

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

# CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL  
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

## **Leadership, Identity, and Mission in a Changing United Methodist Church**

**James Rutland Wood**

Pp 534 – 564 in Roozen and Nieman (eds), *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2005). Also in *Church, Identity and Change*: “Methodism as Machine” by Russell E. Richey and “Practical Theology at Work in the United Methodist Church: Restructuring, Reshaping, Reclaiming” by Pamela D. Couture.

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# CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures  
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Church, identity, and change: theology and denominational structures in unsettled times /  
edited by David A. Roozen & James Nieman.

p.      cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8028-2819-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Protestant churches — United States — History. 2. Protestant churches —  
Doctrines — History. 3. United States — Church history.  
I. Roozen, David A. II. Nieman, James R., 1956-

BR515.C526      2005

280'.4'0973 — dc22

2004060785

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# Leadership, Identity, and Mission in a Changing United Methodist Church

*James Rutland Wood*

Entering the twenty-first century, the United Methodist Church (UMC) faces dramatic changes destined to redefine the role of the denomination's leadership, reshape its identity, and refocus its mission. These changes are driven by social forces in the church's environment and by a vigorous value struggle these forces have precipitated within the church. Contested values include the locus and form of organizational control, the meaning and priority of biblical authority, and the nature and scope of the church's mission. This chapter describes ways the UMC is changing, discusses social forces underlying those changes, elucidates some of their wider implications, and interprets the process of change sociologically as an organization adapting to its environment and theologically as the movement of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

## Overview of the UMC Structure

A brief overview of the UMC's current structure will provide background for the consideration of changes and proposed changes. For most of the twentieth century the UMC and its Methodist predecessor groups have been characterized by highly centralized bureaucracies. Programs developed by boards and leaders at

1. Data for this chapter include a survey of delegates to the 1996 UMC General Conference, formal interviews with ten UMC bishops (including one from each jurisdiction) and conversations with an additional dozen bishops, interviews with the chief executives of two United Methodist boards, United Methodist responses to the General Social Survey (a national poll), minutes of the 1996 General Conference and other documents related to restructure, and observations of one meeting of the Connectional Process Team and four meetings of the Council of Bishops.

the national level have been implemented in a top-down fashion. Ministers tell the story of one pastor who said, "If by Friday I haven't heard from the District Superintendent or one of the national boards and agencies, I go ahead and choose my own theme for my Sunday sermon." This often-repeated story only slightly exaggerates the way the denomination has attempted to have all of its churches at the same time implementing the general church's programs and promoting its causes. This coordination was accomplished by a leadership hierarchy and a structure that largely duplicated the national structure in each annual conference, district, and local congregation. Since the national structure has included more than a dozen general agencies — including those treating Christian unity, church and society, communications, discipleship, finance and administration, global ministries, higher education, religion and race, status and role of women and United Methodist men — the structure of a local congregation could become quite complex. Though there may always have been some unanticipated costs of this complexity — such as clergy and lay burnout and neglect of some causes of local concern — much was accomplished by this structure. Health and educational institutions were built, home and overseas missions were supported, new churches were started. But people and society are changing, and so is the church. A new type of organization and a new type of leadership are emerging from the UMC's stormy quest for identity and its response to United Methodists' demands that the church's mission impact their lives and their communities.

### **Leadership and Control**

Whether with pride or dismay, most United Methodists acknowledge that their denomination is highly centralized. But it is not easy to identify the center of power. The UMC has no presiding bishop, president, or moderator. The General Conference — the official lawmaking body — is the final authority. This conference is made up of about five hundred clergy delegates and an equal number of lay delegates elected by their annual (regional) conferences. About eight hundred of these delegates represent the annual conferences in the United States, and about two hundred represent United Methodist (UM) churches in other countries.

*The Discipline* (the UMC's book of laws and policies) states that "No person, no paper, no organization, has the authority to speak officially for The United Methodist Church, this right having been reserved exclusively to the General Conference under the Constitution."<sup>2</sup> But the General Conference

2. *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), p. 277.

meets only once every four years. Where is power centered in the interim? There is no consensus on the answer to this question, and the answer probably varies over time as particular people and entities of the church exert leadership. The evolving role of bishops and the Council of Bishops is a major focus of this chapter. Bishops, individually and collectively, may be emerging as the key power wielders of the early twenty-first century.

Individually, bishops wield a great deal of power in the annual conferences over which they preside as well as within the boards and agencies where they also preside. Here is where much of the significant structural change is occurring. *The Discipline* describes a number of aspects of the bishops' leadership role: it is through their appointing of ministers in their annual conferences that the connectional nature of the UM system is made visible; they are to enable the gathered church to worship and to evangelize faithfully; they are to facilitate the initiation of structures and strategies for the equipping of Christian people for service in the church and in the world; they are to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the church. Moreover, "The Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships."<sup>3</sup>

G. Bromley Oxnam (1891-1963) may be the best modern example of a bishop who enabled strong collective leadership from the Council of Bishops, especially in the areas of civil rights and international policy. Presently the bishops' initiative on children and poverty represents a major collective effort of the Council of Bishops to shape the identity and mission of the UMC.

### Some Widely Shared Concerns

My interviews and conversations with bishops and my observations of four Council of Bishops meetings in 1998 and 1999 show that bishops are well informed about a number of concerns felt throughout the church. One bishop told me, "There has been a sense at all levels that the present organization simply is not getting the job done. The structure is burdensome without serving mission. This has led to a great deal of soul-searching about who we are and what we should be doing."

Some bishops point to pressures within the UMC that are driving the change process. United Methodists are aware that the size of the membership and, possibly, the influence of the denomination have declined. In 1997, for ex-

3. *The Book of Discipline*, p. 266.

ample, 9 percent of the U.S. population gave "Methodist" as their religious preference, compared to 14 percent in 1974.<sup>4</sup> This decline has occurred despite a national climate congenial to religion. Fifty-seven percent of Americans continue to believe that religion is relevant to contemporary society, and George Gallup, Jr., reports a "new surge of interest in spirituality" among Americans in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Against this background, many United Methodists began to believe that the UMC needed to undertake serious self-examination. As an indication of the grassroots push for change, one bishop I interviewed emphasized that the new UMC mission statement, "Make Disciples," "came from pulpit and pew, *not* from the general church or the bishops." According to this bishop, part of the dynamic behind a new mission statement was rank-and-file United Methodists feeling the "need to make a difference." Another bishop was a bit more specific: "I thought it was interesting that the impetus for change came from across the theological spectrum. It was one of those places where I saw the left and right really joining hearts and voice. It has to do with both. Although they see mission and ministry differently, both see and saw the mission of the church being thwarted by the way in which the church is structured at this time. It is as if our more bureaucratized way of being is hindering the Spirit." When asked how the mission statement got to the General Conference, the same bishop replied: "Well, it came though the traditional route, in General Conference work. It came from annual conferences and from individuals. It was empowering, some of it came from the right, the left. In 1996 the Willimon group came in with a highly polished piece. Others would represent a different theological take saying the same thing. The petition process was used."

The bishops' accounts reflected concerns widely shared by the 1996 General Conference delegates I surveyed. Many of the delegates responded in light of 1996 General Conference legislation that was beginning to meet those concerns.

