his “*class meetings*.” Francis Asbury shipped pastors back to England who would not conform to the emerging “*itinerant*” system.

If “connectionalism “is to thrive as it should, it will continue to require alignment with the directions (both theological and practical) that the connection determines. Are we not being asked to hold pastors accountable to the discipline of our church whenever they perform “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions” or “re-baptize?” (§341.6 & 7, 2008 United Methodist Book of Discipline). If we allowed our pastoral leaders to preach whatever they wanted with no accountability to our doctrine and polity, is there not a great outcry across the church? The connection of the church in general and the leadership of the church in particular are called to guard the faith and order of the church (§414, UMBOD).

Likewise, if we did not embrace a strong sense of connectionalism, we could not implement an itinerant system that provides pastoral leadership for every church/charge within the connection. In the modeling of our understanding of ministry we are called to submit ourselves willingly to the direction set by the call of God and those placed in leadership. Nothing summarizes this conviction better than the “Wesleyan Covenant Prayer.”

I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

When Methodism started its worldwide mission program there were those who said, “*We need to keep our resources at home.*” When we built hospitals & colleges there were those who said, “*We need to be about saving souls, not these other areas that will take us away from our primary role.*” When the Sunday School system was organized there were those who did not want to give up the revivalist “*tent meeting*” approach of making and forming disciples.

Yet, at certain marker points in our history, leadership has called the denomination into a unified approach that aligns us around a common focus and vision. It might be claimed by some that those decisions are misguided and ill-informed. And, in response, the subsequent decision on the part of some may be to conscientiously object. When that happens, it is the right of colleagues and supervisors alike to ask why that objection takes place and what to what end result? As United Methodists, we are called to be connectional and supportive in spite of our cynicism and objections.

Is it wrong for us to ask our churches to, a) discuss their viability and sustainability for the future, and b) set goals for how they can become more vital in their disciple-making and disciple-nurturing ministry (even in the places that already demonstrate vitality)? Absolutely not. Is the method fool proof? Probably not. Might this work fall into the category of another good idea that never found its full flower? Possibly so. But given the current state of organized religion in general and our denomination in particular, what have we got to lose? To do nothing will all but guarantee the same results we have been experiencing. I believe that there should be high expectations upon us all to be in alignment with the mission, vision, and direction the denomination has chosen to follow.

If I chose to only do what I wanted to do and emphasize only the things I wanted to stress, then the Council of Bishops would have every right to hold me accountable to my negligence to the direction and priorities of the denomination. And, if I could not live with that accountability, I would have to make some decision about whether or not I could remain as a part of that group.

If, for example, a District Superintendent rebelled against the direction a cabinet had agreed to take and refused to do something that had been agreed upon, how long would you expect a bishop to keep that person in that role? Compliance to an agreed upon decision does not snuff out the creativity that an individual District Superintendent can and should bring to an idea. Neither does it dictate the method by which she/he undertakes caring out that idea in their district. But if a Superintendent refused to do something, or rebelled against it with their own version of “*conscientious objection*,” or began to paint a negative light on the Annual Conference or the denomination or their fellow superintendents or even the bishop, they would be held accountable to that rebellion and, in all likelihood, not remain as a part of the team unless there was some agreed upon direction made by that cabinet in collective discernment.

The church has asked us to commit ourselves to this exercise. To be in alignment with the direction of the denomination requires a clear explanation from leadership about our theological and connectional understandings of the exercise as well as a clear explanation on the part of those who are skeptical, cynical, or hesitant.

Practical Roadmaps

Third, there is a PRACTICAL disconnect which needs to be addressed. I believe that there are distinct times when people can articulate what they want but can't for the life of them figure out how to get what they want. Similarly, I believe that there are significant times when people do not know what they want until they see it presented to them. Likewise, I believe that there are also times when people say they want something only to discover that it's not what they wanted after all when they see it unfolding.

All of that is to say that people need leaders who are willing to lead out of vision, hope, AND practicality. A leader can cast a grand vision filled with hopeful platitudes for the future and get her/his audience to enthusiastically respond, in the short-term, until they get home. It is then that practicality sets in. *"The speech was great and we agreed to everything she/he had to say, but how do we do it here? I love the thought of the end result she talked about, but how do we get there? Where do we begin?"* And, before you know it, grand visions and hopeful platitudes turn to depressed cries of uncertainty and confusion. What was meant to motivate has turned into a feeling of defeatism. All because the practical roadmap has not been provided.

