

Ten Provocative Questions
Inspired by the 2007 State of the Church Report
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Hear the prayer of the prophet Habakkuk: "O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known AMEN. (Habakkuk 3:2, NRSV)

I have been asked to read the State of the Church report and identify interesting findings, emerging questions, challenging contradictions, and other implications resulting from the research. I have chosen to do so using the concept of "provocative questions" with a heavy emphasis on *provocative*.

The first task of leaders is to help define reality in the tradition of Nehemiah saying, "Look at the trouble we are in." Or as Peter Senge puts it, "Nothing is more limiting to a group than the inability to talk about the truth." The State of the Church report gives us an opportunity to look at realities that our church faces.

Issue: Theological Grounding and Spiritual Vitality

Provocative Question: Can we capture the Wesleyan power of being an evangelical church in a liberal tradition?

United Methodist core beliefs are clear, says the State of the Church report. There is remarkable consensus on key affirmations of Christian faith. There is also strong evidence of spiritual vitality across the church shown by extraordinary responses on questions of faith and core beliefs, as well as practices of Christian discipleship, mission, and social justice.

There are variations of emphasis across global regions and within the United States. These differences should not overshadow the consensus, but they do point to the need for good Wesleyan Christian conferencing in which we honestly engage theological differences for mutual edification, knowing that no one perspective captures all of God's wisdom.

United Methodists today appear to be in the tradition of Georgia Harkness, who spoke of herself theologically as an "evangelical liberal." She believed that it was possible to combine "tolerance with decisiveness, open-mindedness with Christian conviction." Most survey respondents would agree with her that the powerful communication of the gospel is "the most important task under God that any person can undertake." The respondents also would affirm the call theologian Claude H. Thompson made years ago for evangelical renewal in the United Methodist Church, saying this is an hour when United Methodist evangelicals are called to eliminate the evils of war, poverty, and racism from our society.

Could this Wesleyan identity be captured in an inclusive vision of an evangelical church in a liberal tradition? We are an evangelical church. At the same time we are in a liberal tradition.

We are the first to challenge assumptions. We are the first to open windows and doors to new ideas and possibilities when faith mandates it. Could such a vision that is both deep (in faith and piety) and open (to new needs and possibilities) sustain us over the years ahead?

Issue: Global United Methodism

Provocative Question: Can the growing global regions of United Methodism remember the first law of life-guarding—don't let the drowning person drown you?

With the vast differences among the world regions of United Methodism in growth, vitality, and hopefulness named in the report, what should connectionalism and mutuality among them look like?

One way to think about it is to ask what American Methodists most needed from other Methodists during years of dramatic growth. The last things needed were another culture's structure, rules, liturgies, and politics. Of more benefit would be prayer, relationships, resources, and genuine partnerships in reaching others for Christ and healing and transforming the world. The money required for a global governance system on the traditional U.S. model could, if rechanneled, mean the difference in life or death to untold numbers of people, missions, congregations, schools, and clergy around the world.

How then do we accomplish a global church with maximum support and minimum interference? This leads to structure, another major topic of the State of the Church report.

Issue: Structure

Provocative Question: Can we move from a structure of control to a structure of grace?

Mainline denominations have often been fundamentalists of structure rather than of doctrine. It is not working, according to the State of the Church report. From the General Conference through virtually every level of structure, clergy and laity express significant dissatisfaction. Is it time to create a *Discipline* that leaves organizational detail to all the global regions with the challenge to simplify, simplify, simplify?

What might this mean specifically?

We live in a time when people are not anxious to have others make decisions for them or to speak for them. What if the General Conference came to address the “essentials” of doctrine and United Methodist self-understanding and then left to the global regions all matters of structure, regulations, and proclamations? Further, could the global regions themselves take a minimalist approach? For example, could we agree that significantly more than a simple majority be required for all policy, directives, and proclamations addressed to other than the operations of that body—given this time of high distrust of systems of control?

What if we saw the role of leaders as helping to insure accountability to the mission and vision – rather than managing structures? Accountability, then, is based on faithfulness to our mission, vision, and values, and no longer simply on authority. Leaders do not spend time telling people what they cannot do, but asking people what they are doing about our shared commitments.

People will be less likely to feel the need constantly to report what they will *not* do because no one is telling them what they *must* do. Instead, everyone is busy being responsive to the shared vision because that is the expected accountability.

The message to all levels of the church is that you are free to be flexible with your structure. You are not, however, free to structure in a way that does not promote the manifestation of the power of God where you have the calling of ministry. You are free to structure for reaching diverse populations in any way you choose with one exception. You are not free to structure in a way that does not result in the love of God through Christ becoming a reality for all the people you are called to serve.