Asked "What action taken by the 1996 General Conference do you think has the most significance for the United Methodist Church?" just over a quarter of the delegates mentioned some aspect of restructure at the annual conference or national level. Twenty percent mentioned new flexibility of the local church structure. Also related to the local church, 32 percent mentioned approval of the changes in ministerial orders. Many saw this as an important structural change that will bring about, in the words of one delegate, "a new involvement of the laity in ministry." Those who rate themselves conservative in religious

4. Princeton Religion Research Center, *Emerging Trends*, vol. 20, no. 7 (September 1998), p. 2.

5. Princeton Religion Research Center, *Emerging Trends*, vol. 20, no. 10 (December 1998), p. 4.



matters and those who rate themselves liberal are about equally likely to mention each of these structural changes as significant.

Delegates' comments about actions of the 1996 General Conference show how leadership, identity, and mission are interrelated. One strong theme is how flexibility in structure and a broader leadership base impact mission at the local level: "It puts us in charge, not the annual conference or the General Conference! Makes it possible to organize for mission and ministry within parameters of the needs of the community." "This helps regain our sense of mission, moves from an authoritarianism which is stifling, and opens the possibility for addressing ministry in a servant fashion." "If taken advantage of, the options have the potential to encourage local churches to analyze their mission and to determine how to meet that mission, thus inspiring action." Another theme links United Methodists' identity as God's people with flexibility of structure that makes room for the Holy Spirit. "It allows each group to be more visionary and creative about the ministry each church feels God is calling them to do." "Allows for flexibility and for conferences to follow where they believe the Holy Spirit is leading them." "We need room for the Holy Spirit to move within the more flexible structure." "It is time to trust God and allow the spirit to freely move — not control it with structure." "Churches need to organize to fulfil their primary mission of making disciples." Delegates also have a keen sense of the relation between lay empowerment and mission: "This empowers the laity in the local church with a sense of involvement in shaping mission response." "[Changes in ministry] could encourage and free persons to be in ministry other than ordained, thus broadening the leadership base." "We have entered a new partnership of ministry for clergy and laity and we have returned to a more biblical and understandable system of ordained ministry." Delegates also applaud the recognition of the distinctive mission and ministry of a diversity of local churches: "This is the beginning step in changing the focus from the general church to the local church." "The small membership church is affirmed in its own special ministry." "This may be seen as responsive to concerns and needs of smaller churches and help alleviate their sense of being ignored." Delegates affirmed the need for the church to frame its message in ways relevant to the contemporary world: "In order to reach the next generation, we must be willing to put forth the same old message, but in new and different ways. We don't yet know what those ways are, and we don't yet know what all the hurts and needs will be. However we will be able to have enough flexibility to respond." "For the church to be viable for the next century, it is necessary to restructure. To empower laity to be in ministry, to bring clergy and laity closer together. The church must be relevant for the next generations." Many see restructure as a matter of good stewardship — putting the money where the mission is: "Downsizing is very much needed and signifi-

cant. We need more money for missions and evangelism.” “The general church agencies do very little for the local church other than cost it money. And trust has eroded from local to general.”

### Contested Values

There are two processes of change within the UMC. One process is a noisy, visible, occasionally disorderly and uncivil struggle over the fundamental identity of the church. The other process, discussed in more detail later, is more regular and orderly as duly appointed representatives go about redefining the church’s mission and redesigning its structure to carry out that mission in the contemporary world.

The first process centers on the meaning and priority of biblical authority and, consequently, on the nature and scope of the church’s mission. At one pole are those who are confident that the Bible provides clear guidance on the issues that face the church today. For them the church’s failure to follow these clear mandates undercuts the authority of the Bible. These United Methodists typically focus more on individual salvation than on societal reform and place more emphasis on individual morality than on social justice. At the other pole are those who, though they may acknowledge the authority of the Bible, believe that some of the culture-bound injunctions in the Bible contradict some of its most basic teachings about love and justice. These United Methodists often focus principally on societal reform and social justice with little emphasis on personal salvation. Since both these groups of United Methodists are sincere and passionate about their views, it is sometimes difficult for them to dialogue with each other.

If United Methodists in general were this polarized, the church’s unity would certainly be in jeopardy. It is likely, however, that those at the poles do not have the followers they imagine. James Davison Hunter, observing the “culture wars” in the general society, discovered that the intense feelings are more of the leaders than of their followers — that the vast middle of the society is not passionately involved in the struggle over values.<sup>6</sup> It is quite possible that most United Methodists, drawing on their rich Wesleyan heritage, have a great deal in common with both groups described above, hence cherish a diversity that encompasses both poles. Still, this struggle over values hijacks the agenda and consumes the energy of the church.

My study of the bishops and the Council of Bishops shows that the bish-

6. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

ops are well aware of these two processes of change and want to address the concerns that stimulate them. Whether the emerging power of the bishops will be equal to that task remains to be seen. Clearly, bishops are caught up in the controversies that are roiling the church. Diverse groups are challenging bishops' and other leaders' control as a means of gaining influence over the identity and mission of the church. Here is an excerpt from a speech by one conservative leader: "I believe most people within our denomination support the high calling of episcopal leadership in the United Methodist Church. We want our leaders to lead. We want our leaders to guard, maintain, and teach the doctrine of our church. We want them to defend the discipline of the United Methodist Church. In fact, we are so serious about it, we believe it is of such crucial importance, that we are no longer willing to allow our bishops to exploit the episcopacy to pursue their narrow ideological agendas."<sup>7</sup>

But bishops are also challenged by their liberal constituencies, who see changes driven by conservative theology as "narrow ideological agendas." For example, the Methodist Federation of Social Action (MFSA) was concerned that the mission statement adopted in 1996 — "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ" — will be too narrowly interpreted. They proposed expanding that statement by adding the following sentence: "discipleship means continuing Christ's world-changing work of offering God's gift of salvation, healing relationships, transforming social structures and following in the way of love and service."

Here we see the same value conflict that led conservatives dissatisfied with the General Board of Global Ministry (GBGM) to form their own mission society in 1984. At that time, one advocate gave the following as one rationale for forming a new society:

Consider the annual report for 1982 by the President and General Secretary of the GBGM. In this report it is very difficult to find any clear indication that the evangelistic mandate of calling people to personal, saving faith in Jesus Christ is an urgent part of the program and priorities of the board.

The report says that "we are called to understand ourselves as sharing in the cosmic events of this era," that "mission has moved from the perspective of territorial conquest to one in which the arena is one of spirit and mind," that "mission is a slow, tedious struggle with principalities and powers in the force of evil," that "we must implement the Gospel without fear," and that mission is "being in the frontiers of race, of economic structure, of

7. Scott Field, member of the board of directors of Good News, in an address to the national conference of the Confessing Movement, September 1999.

political reality or of cultural difference.” What the report does not mention is that *faith* is also a frontier where we are called to witness.

Nothing in this annual report suggests that it is a matter of any special concern to our GBGM that 120 million people in this country and 68 percent of the world’s population do not have saving faith in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years the homosexuality issue has become the symbol of the struggle over the church’s identity. Though the bishops have been sharply divided on this issue, and are very much caught up in the controversy, we will see that they feel that facing the controversy has brought them closer together, forging a unity that empowers their leadership.