We have plenty of churches out there that are struggling with their short-term futures. We have some churches among us that are still living under the illusion that they are going to be just fine in the future if they only continue doing ministry in the way that is currently working for them. And, we have some highly vital congregations that will lose their vitality in short order if vital leaders do not continue to lead out of a vision for the future. In whatever category, the ongoing discussion of congregational vitality, the development of SMART goals, and the subsequent determination of numerical metrics is absolutely critical across the denomination and within each of our local churches. They are a necessary step. But there must also be practical roadmaps, best practices, models of faithfulness, and realistic expectations attached to each goal. We didn't get into this dilemma of decline overnight. We won't get out of it without making some simple, practical steps that can prove to us once more that we can.

At the recent Council of Bishops meeting it was shared, based on statistical figures from 2005-2009, that the UMC in the United States has only 14% of its churches that fit into the "vital" category. The "Top Ten" Annual Conferences were celebrated. Yet, if the average percentage of vitality in our denomination is at only 14%, there really isn't much to celebrate. It isn't time to celebrate any measure of vitality found in one place at the expense of another. On all levels of the churches life, we are tempted with defeatism and negativity.

There is no doubt that the methods undertaken by our churches have not, in large measure, shown measurable vitality as a result. I am so tempted, at times to blurt out the oft-used phrase: *"How's that workin' for you?"* What we are currently doing isn't working so well. As a result, there is a crisis of confidence in our church and our people.

Many of our laity and clergy have inherited a style of leadership that has not emphasized or identified with “*disciple-making*” as a requirement of their leading. To transform this it will take a deep commitment among our leadership to keep this agenda before our people. But it will take more than just keeping the agenda and the vision in front of our people. It will require our leaders to help our people set tangible, realistic, practical goals that they can work toward, not as mechanism to save the United Methodist Church, but as a passion to clearly realize that God requires disciples to make disciples. When that realization takes place, a contagious movement of the spirit takes hold making it a joyful opportunity to share our faith rather than a dutiful obligation to meet a denominational requirement. That’s how disciples are formed, made and nurtured both inside the church and throughout our communities.

What are we to Do?

The mandate of Jesus is abundantly clear: Love God and love others enough to invite all of God’s children into the heart of God’s love. At this point in denominational conversations on all levels the temptation is to revert backward in our minds and begin the chorus of finger-pointing accusations and justifications as to why we are where we are: the failure of the institution, the shortfall of the general church structure, the limited vision of the local congregations, the inconsistency of leadership, the metrical evidence of our decline, etc., etc., etc. I wonder though how helpful that chorus and its various parts are in creating motivation and desire among United Methodists to love God and love others enough to invite all of God’s children into the heart of God’s love in the 21st Century. To legislate change or to mandate it bureaucratically will not do much to motivate people to action. You have to reach their heart and evoke a feeling that will drive them to carry the message of God’s love joyfully into the places where they live, work, play, and have their being. I have heard little these days from bishops, district superintendents, pastors and laity about joy or encouragement for the opportunity of creating relevant disciple-making ministries and opportunities in our 21st century world. What I DO hear, on all levels of the church, is a series of finger-pointing accusations about who is wrong without any self-analysis coming back to those who are pointing the finger! What I DO hear is a “*woe is us*” litany that sounds more like Israelites who would rather go back to Egypt and eat out of the fleshpots of slavery than press on with determination toward the goal of the Promised Land! What I DO hear resembles more of the self-defeating negativism of “Eeyore” (“Oh dear, lost my tail again.”) rather than the naïve optimism of “Winnie the Pooh” (“I think I’ll climb this tree and get some honey.”).

It begs the question: *“If you were a potential disciple who was considering living out your new found relationship with Jesus Christ through the church, would you want to align yourself with a church that could best be described by the paragraph above?”* I wouldn’t! I want to be associated with people and institutions who are going to joyfully anticipate the coming Kingdom of God and find, with determination, creative and naively optimistic ways to take the Good News of God’s love to the loners, losers, and lost ones of the world. It appears that the church in its current form better resembles the world and its angry, cynical tendencies than it does the prophets, saints, and Savior who stepped out and proclaimed that there was a better way for us to live!