Still, the church may be growing more polarized as United Methodists at both poles of the liberal/conservative field more forcefully press their views. For example, compare the response of the Confessing Movement with that of the Reconciling Congregation Program to the California/Nevada decision to bring no charges against sixty-eight pastors who, disregarding *The Discipline’s* prohibition of such action, jointly celebrated the union of two women. The Confessing Movement said, in part:

It is our deep conviction that Bishop Melvin Talbert, the leadership of the California/Nevada Conference, and the 68 pastors who performed the same-sex union have broken covenant with their colleagues in the rest of United Methodism. Our covenant is not restricted to Conference boundaries, but includes the whole of the connection. It is obvious that the decision of the California/Nevada Conference is in violation of Church Law. The question is, will Bishop Talbert and his colleagues in the Conference be held accountable? This arrogant usurpation of power and disregard for the action of General Conference and the decision of the Judicial Council cannot be allowed to stand. To do so would surely bring a division in the United Methodist Church. One would wonder if this is the intent of Bishop Talbert and his colleagues in the California/Nevada Conference.<sup>9</sup>

The Reconciling Congregation board’s response to the decision said, in part:

This ruling is positive in that it reflects the diversity within The United Methodist Church (UMC). The California-Nevada Conference of The

8. Gerald H. Anderson, “Why We Need a Second Mission Agency,” an address to UM clergy in Dallas, Tex., October 1983.

9. “Confessing Movement Response to California/Nevada Decision to Bring No Charges against 67 Pastors,” *We Confess: A Newsletter of the Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church* 6, issue 2 (March/April 2000): 2.

UMC has a long history of inclusiveness of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, dating back to 1964 when San Francisco clergy founded the Commission on Religion and Homosexuality. In 1985 their Annual Conference adopted a resolution commending the Reconciling Congregation Program to all churches and in 1987 they voted to become a Reconciling Conference.

As much as the previous Nebraska ruling that defrocked Jimmy Creech is an interpretation of the UMC Discipline, this California-Nevada decision is equally of the church. Within the book of Discipline, there are contradictory statements on sexual orientation. These rulings highlight the conflict between recent language that restricts celebrations of "homosexual unions" and core statements that reflect our Wesleyan heritage and charge the whole church to be broadly inclusive.<sup>10</sup>

Going beyond statements, United Methodists at one pole have encouraged civil disobedience, such as that of the California/Nevada pastors, while those at the other pole have assembled a legal staff to facilitate the process of holding pastors and churches accountable to the discipline.

Where this will end is not clearly discernible, but already the high-profile civil disobedience on the one side and the policing of local churches on the other have dramatically changed the climate in which the UMC does its work.

## Changes in the UMC

Many changes and proposals for change have occurred as United Methodists, individually and in groups, have sought to influence the identity and mission of the church. The current official change process began when the 1992 General Conference directed the General Council on Ministries (GCOM) to "lead the church in a time of discernment, reflection, and study of its mission and its structural needs as it moves into the twenty-first century. The Council will do this by consulting groups across the church, conducting appropriate research, and developing and utilizing resource materials."<sup>11</sup>

As discussed above, drawing on the results of this four-year "connectional issues" study, the 1996 General Conference passed legislation giving considerable flexibility to local churches to restructure themselves to fit the needs of

10. "Reconciling Congregation Board Responds to California-Nevada Conference Decision on 'Sacramento 68'" (press release by the Reconciling Congregation Program, February 11, 2000), p. 1.

11. *Daily Christian Advocate: Advanced Edition* 1 (1992): 537.

their ministries. For example, for the local church the number of required committees was reduced, and though several mandated emphases remain, "every local church shall develop a plan for organizing its administrative and programmatic responsibilities . . . so that it can pursue its primary task and mission in the context of its own community."<sup>12</sup> It appears that delegates also expected that considerable new flexibility for annual conferences would follow ratification of a constitutional amendment to "allow the Annual Conferences to utilize structures unique to regional aspects of their mission, other mandated structures notwithstanding."<sup>13</sup> But when several annual conferences either enacted or proposed such new structures, the Judicial Council (the UMC's Supreme Court) ruled that such changes could not occur until a future General Conference passes appropriate enabling legislation.<sup>14</sup>

### The Connectional Process Team

In addition to these actions, the 1996 conference established a Connectional Process Team (CPT) "for 1996 to 2000 to manage, guide, and promote a transformational direction for The United Methodist Church."<sup>15</sup> In February 1999 the CPT released its penultimate report. Though, as we will see below, this report underwent extensive revision as a result of feedback invited by the committee, discussion centering on the report provides an important window on contested values within the UMC today. The report paints a picture of a struggle to clarify the church's identity, to refocus its mission, and to shape its structure to reflect both identity and mission.

The CPT report defines UMC work to reflect the church's identity as Spirit-centered, diverse, global, and focused on mission. It is anchored solidly in biblical theology, especially Jesus' commission to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). This Great Commission is reflected in the UMC's new (1996) mission statement: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs."<sup>16</sup> The report

12. *Book of Discipline*, pp. 136-37.

13. "Judicial Council Offers Guidelines for Conference Restructure at Present," United Methodist News Service, October 31, 1997, p. 1.

14. See, for example, Judicial Council Decision No. 831. [http://www.umc.org/interior\\_judicial.asp?mid=263&JDID=871&JDMOD=VWD&SN=801&EN=900](http://www.umc.org/interior_judicial.asp?mid=263&JDID=871&JDMOD=VWD&SN=801&EN=900)

15. *Daily Christian Advocate* 3, no. 6 (April 22, 1996): 252.

16. *Book of Discipline*, p. 114.

also draws attention to the *Discipline's* statement of the process for carrying out the church's mission:

- Proclaim the Gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
- Lead persons to commit their lives to God through Jesus Christ;
- Nurture persons in Christian living through worship, baptism, communion, Bible and other studies, prayer, and other means of grace;
- Send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, and working to have social structures consistent with the gospel; and
- Continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

The CPT then asks one central question of “all of the activities, functions, and structures of the church today: Will this help us invite, nurture, and empower disciples of Jesus Christ through local congregations and faith communities throughout the world?” (p. 6).

The report presents eleven “transformational directions” congruent with this question. The first five embody the CPT’s central concern with spiritual leadership — listening, caring, serving leaders whose spiritual life is nurtured by “spiritual disciplines” that have sustained Christians throughout the ages:

- Place spiritual formation at the center of our work.
- Invigorate the ministry of the church.
- Call forth spiritual leaders.
- Create a Covenant Council of spiritual and prophetic leaders.
- Empower the ministry of congregations and faith communities. (pp. 7-9)

Five other transformational directions reflect various aspects of the UMC’s identity as a global, connectional, ecumenical, theologically diverse, and inclusive church. The remaining direction expresses the intention that general agencies exist “to support congregations, faith communities, and annual conferences” (pp. 10-11).

Moving from definition to structure, the CPT recommends a number of

17. Connectional Process Team of the United Methodist Church, *Transforming: A United Methodist Church for the Twenty-First Century* (February 1999), p. 5. Page numbers in the following text refer to this document.

structural changes throughout the UMC. The heart of the recommendations is summarized in a paragraph headed "Create a Covenant Council of Spiritual and Prophetic Leaders."

We propose that The United Methodist Church center on a Covenant Council of spiritual and prophetic leaders, a new form of organization. These leaders will come together to hear the call of Christ, discern the will of God for our ministry in the world, nourish each other spiritually, and support each other in carrying Christ's message into the world. As an organization, we often go to extremes in segmenting our resources and energies into task-related, discrete components. In local congregations these take the form of burgeoning committees and fragmented responsibilities for staff. The same is true in districts and in annual and central conferences. In the general church, the clearest manifestation of this is the vast array of general agencies. This segmentation has confused our understanding of our common mission and our expression of the connection. It has muffled our message as a united church. We recommend creating in each part of the church (local congregation, annual conference, central conference, and Global Conference) a Covenant Council where spiritual and prophetic lay and clergy leaders will gather for discernment, discussion, decision-making, and disciple-making. (p. 8)

Thus the CPT, expanding on the flexibility already granted to annual conferences and local congregations, proposes a simple, fluid decision and control structure that reflects the church's mission "to make disciples of Jesus Christ."

The most controversial recommendations coming from the CPT stem from the reconstitution of the General Conference — the denomination's highest legislative body — as the United Methodist Global Conference and the creation of a United States Central Conference. To illustrate the impact of this change, consider the proposal for balance in global representation. CPT recommended "that no single continent (North America, Europe, Africa, or Asia) have more than 50 percent of the total number of delegates in the Global Conference" (p. 24). For comparison, the 2000 General Conference will have 830 delegates from the United States — 84.5 percent of the total delegates. The CPT was not timid in recognizing the implications of these changes. "This transformation requires a shift from a model in which the United States' perspective dominates a highly structured organization to one where the global perspective supports a rich variety of United Methodist ministries and missions around the world" (p. 21).

Those parts of the proposal related to the Global Conference were highly



contested. One reason for this is the power and turf struggles of boards and agencies that have been observed in other efforts to change the UMC bureaucracy.<sup>18</sup> One bishop told me, "If you look at legislation and *The Book of Discipline*, it is written primarily to protect a certain area of the turf and not primarily to engage the church in mission in the world. . . . Agencies have become defensive. They have spent a lot of time preserving themselves and are not interested in change unless they can control that change." Some delegates to the 1996 General Conference perceived the Board of Global Ministries' lobbying effort to keep that conference from moving the board out of New York City as an example of such resistance to change. By contrast, the top executive of the General Council on Ministries seemed willing to accept the demise of his agency provided a new structure continues the essential functions of the GCOM.<sup>19</sup>

This proposal in addition challenges some of the vested interests of various regional entities. One bishop reflected: "To move us toward a more global church and allow other areas of the world to participate on a more equal footing and to deal with the reality of a huge amount of the money still in the United States, how does that play out in terms of these issues around power?" It seems likely, for example, that those called on to pay the bulk of the additional cost of the Global Conference will have less representation than in the current structure. The widely read *United Methodist Reporter (UMR)* observed that "U.S. United Methodists make up 88 percent of the church numerically but will have only a maximum of 50 percent of the representation in the denomination's highest policy-making body." The editorial strongly criticized the proposed global structure for unfair representation, "distancing congregations even farther from their leaders," increased cost that would be borne disproportionately by U.S. churches, and "massive centralization that runs counter to our era of decentralized networks."<sup>20</sup> In subsequent issues of the *UMR*, reader reaction revealed considerable ambivalence toward the global structure. One retired bishop called the editorial "nothing but a rehash of paternalistic and parochial ideas — not to mention 'colonial' attitudes and practices." In sharp contrast, a retired United Methodist missionary to the Philippines sees "the idea of a global structure as detrimental to the movement toward an indigenous church in the Philippines." He believes that "our overseas United Methodist brothers and sisters . . . are eager to share

18. See Paul A. Mickey and Robert L. Wilson, *What New Creation? The Agony of Church Restructure* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

19. See "Council Wants Functions Continued, Regardless of Reorganization," *United Methodist News Service*, April 29, 1999, p. 1.

20. "Does the UMC Really Need a Global Structure?" *United Methodist Reporter*, February 26, 1999, p. 4.

their faith more effectively at the local level without being under the control of a global hierarchy.”<sup>21</sup>

A specific problem for the proposal of a Global Conference was posed by the, then current, crisis over homosexuality, discussed above. A 1999 Judicial Council ruling that the blessing of homosexual unions was against church law was followed by several such celebrations as acts of civil disobedience and by subsequent church trials. A major concern of both liberals and conservatives was where such issues as the blessing of same-sex unions could be decided in the new structure. Since some of the strongest opposition to the acceptance of homosexuality came from outside the United States,<sup>22</sup> conservatives would likely want this issue settled at the Global Conference, liberals at the central conference level. Meanwhile, amidst the furor over same-sex unions, continued pressure to hold the first Global Conference in 2004 as first proposed by the CPT would have increased the danger of a schism. Of course, the kind of spiritual leaders the CPT envisions might have been able to find creative compromises to preserve unity.

The final CPT report, released on December 1, 1999, differed significantly from the preliminary report. Perhaps most significant, the preliminary report proposed that the 2000 General Conference be the last — that it be supplanted by the Global Conference beginning in 2004. The CPT later recognized that the legislative process cannot move that rapidly. They then proposed that the General Conference approve the report in principle and create a group that would prepare needed legislation and propose constitutional changes for the 2004 General Conference. Apparently this seventy-five-member Transformation Implementation Council would replace the present GCOM. The interim council’s membership would be 60 percent laity and 40 percent clergy. “The body would include bishops, representatives from the five regional jurisdictions in the United States and central conferences in other countries, the top staff executive and one voting member for each of the 13 churchwide agencies, and two representatives from affiliated autonomous Methodist churches in Asia and Latin America. A category of additional members is also proposed to guarantee diversity.”<sup>23</sup>

The proposed Transformation Implementation Council appeared to answer some of the major concerns of a GCOM task force that felt the original CPT report would have the effect of asking the boards and agencies to restruc-

21. “Letters to the Editor,” *United Methodist Reporter*, March 26, 1999, p. 4.

22. Though two bishops from Africa told me that they were willing to live in a larger church that left such issues to local discretion so long as their conferences were not pressed to accept homosexuality.

23. “CPT Completes ‘Transformational Direction’ Report,” *United Methodist News Service*, September 21, 1999, p. 2.

ture themselves. Whether this and other changes would be enough to ward off competing proposals at the 2000 General Conference was doubtful.

Whatever the fate of the CPT's preliminary proposals, they did address a number of values and concerns that were and remain prevalent in the church. In the first place, the report was responsive to needs perceived by United Methodists and reflected in my earlier quotations from General Conference delegates. Referring to the flexibility already granted by the 1996 General Conference, one delegate said, "The General Conference listened to the annual conferences, local churches and membership and responded to their desires and understanding." This can also be said of the CPT.

There was wide participation in the planning process that led to the CPT proposal. From 1992 to 1996 the Connectional Issues Study employed a wide variety of means to sound out all levels of the church on the UMC's mission and its structural needs. Just a few of the means used are a survey of nearly 35,000 annual conference delegates, telephone interviews with leaders of three to five vital churches in each annual conference, and two meetings of a forum of thirty-two persons representative of the total church. All these data were made available to the CPT. In addition, the CPT sent listening teams to visit United Methodists in various parts of the world and invited all United Methodists to give advice. The February 1999 report, which was mailed to a cross section of United Methodists, included a comment form and the invitation to give the committee feedback before they wrote the final report. The report and comment form were also placed on the CPT's Web site!

Many of the changes proposed by the CPT had already been tried at the annual conference and congregational level. For example, in responding to a question about whether local congregations have taken advantage of the new flexibility, for example, collapsing some committees, one bishop stated:

Yes, the interesting thing is in [our region] we were already there before the General Conference acted. Some people were acting as though the Discipline was preventing but, when people would bring that up, I would just say, "Nothing in the Discipline prevents you from doing what you want to do." I discovered that people were . . . not using all the flexibility that was there. So as we began to get a sense of freedom and move in that direction, some were already going there. But with the General Conference acting the way it did, it kind of blessed what we were about and it has been more intentional on the part of some.