Could it be that we are answering the questions that no one is asking? If so, what are we to do?

The ministry of The United Methodist Church and its people are, in effect, segmented into four levels: General Church, Annual Conference, Local Congregation, and individuals. To address the question of what we are to do, we must look at responses and directives on all four of those levels.

The Ministry of the General Church

I have been blessed to be a part of the world of the General Church of United Methodism for the last thirty-five years. It has played a formative role in my understanding of connectionalism, the development of my leadership skills, and the exercise of my day to day ministry. I am grateful for the ministry of the General Church.

It seems to me that general church ministry can, in its most basic form, be described on two levels. *The first role of the General Church is to stimulate and initiate ministries that fulfill parts of our disciple-making mandate that cannot be done successfully on any other level of the church's work.* It represents the big picture of our mission and outreach. Could, for example, any local congregation in United Methodism have founded Africa University or played a significant role in creating a pension program for pastors in the Central Conferences? Could any single United Methodist eliminate malaria-related deaths across the world? Could our network of colleges and hospitals across the globe been created by a single United Methodist unit of United Methodist Men or Women? The answer is simply: No.

The General Church needs to continue to focus on what it does best: creating possibilities for disciples to make disciples in places where those disciples cannot do it alone. This is the beauty of connectionalism. We can do far more together than any one of us can do by ourselves. That is, in a nutshell, how you change the world! Like Francis Asbury, you get on a boat in a tiny little harbor and you sail across an unknown ocean to an unknown world and you get on a horse and travel to unknown territories and you preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to unknown people and, by faith, big things get done for the Kingdom of God.

Throughout my ministry I have successfully raised 100% of the apportionment asking of the General Church. I did not raise that money by raising the question, "What are we getting back for the money we are paying?" That's poor theology: What's in it for us? I did raise that money by saying, "This is an investment of our resources into a church that is far bigger than we can ever imagine and this is our way of helping that church reach people for Christ that we could never do by ourselves."

The second role of the General Church is to motivate the church on all levels of its disciple-making ministry by telling the story of God's miraculous love at work all around us. I can only imagine what it might have been like to sit in a worship service when the Apostle Paul began to tell the story of how God had led him into ministry and used him throughout the journey: blinded on the Damascus Road, run out of town on a rail in places where he wasn't accepted, imprisoned for his faith, shipwrecked and left to die! I would have been on the edge of my seat! The fact is, I HAVE BEEN on the edge of

my seat throughout my ministry as I have heard the stories of how seeds of God's love have been planted by the ministry of my church! As a young pastor I would listen to my bishop describe his journeys to far off lands and how faithful servants were risking their very lives just to spread God's love to people who needed to hear it. I heard missionaries return with stories of life-saving ministries that were initiated in foreign countries and how my little congregation could play a role in helping to make that ministry sustainable. Later on, I was offered an opportunity by the church to travel to Africa myself and, to my surprise, had a second significant conversion experience at the hands of Africans who gave the gospel back to me in ways that I could never have found myself. And now, I am humbled to be in a role where I personally experience those transformational stories on a regular basis. If I were to keep those stories to myself, I would be limiting my role and responsibility as a bishop of the church. My role, our role, is to tell those stories and motivate others to believe that God is not through with us yet. My responsibility is to connect those stories with possibilities of service for all United Methodist Christians so that conversion, transformation, and revitalization might be seen as a very close reality rather than a very far off dream.

There are many today who are discounting the role of the General Church in the overall disciple-making ministry of The United Methodist Church. I believe that our bishop from Sierra Leone, John Yambasu, would disagree.