A final strength of the CPT's proposals was that they maintained a certain kind of continuity with Methodist tradition. One delegate, speaking of the

General Conference, said, "We followed Wesleyan heritage by adapting the tradition of ordination to fit the current time." The CPT was intentional in its commitment to continuity: "We celebrate the historic commitment of The United Methodist Church and our Methodist forebears to serve the world as an instrument of God's will. A transformed church builds upon this history by seeking to become a global church of disciples of Jesus Christ who are connected in mission and ministry throughout the world."<sup>24</sup>

It could be said that the covenant councils of spiritual and prophetic leaders — the centerpiece of the CPT proposals — are an adaptation of Wesleyan holy conferencing. The early Methodist conference served as the spiritual center of Methodism.<sup>25</sup> Describing the early conference, Richey concludes, "It should not be surprising that conference continued to nourish revival, that the spirituality within the fraternity would spill outwards."<sup>26</sup> Applying this Wesleyan heritage to the present time, Richey reflects, "No one organization or structure guarantees the Spirit's presence. But to be the body of Christ must not the church be gracious in its style, in its way of doing and being, in its way of conducting business? Must not ends and means link closely? Indeed, must not means be proximate ends? Must not our forms operate spiritually/Spiritually?"<sup>27</sup>

The CPT, quite possibly influenced by Richey's work, clearly attempts to infuse into contemporary UMC organization the gracious style of early Methodist conferencing.

### **Other Sources of Proposals for Change**

As the result of the CPT's information-gathering strategy that cast a very wide net, the CPT report brings together in one document many of United Methodists' ideas, experiences, and movements related to structural change. However, even those consulted were not uniformly appreciative of the report. For example, though bishops had been consulted by the CPT and kept updated (and four bishops were on the committee), bishops were highly critical of the February 1999 draft when they dialogued with committee representatives at the Council of Bishops (COB) meeting later that year. One bishop even asked the committee to consider withdrawing the report. At that time committee representatives seemed confident that the final draft of their report, profiting from the criti-

24. Connectional Process Team, *Transforming*, p. 21.

25. Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), p. 17.

26. Richey, *The Methodist Conference*, p. 40.

27. Richey, *The Methodist Conference*, p. 202.

cism, would be accepted. Since that time, and after the final draft was made public, the report has drawn fire from both the liberal and the conservative caucuses.

The Good News caucus's legislative agenda for General Conference called upon delegates to reject the CPT report. Reasons to do so included the time, energy, and resources it would cost to add another level of resources in a United Methodist Global Conference; that the massive restructure plan would divert attention from the local church; and that much of what is envisioned in covenant councils is already happening and does not require restructure to make it happen. The creation of a Global Conference would remove decision making yet another step away from local churches, and serious theological questions are raised by references to interreligious dialogue with Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and others.

The Methodist Federation of Social Action, a liberal caucus, also opposed the adoption of CPT's recommendations. It encouraged "a church-wide participatory study of important issues raised by the report." And it wanted the church to "provide resources to each Annual Conference and local church to proceed with study and prayerful reflection on such changes and the future of our church."<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, there were several other sources of potential proposals to the General Conference. Though the CPT was often conversant with and may have shared members with these sources, they could have produced independent proposals for redefining mission and for restructure that emphasized their particular ideas and concerns. When bishops were asked where to look other than the CPT for models of change, their answer was the annual conferences. They were talking about their own annual conferences as well as others they knew about.

## **Annual Conferences**

One bishop told of being part of a group of more than a dozen bishops exploring the "Quest for Quality" process under the guidance of the General Board of Discipleship. In this process one assumes that the current system is designed to produce the current results. If those results are undesirable, it is necessary to change the whole system rather than to tinker with the parts. Vitality and creativity result from drawing together diverse people and giving them the free-

28. Methodist Federation for Social Action, "General Conference Information: Summary of Petitions to 2000 General Conference" (undated information sheet), p. 2.

dom and the challenge to design a system that will produce the results they want. In this bishops' conference liberals and conservatives alike agreed that the primary task of the conference was to provide spiritual leadership. The conference has removed current conference legislative prohibitions for most of the agencies, and it is now working in leadership groups to talk together about how to provide a structural base to undergird the newly defined task — providing spiritual leadership.

Another bishop described how he chose a "vision team" of about forty persons, clergy and laity. The team met seven times, on Friday nights and the following Saturdays, the first year. The team articulated its vision as "challenging and equipping churches to make disciples of Jesus Christ by taking risks and changing lives." According to this bishop, once the annual conference adopted that vision, "then I turned loose these creative minds and said you have a blank piece of paper. There's nothing on your paper and do what you think would be creative." One result was the formation of six implementation teams formed around missional goals such as new congregations, youth, children, "servants like Jesus," and communications. The original intention was to have these implementation teams replace the traditional organization of the annual conference. But because Judicial Council decisions prevented that, the conference had parallel structures as they looked toward clarification at the 2000 General Conference. This bishop sees his conference as exemplary in its articulation of its vision prior to any discussion about structural change and in its willingness to start with a blank page in redesigning its structure.

Still another bishop described the new structure in his annual conference that was struck down by the Judicial Council. The central idea was to centralize resources and decentralize decisions to deploy them. They put into a common pot all the resources of districts, and the conference committees, agencies, and institutions. Then the Executive Steering Team that managed those resources turned to people at the grassroots level for knowledge and advice on how best to use those resources.

### **General Boards and Agencies**

The diverse initiatives at the annual conference level have in common a drive to involve people from diverse backgrounds and at all levels of the church in defining mission and to give freedom and flexibility that will allow mission to happen. This drive is also found elsewhere in the UMC. Another possible source of alternative proposals is related to the GCOM, which is mandated by *The Discipline* "to encourage, coordinate, and support the general agencies as

they serve on behalf of the denomination.”<sup>29</sup> Most of the UMC’s boards and agencies are in theory accountable to the GCOM between General Conferences. Since many leaders believe that appropriate structure will be achieved only after mission and ministry priorities are clear, the GCOM’s major contribution to restructure may have been through its efforts to achieve and articulate a common vision — shared by the various boards and agencies. These efforts included consultations that drew together diverse elements of church leadership from across the church.

Evaluating the consultations, the Conciliar Forum, made up of officers and board members of the GCOM, affirmed the need for United Methodists from across the church to sit at a “common table” to discern the appropriate missional direction and organizational framework for the UMC. According to the document affirmed by the group, any new organization for the UMC must have a place “where all the church’s vast programs and ministries can be known and information about them known and obtained.”<sup>30</sup> A year later the Conciliar Forum received from a fourteen-member GCOM Implementation Task Force a proposal for a Ministry Resource Conference that could take over many of the functions of the present GCOM.

This conference would have 100 to 125 members, including “bishops, individuals from each of the function teams, members of local congregations and annual conferences across the church, caucus representatives, people from affiliated and autonomous churches of the Methodist family, and others to ensure that ‘all parts of the church connect and communicate with the whole church.’”<sup>31</sup> Though members were not of one mind as to whether this should be an independent proposal to the General Conference or whether the CPT should be urged to incorporate it, many felt a major strength was that the proposed conference would be a more representative group for transforming church structures during the next quadrennium. The February 1999 CPT report, in contrast, called for churchwide leaders to transform church structures. In addition to the activities already described, staff members of GCOM consulted with annual conferences and groups of local congregations pursuing changes that could serve as models for reorganization. As mentioned above, the General Board of Discipleship had done similar consulting. Networks of large congregations could also have been a source of independent proposals for changes within the UMC.

29. *Book of Discipline*, p. 449.

30. “Group Proposing ‘Common Table’ for Future Decision Making,” United Methodist News Service, July 28, 1998, p. 1.

31. “Another Proposal Emerging for United Methodist Reorganization,” United Methodist News Service, August 3, 1999, p. 2.

## **Social Forces Underlying These Changes**

Many of the significant structural changes and proposed changes may be viewed as adaptations to broad societal forces in the surrounding environment. The UMC and its predecessor bodies have undergone continual changes in organizational structure reflecting societal changes. On occasion such changes have been dramatic. Most dramatic was the split of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844, creating the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Reunion did not occur until 1939. The gradual lessening of organizational support for the anti-alcohol movement is a less dramatic example of adaptive change.<sup>32</sup> Some of the societal changes worth exploring as possible sources of adaptive change in the UMC include education, mass communication, the growth of caucus groups within the church, social mobility, the erosion of authority, growing acceptance of homosexuality, receptivity to spirituality, consumerism, the dramatic increase in the number and diversity of nonprofit organizations, and some businesses' concerns with human welfare.

## **Social Forces Affecting Leadership and Control**

In his classic work on leadership, Robert Michels argued that the disparity in education between leaders and members and the resulting apathy by members was a primary source of leaders' control of an organization's policies and resources.<sup>33</sup> In this light, there is little wonder that United Methodists are challenging the authority of their leaders and calling for less centralized decision making. There has been a marked increase in the level of education of the general population since Michels was writing in the early years of the twentieth century. And that trend continues. For example, the percentage of United Methodists with more than twelve years of education increased from 45 percent in 1984/86 to 53 percent in 1994/96.<sup>34</sup> Increased education of United Methodists

32. See James G. Hougland, Jr., James R. Wood, and Samuel A. Mueller, "Organizational 'Goal Submergence': The Methodist Church and the Failure of the Temperance Movement," *Sociology and Social Research* 58, no. 4 (July 1974).

33. Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

34. I generated these cross-tabulations and the figures reported in the following two paragraphs from data files of the General Social Surveys. See James Allan Davis and Tom W. Smith, *General Social Surveys, 1972-1996* (machine-readable data file), principal investigator, James A. Davis; director and coprincipal investigator, Tom W. Smith, NORC ed. (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center; distributed by Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, 1996), one data file (35,284 logical records) and one codebook (1,295 pages). I was also able to obtain preliminary data from the 1998 poll.



negatively affects willingness to follow leaders without question. Also, new information technology, including the Internet, directly impacts apathy, making it possible for followers to be instantly informed of events and developments related to church policies. For example, when one Chicago pastor celebrated a holy union service for two men, the story made the front page of newspapers within two days. The proceedings of the subsequent church trial of this pastor were summarized hourly on the Internet.

Increased societal mobility also negatively affects members' willingness to give unquestioned control to their leaders. Fifty-eight percent of United Methodists don't live in the same city they lived in at age sixteen. This mobility means that many United Methodists grew up in other, more congregational polities. (It also means that United Methodists uprooted from their birth communities may be available for recruitment into other faith communities.) As it turns out, 30 percent of United Methodists were not raised as United Methodists, and about 10 percent were raised Baptist! It seems likely that those raised in a congregational polity might be less willing to accede to the directives of a more centralized polity.

There may be a more direct way that shifting public sentiment has influenced perceptions of leaders. There has been a general erosion of authority in our society. Witness the widespread notion, for example, that taxes are bad — that great pains should be taken to avoid paying money to the government. In 1994/95, according to the General Social Survey, 5.4 percent of United Methodists had "a great deal" of confidence in the executive branch of the federal government and 4.7 percent had such confidence in the legislative branch. Though their confidence in the leaders of organized religion was greater by comparison, only 29 percent had a great deal of confidence in such leaders.

Today's United Methodist leaders also must operate in a climate that includes well-led and well-funded caucus groups, both liberal and conservative. These advocacy groups, several of which were discussed above, are formed of dedicated United Methodists who are passionate about their causes and views.<sup>35</sup>

These and other changes in the contemporary world have necessitated a shift toward leadership that assumes members' awareness of the issues and their ability to thwart policies they oppose. One adaptive response to this situation is to empower the laity and to localize decision making where feasible. Another is for leaders to adopt a more persuasive, educative, participatory style of leadership. As we have seen, both kinds of responses are occurring in the UMC.

35. Some United Methodists are concerned about the funding of conservative caucuses by the secular right. For example, UMAction is a part of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, which draws much of its funding from conservative foundations.

## **Social Forces Affecting the UMC's Identity**

Several of the social forces just discussed have helped to precipitate a severe identity crisis within the UMC by making it possible for United Methodists at both poles on contested issues to press their views at least as effectively as official United Methodist leaders can press more moderate views. In addition, two societal trends or cultural drifts are also major forces — the decrease in our society of biblical literalism and the increase in acceptance of homosexuality. The percent of Americans believing the Bible is to be taken literally decreased from 39 percent in 1983 to 31 percent in 1995.<sup>36</sup> From 1984 to 1998 biblical literalism among United Methodists decreased from 35 percent to 26 percent.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the American public has become increasingly accepting of homosexuality. For example, recent polls show that 61 percent of Americans (71 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-nine) think high school education courses should not “tell students that homosexuality is immoral.”<sup>38</sup> These two trends have contributed to the identity-defining value struggle within the UMC. United Methodists on one side fear that the first trend foreshadows a loss of belief in the authority of the Bible with a resulting loss of an absolute moral standard, as exemplified (for them) in the second trend. Those on the other side see the demise of biblical literalism as an opportunity to teach and experience a culturally aware biblical faith which sets a high standard of morality for all human relationships, and they believe that some same-sex unions can pass this test of biblical morality. As one can see, there is a common ground here — biblical faith — but at the turn of the century those at the poles on these issues seem not to be looking for common ground.

## **Social Forces Affecting the UMC's Mission**

Some societal changes, by curtailing resources or presenting competing causes, put constraints on the church's ability to implement mission. For example, consumerism in our society has developed to the point that many families perceive as necessities things that would have been seen as luxuries even a decade ago. The result is that, from the perspective of these families, there is little or no “discretionary” income to support the church's mission.

The multiplication of alternative ways that people can pursue various

36. Princeton Religion Research Center, *Emerging Trends* (April 1996), p. 2.

37. Davis and Smith, *General Social Surveys*.

38. “Sex Education,” ABC News Nightline Poll, February 17, 1995, pp. 2-3.

purposes poses another challenge to the church's mission. Take for example the fact that many public utility companies now work with voluntary organizations in watching after elderly or homebound persons in their homes — a task that was, until recently, primarily in the domain of the churches. Moreover, the efforts of various nonprofit organizations and the media are making it easier for people to perceive the dramatic needs close at hand in any community, hence making them less inclined to send their funds to a central program agency.

But another societal trend may be good news for the church's mission. Many in society have become more receptive to spirituality. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof, describing the baby boom generation, says, "This search, in an increasingly pluralistic moral and religious setting, produced a new salvational dilemma, namely, that of finding one's own spiritual path in the midst of so many alternatives. Fundamental questions, such as 'Who am I?' and 'What am I doing with my life?' took on fresh meaning. Religion — like life — was something to be explored. Old cultural and religious scripts had lost power over them, forcing them to think through anew their religious and spiritual options."<sup>39</sup> This engagement with spirituality poses a challenge to institutional religion, yet many United Methodists find within their Wesleyan heritage both the deep spiritual experience and the social relevance many people outside the churches want. Roof's findings may also suggest a receptive climate for the spiritual leadership the CPT celebrates.