In the spring of 2011 our United Methodist Church, through the "Imagine NO Malaria" campaign began to initiate a project to save lives in Sierra Leone. Our church, in collaboration with the Sierra Leone government, the International Red Cross, and others, initiated a country-wide distribution of insecticide-treated mosquito nets in an effort to reduce malaria-related illness and death in that country. Six months later, 80% of those nets are still being used and there has been a 60% reduction in malaria-related illness since the time of the distribution. That is an amazing achievement! But what is even more amazing is the story that Bishop Yambasu shares. Three months after the distribution took place, Bishop Yambasu was approached in his office by fifteen "Tribal Chiefs," who are, for the sake of clarity, the mayors of various villages in Sierra Leone. These tribal chiefs wield great authority and power and were critical in the success of the mosquito net distribution. The tribal chiefs, who were United Methodist, Muslim, and some of no faith at all, had come to ask the bishop to consider opening new United Methodist congregations in their villages. When Bishop Yambasu inquired as to what had motivated them to come to his office to make such a request, one Tribal Chief spoke these words, "Sir, three months ago you came to our villages with life-saving mosquito nets. We trusted you with the care of our bodies. Now, because of that, we would like to trust you with the care of our souls." My goodness! Nets designed to care for the physical body have opened a door to care for the spiritual soul. Health-care ministry has, in Sierra Leone, been converted into an evangelism ministry! Could anyone have done that on their own if not for the General Church at work? And further, would anyone have been blessed by that story had Bishop Yambasu kept it to himself?

What we have been given we called to give away. That is the role of leadership within the General Church. We have the opportunity to gather the stories of how God is active and alive all across this connection and, with the skills and technologies at our disposal, motivate our people to make a "connection" with the "connection" and in the process

make a “connection” with Jesus Christ. If our General Church boards and agencies were to fulfill these two basic roles and functions they would effectively contribute to the revitalization of our denomination.

The Ministry of the Annual Conference

The Annual Conference that I am privileged to serve created a mission and a vision statement that, I believe, summarizes the role and function of the Annual Conference in motivating the disciple-making ministry of the church. It says that our mission is “to provide leadership, connection, and resources to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Our vision is “to ignite and sustain a passionate spiritual connection with Christ among all people.” The key words in those two phrases are: provide, ignite, and sustain. These are some of the key components an Annual Conference can create that will stimulate the revitalization of the church.

Our book of discipline is clear that the local church is the main disciple-making unit within the church. But each of those local churches is tied to a region out of which its disciple-making ministry takes place. Those regions each exhibit unique and distinct characteristics that shape the manner by which those churches do ministry. We call it our “context.” That context for ministry must be accurately understood and facilitated in order for the churches in that area to be effective. This then, is the first role of an Annual Conference: *To accurately discern the context for ministry in a particular area and shape possibilities for ministry that directly relate to that context.* The second role is directly related to the first: *To create relationships within and among the congregations and people within that area so that a vision and strategy for ministry may unfold.*

There has been, for several years, a significant debate in our church about the role and function of the District Superintendent. Some argue convincingly that the role of the D.S. is supervisory in nature. Our Book of Discipline supports this argument in paragraphs 421-423 of our United Methodist Book of Discipline. But there is another side to the debate. Others argue that the role of a D.S. is to build relationships (§419-420, 424, UMBOD) among churches, pastors, and laity so that effective ministry can be discerned and implemented within the particular region we call a “district.”

I would argue that both functions are critical if we are to experience revitalization within our denomination. Accountability to our theology and practice of ministry is undeniable and has already been addressed in this paper. The challenges and temptations facing leadership today are a threat to our integrity and image as a caring body to a broken and chaotic world. The need for clear and direct supervision of our leadership and the churches under their care is the only way to maintain that integrity and preserve that image. Yet, true change in any institution will not be found through supervision. Neither will it be found in legislation at a denominational gathering. Neither will be found by some hierarchical mandate passed down. True change happens through relationship. True change is effected when, through that relationship, something is planted in the heart that stimulates the change you desire. This is the same language we use when we talk about bringing someone into a relationship with Christ. Why not use it to talk about the conversion of our church?

In my own life I am seldom motivated by someone saying to me that I have to do something. On the other hand I am often motivated when I sense within a deep desire to do something. Tell me I have to and I might work hard to prove you wrong. Invite me into the story and I will walk with you into the future. Why? Because you cared enough to include me in the journey.

Throughout our denomination there are clergy and laity who are struggling with a church that no one trained them to deal with. In many churches there are laity who are sitting in pews with a memory of a church, once full, now struggling to survive. In many parishes, pastors are consumed with church matters that are not addressed in seminaries or course of study schools. Those issues are not about theology or ethics or preaching. They are issues about making ends meet, the psyche of decline, and a passed down style of lay leadership that looks more like the local civic club than it does the band of Jesus and the twelve.

Annual Conferences and the districts under their watch must begin to focus, as many already are, on what it means to facilitate ministry through relationship. We cannot expect our seminaries to fill this gap completely. They need to continue to teach theology, ethics, and preaching but they also must help our students integrate what they have learned into what they will experience. Yet, this will not completely equip our students for the church they will encounter. Annual Conferences must assume the responsibility to fill the void with continuing education, book studies, and groups for prayer, support, conversation and discernment. Mentors and coaches must be developed and engaged. Best practices should be celebrated rather than scorned and a climate for the active engagement of a mutual ministry beyond the walls of a local church must become the standard. The covenant of clergy must be talked about, emphasized and renewed. The need for cooperative and mutual ministries must not be downplayed.

The bow tied around each of these endeavors is one simple word: relationship. If the Annual Conference and its Districts fulfill this role and function they will effectively contribute to the revitalization of our denomination.

The Ministry of the Local Congregation

Much of the negative based conversation about the current state of affairs in our denomination eventually finds its way to what is not happening in the main disciple-making unit: the local church. Our Book of Discipline clearly states that, in the mind of United Methodists across the world, the most effective unit for fulfilling the disciple-making mission of the church is the local congregation.

Yet, if only 14% of all United Methodist congregations are determined to be “vital,” what does this say about where we are and where we need to be? There is no doubt that a focus on local church vitality is the key to revitalizing our denomination.

The question becomes: How do you motivate and stimulate that vitality? I am not convinced that merely setting numerical goals will achieve the goal. Likewise, I do not believe that conversations inside the church building with people sitting around conference tables talking about the issue will turn the tide. As a pastor I was far more

successful in getting people to gather around a table to talk about outreach than I was in getting people to go out and reach! While the conversations and strategies are a good and necessary beginning, they are not the source of the revitalization we desire.

In order for revitalization to take place within our local churches there must be, at the very least, three shifts in the form and function of ministry on that level. First, *local churches must find a deepened sense of spiritual passion, renewal, and urgency.* Specific measures, mandates, and strategies for renewal of the church will have little to no effect unless there is a renewed sense of spirituality that emerges within congregations and their leadership. This must become normative in order for congregations to transition from a survival mentality to a posture of joyful anticipation of what God has in store for them.

At the 2011 Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference session, I called for each congregation to suspend “*business as usual*” for the next year. That call was to replace ordinary business meetings that have predictable agendas with gatherings for prayer, discernment and active conversation about God’s call and our role in responding to that call. Those gatherings were to be centered on creating active conversations about the future, vitality, and a renewed sense of purpose. Many have responded affirmatively and have been engaged in open dialogue about the future. Some of those conversations have been about death. Others have centered on how to leave a positive legacy for the next generation. And some have generated renewed excitement and hope for the future vitality of their congregation.

Beyond structured and strategic conversations, local churches must also re-emphasize and center their ministry on an intentional, week-to-week spiritual journey. To put it simply, in order for any revitalization to “*stick*,” our churches must experience a revival of spirit. Change for the sake of change will not sustain itself. Change born out of obligation to the system (whether local or denominational) will only breed resentment and cynicism. Change that is motivated by mere survival might sustain a church or a denomination in the short-term but will result in a lack of motivation and a rise in fatigue. No, we need something more, something deeper, something far more proven and dependable. Change that is born out of mission and ministry will breed purpose and will. Change that is motivated by the words of Jesus himself will make an association that has stood the test of time for thousands of years. And change which is fed by deep spiritual foundations will be sustained “until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at His heavenly banquet.” Revitalization, in its deepest and most meaningful form, has at its roots a will and a want to based on a clear and undeniable association with the historical Jesus AND the “*prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 3:14, NRSV)

Yet, this alone will not result in the revitalization we so deeply desire and long for in the local churches that make up this blessed connection of people called United Methodists. *Secondly, local congregations must commit themselves to a re-orientation of their day to day function of ministry.* The solution we desire, a more deeply spiritual, engaged and growing congregation, will not come without effort. While there are ministries and opportunities that present themselves at our doorstep that we could never have planned or anticipated, just waiting for those unexpected revelations to descend on a silver

platter will not cause the change we desire. A key to revitalization is a desire and a commitment from the leadership and members of a congregation to be ready to receive unexpected opportunities when they come and re-orient the manner in which they go about their ministry on a day-to-day basis.