### The Leading of the Holy Spirit

All the reasons for changes discussed above seem plausible sociologically. But bishops gave far more weight to another explanation for changes in defining and organizing the work of the church: these changes are manifestations of the movement of the Holy Spirit. Social scientists are better equipped to show the influence of societal forces on organizational change than to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit. Yet I can report the enthusiasm with which bishops credited the Holy Spirit with stirring up change in the UMC. One bishop told me: "It's clear for me in our conference that the change is coming because we are guided in what we think by the spirit of God working within us." Another bishop said, "What is motivating the church today? I believe God is stirring this up. And God is helping us remember that the core center of our life is a body of faith and transformation which is ongoing. Change is not just any change. It's

39. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p. 59.

ongoing transformation where you are radically becoming a new thing. If we could discover again the spirit of transformation and know that that's life giving — the core identity of who we are, and if our leaders could live out of that and articulate that, then I think we have new life." Yet another bishop put it this way: "The quest for hands-on mission, the search for meaning. Those issues do not seem to be addressed by the denominational structure, and oftentimes we get caught in perpetuating the work of the form of the church and the dynamic has gone somewhere else. My own judgment is that some (not all), religious or non-religious, judge us as irrelevant as to where the Spirit is moving us."

Another bishop sees in a new way of relating to one another the practical consequences of the movement of the Spirit:

I see a turning to be more open to God's guidance in the way that we do our work in The United Methodist Church. We are far from enacting that in General Conference. But there's a lot of laity and a lot of clergy and with many people in the council of bishops this really heartfelt yearning not so much what do I want or what does this caucus want or that caucus want or even this annual conference or that annual conference but what does God want. What does God want of The United Methodist Church? And how can we become more open to the direction that God is leading rather than all these things that we have already made these decisions about?

Bishops I talked with clearly believe that the Holy Spirit is actively present in the process of change in the UMC today. One of the major implications of this study (discussed below) is the challenge it presents to the traditional sociological approach to claims for divine guidance. But before turning to the wider implications of the study, let us consider a few sociologically informed cautions about some of the proposals for change.

### **Some Sociologically Informed Cautions for the UMC**

The sociology of organizations and institutions suggests several cautions for those shaping UMC restructure.

#### *Unanticipated Consequences*

Often participants in organizations make emotional decisions based on the organization's values without thinking through the long-term consequences. One

example comes from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Several southern-based denominations that were cooperating with other denominations in the National Council of Churches made decisions that may have been appropriate for the northern-based denominations but arguably impeded the eventual implementation of the civil rights goals in the southern-based bodies. They lost much revenue, many members, and some congregations. Sociologists call these unwanted consequences “unanticipated” consequences not because they cannot sometimes be foreseen, but because they are out of line with the outcomes sought. Historian Russell Richey has identified just such a situation within the CPT. It appears that the strong desire to be global, heightened by the strong presence of members of the CPT from outside the United States (almost one-third of committee members), may have allowed the CPT to propose a new global structure that is not a realistic means of achieving globality, or at any rate they may have failed to look at more feasible ways of implementing that value. Richey argues that true affirmation of the global mission and outreach of Methodism will not be found in making the UMC a global denomination in the manner the CPT has proposed, but rather in appropriate participation with and ties to other Methodist denominations, especially through a strengthened World Methodist Council: “By using the World Methodist Council as a global expression, United Methodism embraces all the churches that share our Wesleyan and EUB heritage, including those with a British background, those now in united churches (e.g. India, Australia, Canada), those in the holiness tradition (who have believed so deeply in our Wesleyan values that they have had to dissent from the MEC/MECA/MC/UMC accommodation to the world), and particularly with the AME, AMEZ, and CME, with whom we have entered into conversation about a common future.”<sup>40</sup>

Richey’s point gained strength with the World Methodist Council’s September 1999 approval of membership for the Church of the Nazarene.

### *Dangers of Congregationalism*

There are important implications of moving toward congregationalism. As one delegate put it, “[Restructure] may be a step moving us toward congregationalism which would lead to a very different denominational understanding.” There are advantages to maintaining a strongly connected formal polity. It is true that in our society, steeped in traditions of grassroots democracy, even the

40. Russell Richey, “A Global Connection: Some Questions about the CPT Report,” *Circuit Rider*, September/October 1999, pp. 25-27.

strongest polity must also rely on persuasion — more so in the aftermath of the general erosion of authority that started with traumatic events in the 1960s, the revelations of Watergate and the disaster of the Vietnam War. Leaders need to gain compliance primarily by appealing to members to live out the implications of the fundamental values of the church. The new definition of leaders as listening, serving, caring individuals, strengthened by the spiritual disciplines, may facilitate this type of leadership. Still, the formal polity strength derived from the control of appointments and property provides a context that allows the persuasive process time to work.<sup>41</sup>

There are risks implicit in the emerging model of a national structure that merely resources the local church, which, seen as primary, is empowered to shape its own ministry. The local churches may well “provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs,”<sup>42</sup> as the new UMC mission statement affirms, but the history of the struggle for racial justice shows that local churches sometimes need a bit of pressure from the national church. Moreover, a theology that places the local church at the center may, as Harrison found with the Northern Baptists, impede the development of the kinds of structural checks and balances that prevent national leaders from appropriating illegitimate power. Still, members are often more energized by projects which they have helped to design, especially local projects. The challenge is how to provide permission for local churches to shape the ministries that fit their talents to the community yet maintain a polity strong enough to maintain a collective identity and mission.<sup>43</sup>

Though watchfulness is necessary to be sure structures do not stifle spiritual enthusiasm, structures and institutions are essential for carrying out the church’s mission. Speaking of the Methodist conference, Richey observes: “This expansive mission, this spirituality, required order. Indeed, spirituality and order, the freedom Methodists found through conversion and the discipline to which they subjected themselves and others, represent two sides of the evangelical impulse. . . . So conferences began to devote more exacting attention to their own political structure, to polity.”<sup>44</sup> Spiritual leaders within spiritual covenant groups may be an effective adaptive structure given certain social forces

41. For a more fully developed treatment of the model of leadership implied in this paragraph, see my *Leadership in Voluntary Organizations: The Controversy over Social Action in Protestant Churches* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1981).

42. *Book of Discipline*, p. 114.

43. Many United Methodist churches have been influenced by William M. Easum’s concept of the “permission-giving church.” See his *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

44. Richey, *The Methodist Conference*, p. 76.

affecting the church today. Yet at some point that leadership needs to be insulated so that it can foster precarious values and enforce contested policies.<sup>45</sup>

### Implications of the UMC Case Study

This case study has implications both for United Methodists and for social scientists. For United Methodists, one clear implication of the emerging definition of work in the UMC is the recovery of a fuller spectrum of spiritual/social action. Conservatives have pushed for more spiritual emphasis, and liberals, though they find it unnecessary to endorse classical theology in order to recover spiritual resources, have responded by becoming more spiritually aware. As a result the church is cutting through the false polarity of changing individuals versus changing culture.

Here are relevant comments from two bishops:

You know you've got people [who see] the job of the church is to change individual lives and then you let individual lives change, and other people that said — and this is probably more prevalent in a lot of leadership in the 60s and 70s — our job is to change the culture and the culture will change life, well, I think that's a false polarity. It's much more of both, that we're doing all of this together. I want us to take a more holistic approach.

I think one of our difficulties, we have tended, by virtue of where we are theologically, to major in one or the other. And so, if we were more liberal, we were more missional but forgot the life of prayer, intimate small-group theologizing. What was done by our conservative folk did not show in the world. For me, the consistent theology, the money where the mouth is, the rubber to the road, is where those two are in confluence, where there is both/and.