In my last congregation there was an unexpected opportunity that changed the course of our ministry. Had we not accepted it when it arrived we would not have experienced the revitalization that was associated with it. I was blessed to have a number of public school teachers in that congregation. One Sunday I walked into a conversation among some of the teachers who were working at a nearby elementary school. The conversation was animated and pointed. It seems that at the beginning of a major renovation project it was discovered that the school was full of asbestos and was being shut down until the entire renovation project was completed. The plan was to bus the entire student body over forty-five minutes away to a convention center. The anticipation was that this would happen for an entire school year!

I had a church that was only beginning to show signs of growth. What that meant was that on Monday to Friday, I had an educational wing, a fellowship hall, and a sanctuary that was pretty empty from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Culloden Elementary needed classrooms (an educational wing), activity and eating space (a fellowship hall), and a gathering space (a sanctuary). They had a need and we had what they needed!

It took plenty of convincing at the school board meeting, but avoiding the hazards and uncertainties of forty-five minutes of busing trumped the struggle over separation of church and state. Before I knew what had happened, I had a full church five days a week! I became the unofficial (and unstated) chaplain of Culloden Elementary School. I spoke to the kids in general assemblies and walked the halls building relationships with teachers and students.

What happened as a result of that unexpected opportunity was that we sent out some clear signals to our community: We were a church that cared about our children. We were a church that was open to doing something creative and radical. Maybe most importantly, we sent out a signal that if we were open to having a family's child in our building from Monday to Friday, we would also be open to having that child's family join us on Sunday as well.

The rest, as they say, was history. Culloden Elementary may have vacated our church a year later when their school was completed, but many of those associated with that school never left our church. They had become members.

We had made a connection with the community. Yet that connection would have never have been possible had it not been for a willingness to accept an unexpected opportunity that came our way.

While that's a great story of God and people syncing up together to make a difference, you can't wait for those opportunities to come your way. I believe that local congregations have to position themselves for growth and engagement with God and others. I remain concerned that the decline in our church has happened, in large measure, because we have become comfortable with routines and habits and, as a result,

lost our creative and spiritual edge. It may seem odd to hear this from a “denominational head,” but I am far less concerned about organizational correctness in our churches as am about spiritual malaise and routines that have sapped our energy and focus.

Thirdly, local church leadership must move out into the communities by taking their people where they need to be. What do I mean by this? It means that, in large measure, many of our churches have attempted to become self-contained centers of ministry rather than mission outposts that integrate practice into proclamation. Where there is a desire to see the church’s witness in the community, it is often stated like this, “This is what we pay the pastor to do.” Yet, the revitalization of our church as a true disciple-making unit will require every member not only sensing their own “call to ministry” but also having specific opportunities to integrate their call into the community around them.

Two months into the ministry of my last pastorate, I reached my first mile marker on the journey with that congregation. Two months earlier I had been assigned to a congregation that had significant need for healing. Feelings had been bruised and repair work undeniably needed done. On this eventful day I was sitting at my desk when one of my members walked into my office. “When you came here,” he started, “I told you that were a series of people that you needed to see if we were going to put this church back on its feet. Why haven’t visited Mr. Gibson yet?” “I will pick you up at 4:00 tomorrow afternoon and we can go together,” I replied. “I wasn’t talking about me going,” he said. “I was talking about you.”

That was the mile marker. I had a choice to make. It might work. It could backfire. But it was an undeniable mile marker. Rising from my desk, I walked over to the parishioner and said to him, “Ransford, I need to say this to you. Don’t you ever ask me to do something that you are not willing to do yourself. I need you in order to make this ministry successful. I will pick you up at 4:00 and we will go together.” And that’s exactly what we did.

About two months later, Mr. Ransom appeared once again in my office. “Did you hear that Mrs. Rowsey is in the hospital?” “Yes,” I replied. “When do plan to visit her?” he asked. “I will pick you up at noon tomorrow and we can go see her together,” I said. “I don’t do hospital visits!” he firmly stated. “Tomorrow you will,” I replied. “I will pick you up at noon.” And that’s exactly what we did.

Nine years later, whenever I went to the hospital to visit a parishioner, can you guess who had already been there? It was Ransford. He had become one of our most dependable visitors.

Parishioners become visitors when they are mentored in how to visit. Leaders are able to lead when they are coached into leadership. We cannot expect our people to go where we have not been. Likewise we cannot expect them to go into uncharted but necessary waters of ministry without someone showing them the way. This is the role of leadership that is born out of a model created in the book of Acts, a role that is defined by an expectation that every member is a minister and every minister has an opportunity to invite someone, somehow into the heart of a loving God.

Many churches have set firm expectations that every leader must be involved in some form of bible study or small group if they are to continue in their service. Many others have established mentoring and coaching programs that intentionally move people into the community with meaningful opportunities for outreach, advocacy, friendship, and witness.

The revitalization of our local church depends on the meaningful connections that are made in the communities where those churches reside.

A Final Word

I believe that leaders on all levels of the church's life and work need to come to deeper understanding of what we are doing and why we are doing it. This is not a time for overly negative conversations. It is not a time to *"throw the baby out with the bath water"*, to make change just for the sake of change, or work toward a new reality that is driven out of cynicism or past hurt. It is not the time to listen to the *"devil on our shoulder"* at the expense of the spirit's true invitation into God's will or fall victim to the sidebar conversations that tempt us away from the *"main thing."*

Conversations around the *"Call to Action"* will require robust, carefully conducted conversations that will listen to all rather than make assumptions over what we think is wrong. It will require the discipline to do a close self-examination of our own practices and motives before we point the finger at someone or something else.

Likewise, the conversation around congregational vitality needs to not only be embraced but revised in settings based on the context of ministry in that place. It needs to be a conversation that will extend way beyond the Charge Conference. It may be a conversation about how to die and pass on assets as a way of caring the legacy of a dying congregation forward. It may be conversation about how to bring in five members a year just to offset the five who will die. It may be a conversation about how to reach people by better understanding the changing context of our community. And, as a result of those conversations, a church may realistically project closing in five years, a loss of 10 members over that period, or a goal of zero growth based on the losses they project. In some settings, it may be an aggressive plan to radically grow because they have embraced the vision and see the possibilities.

None of those goals is wrong. But setting no goals IS wrong.

Every year I have the privilege of taking my Ordinands on a tour of John Wesley's England. On this trip there are the expected visits to Epworth, Oxford, Bristol and London. But there is one unexpected visit on our tour. It is a stop we make every year to a little port just outside of Bristol in a place called Pill.

There isn't much in the tiny village of Pill, yet it has become one of our most meaningful visits. It was here in this tiny port that Francis Asbury confirmed the call of God and the appointment of John Wesley and set sail for the United States. His mission was clear: to organize and grow the Methodist movement in the new land.

Over the years I have noticed a consistent emotion among the ordinands as they gather around the small monument at the harbor. In those moments the ordinands come to an awareness of the deep faith it took for Asbury to set sail into unknown waters. They realize that Asbury would never return home, that life for him would never be the same and that it would not be an easy journey. And in those moments, the ordinands make a special connection with their roots.

The journey of our church into the future is not unlike what Francis Asbury encountered. It will take deep faith to revitalize our church as we too sail into unknown waters. For those of us who are willing to make this venture, we realize that we can never return to the way things were. The church we serve will never be the same. It will not be an easy journey.

But there is a way through. It is a way that may best be described by John Wesley himself. In his last letter to America on February 1, 1791, John Wesley wrote: *"Lose no opportunity of declaring to all men that the Methodists are one people in all the world, and that it is their full determination so to continue, Though mountains rise, and oceans roll, To sever us in vain."*

Mr. Wesley is once again our inspiration and guide. On February 25, 1791, John Wesley breathed his final breath. His final words summarize a life committed to spreading scriptural holiness across a world that he called his parish. His final words put it all in perspective – the uncertainties, the struggles, the cynicism, the doubt. His final words add the right words to give us hope in the midst of all that we are facing.

On his final day of life John Wesley simply yet profoundly said: *"The best of all is, God is with us."*

Let's never forget it.