Another bishop reminds us that spiritual leadership and administrative leadership are not opposed to one another:

I think within CPT there are some folks who see spiritual leadership as different from administration. That is not my view because I think one of the biggest places I exert spiritual leadership is in the appointment process. There is a lot of administration in the appointment process. So I think there was a heresy back in the early church sometimes that separated the

45. On insulating leaders in order to safeguard precarious values, see Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

temporal from the spiritual and I think that the temptation today is to keep that split and I think what's happening culturally is that it is all coming together. . . . When I make an administrative decision, I am making decisions about people's lives. And about congregations' lives and their own future and that to me is a very spiritual matter. It's about God in the midst of life. So when I am answering mail, I am dealing with people's souls. And the issues of their relationship with God. That's not a task that is void of spirituality because it's administrative. . . . When I think of the church, if we try to pull bishops out of what is perceived to be administrative work of working with the boards and agencies, the church, the boards, and agencies will lose life because those boards and agencies have to be infused with spirit and that work needs to be set in the context of the vision and mission which is a spiritual matter. But we as a denomination still have work to do around that issue. We don't have clarity. I think we hunger for the spiritual and somehow we've got it over against administrative rather than seeing it in the midst of the administrative.

One liberal bishop talks more personally about spiritual leadership:

We have assumed that programs will save people's lives. That just has not worked. We talk now of process, not of program. Go back and live different lives. Be different, listening, learning leaders. The vision emerges from the people — their deepest yearning and desires. As we listen to them we cast that vision. We never stop listening but at the same time listening to what God is saying. The UMC needs transformational leaders who discern God's will. CPT doesn't need to change the structure of the bishops' office, but we need to change the minds and spirits of bishops so that they will function differently in the office. I proudly identify myself now as the spiritual leader. I had to get past some of the hang-ups I had with spiritual leadership.

### **Researching the Role of the Holy Spirit**

This study challenges the traditional way social scientists have researched claims of divine influence. The usual sociological tack starts from the assumption that whatever is defined as real, by particular individuals or groups, is real in its consequences, for those individuals and groups. Two members of the UMC research team for the ORW (Organizing Religious Work) project, both together and independently, have observed real changes in the ways bishops relate to one another as well as the kinds of activities they are undertaking together. Witness this excerpt from one bishop's sermon at a 1998 meeting of the COB.



I went home after my first COB meeting and said to . . . my spiritual director “The COB is the strangest Christian community I’ve ever experienced. It is rife with anger and suspicion and distrust. They can’t seem to talk about what is dividing them.” She counseled what she has counseled so many times before, “Pray and wait.”

This is my fifth COB meeting. In each of these five meetings, we have spent more and more time practicing the presence of God. Individual prayer. Covenant groups. Community prayer. Prayer interwoven through the day. The practice of prayer is drawing us together at a deeper level. We are spending more time in Biblical and theological reflection about underlying issues. The practice of studying the Scriptures and doing theology together is knitting us together. We are asking questions of discernment — what does God want this COB to be and to do? What will we have to let go of? The practice of discernment is helping us to lay aside our individual wills and search for God’s will, and it draws us together. . . . The Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty may be changing this Council more than it is changing the world — at least for now. It is uniting us in a common mission. Our genuine appreciation for one another’s gifts appears to be enlarging. Is it possible that the practice of “bearing one another in love” — even a little humility, patience and gentleness — is uniting us? . . . If Christ’s love can transform us, can it not transform the United Methodist Church?

Later another bishop underscored for me an indication of dramatic change within the COB. At the time of the 1996 General Conference in Denver, the COB was polarized and filled with anger by the actions of fifteen bishops who held a press conference to announce their disagreement with UMC policies relating to homosexual persons. Yet this spring in Chattanooga, the COB unanimously elected one of those fifteen bishops as their new ecumenical officer who will represent the UMC to other denominations and ecumenical groups throughout the world!

The transformation of the COB is certainly an interesting sociological phenomenon. There is evidence that most bishops go beyond merely using spiritual language to describe what happened after the fact. They describe individual bishops and groups of bishops in the midst of deep, hurtful conflict, seeking the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit and intentionally opening themselves to the possibility of transformation of their own attitudes and ideas.

Sociologist Rodney Stark cautions against assuming that revelations do not actually occur:

Unfortunately, as Ralph Hood (1985) has pointed out, even the most unbiased social scientists typically have been unwilling to go further than to grant that the recipients of revelations have made honest *mistakes*, that they have *misinterpreted* an experience as having involved contact with the divine. This is taken as self-evident on the grounds that any real scientist “knows” that real revelations are quite impossible. I fully agree with Hood (1985, 1997) that while methodological agnosticism represents good science, both methodological atheism and theism are unscientific. We do not know that revelations are impossible; it is entirely beyond the capacity of science to demonstrate that the divine does not communicate directly with certain individuals.<sup>46</sup>

Psychiatrist Robert Coles gives a moving account of how an eight-year-old girl he treated while in psychiatric training helped him and his supervising doctor to see the importance of taking seriously the reality of God in the lives of their patients. The account ends with a quotation from the supervisor’s summary of progress in the case: “This girl has begun to settle down in treatment. Her use of her Catholic faith has been both a stumbling block and an opportunity for her doctor and me. We have stopped trying to take on her faith clinically! She has built her own version of that faith, and we have let her tell us all about it, and learned more about her. For her God is quite alive; He’s a big part of her life. We’re hoping He’ll be of further help to her — and to us, too.”<sup>47</sup>

A major strength of the CPT proposal, which reflected the dynamic going on in several annual conferences and in the COB, was that it appealed not just to a transcendent purpose, but to God who wills and empowers that purpose — to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Theologians may best decide when God’s influence is real, but even the traditional social scientist knows that if something is perceived as real, it may be real in its consequences. In my interviews with bishops and observations of their meetings, those consequences were palpable.

## Conclusion

There are loud voices warning that the UMC is in imminent danger of schism. They may be right. People at the poles have strong differences that they perceive as irreconcilable. Those who believe the God of the Bible is directing them to be and do something that is incompatible with what others believe the God of the

46. Rodney Stark, “A Theory of Revelations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38 (June 1999): 288.

47. Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), p. 19.

Bible is calling them to be and do may decide to leave the church, individually or collectively. Such a truncation of the diversity within the church would dramatically change both the identity and the mission of the UMC.

There is a more hopeful scenario for the UMC. Perhaps the value struggle will be won not by the extremes, but by the middle. There is strong traditional support for diversity within the church, and only 21 percent of delegates to the 1996 General Conference agreed that "The UMC has become too diverse."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, in the past several years there have been exciting theological diversity dialogues throughout the church. Imagine that, as these dialogues continue, United Methodists discover not only that they can understand and tolerate the views of those with whom they differ, but also that they have more in common with the holders of those views than they had thought. And imagine that the bishops — who, divided among themselves, were forced to form covenant groups and to adopt a discernment process of decision making — imagine that these bishops in their new kind of spiritual leadership discover the power to unite the church in mission. There's a drama for the twenty-first century!<sup>49</sup>

48. These statistics are from my survey of the delegates to the 1996 General Conference of the UMC. For more details of the survey see James Rutland Wood, *Where the Spirit Leads: The Evolving Views of United Methodists on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), especially p. 137.

49. See General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, *In Search of Unity: A Conversation with Recommendations for the Unity of the United Methodist Church* (New York: General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, 1998).