Accountability in our day will not come by mandates, legislation, or resolutions. Accountability instead may be achieved through the right questions. Leaders no longer will be those with the answers but those with the questions. The background for every question must be what it is God is calling us to do.

Issue: An Aging Church

Provocative Question: Can medical science continue to keep U.S. United Methodism alive?

When the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches stopped growing in the 1960s, the average age of members was well below the general population, and that continued until about 1975. Since 1975, the average age in U.S. United Methodism has gone up consistently. Despite over thirty years of aging as a denomination, with the help of medical science we are still alive.

The failure to reach younger people is abundantly clear in the State of the Church report. It is painful to read that clergy seem less concerned about this than laity are, and that laity want younger people but are not willing to change their worship or budgets to reach younger generations. The report is clear that the gap between rhetoric and action appears to be as large as the age gap that some believe threatens the future viability of the denomination.

Issue: Finances

Provocative Question: Can we escape the approaching “tipping point” of declining income after over thirty years of aging as a denomination?

There is strong support for apportionments as an effective and efficient way to pay for work beyond the local church. The report describes attitudes toward apportionments and giving as positive, though these are not as strong among younger people.

One unfortunate reason the aging of the denomination has not received more attention is that in aging congregations, the availability of financial resources tends to continue, and perhaps even increase. Overall, people have more assets from age fifty and above than at any other time in their lives.

The next two decades will bring the death of a large group of United Methodists nurtured in another era and with an exemplary dedication and commitment. Some will continue their giving

to the church through estate plans. But in the final analysis, churches cannot thrive on either inherited faithfulness or inherited money. There must be a vision and enthusiasm to capture the hearts and souls of a new generation of disciples.

Issue: Young Clergy

Provocative Question: Should we declare young United Methodist clergy as an endangered species?

There has been a dramatic drop in the number and percentage of United Methodist clergy under the age of 35 in the last 20 years in the United States, with the percentage of clergy under the age of 35 now below 5 percent. The young clergy crisis is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon. There is no single cause and no single solution.

Why is it crucial for the pool of clergy to include a proportionate number of younger persons? Without them, new ideas, creativity, energy, and cultural awareness often exhibited by the young are lost. With more persons entering ministry with fewer years to serve, the wisdom and experience that can come with long tenures in ministry are also in jeopardy. Young clergy have certain advantages in reaching out to their own generation—speaking the language of an emerging generation whose worldview and communication modes differ from those of their parents' generation. Just as importantly, the very presence of young clergy in a church symbolizes that younger persons are valued as leaders and participants. All of these factors help explain why young clergy seem particularly well suited to the task of church planting. Research has found that pastors between the ages of 24 and 35 were the most successful in founding churches.

Issue: Diversity

Provocative Question: Should the affirmative action and monitoring priority for the next decade be people of color professions of faith?

Diversity is not as prominent in the State of the Church report as one would expect, given the fact that the United States is experiencing one of the most dramatic shifts in racial and ethnic makeup in its history. But the report makes clear that diversity continues to be a high value, and commitment continues toward the elimination of racial inequities.

Diversity was a challenge for Wesley and early Methodists. Yet the results make clear the seriousness with which Wesley took the task. The need for a renewed spirit of inclusion of people is crucial today. The youthfulness of the growing racial ethnic diversity in the United States makes its impact even more significant for the future. Clearly the church's vitality in the next century will be shaped largely by its willingness and ability to respond to the changing face of America.

Issue: Future

Provocative Question: Can the church change to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people?

The United Methodist Church in the United States has a future only to the extent that it can find ways to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people.

The United Methodist Church did very well “growing up” with America through the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century. Then, as the last century unfolded, the nation changed and the church did not. Earlier generations had followed Americans from East to West, from urban to frontier, and from lower to middle and upper-middle classes. But success led to staying with practices even as they became increasingly less effective.

Today the United Methodist Church in the U. S. is not only dramatically smaller, but it is older and less diverse than the population. Thus, the premise emerges that we must learn to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people.

Issue: Large Churches

Provocative Question: Can we learn from a cohort of large churches that have for thirty years been reaching more people, younger people, and more diverse people?

We are aware that new church starts are particularly effective in reaching more people, younger people, and more diverse people. Less well known is another group of churches that have been doing for three decades what the whole church must learn to do in the years ahead.

Churches with average worship attendance of 500 or more today make up about 2 percent of United Methodist churches in the U.S. In 1975 (when the age of United Methodists became older than the national population), these churches represented about 9 percent of membership, attendance, and professions of faith. Today these churches represent

- 20% of membership
- 20% of attendance
- 24% of professions of faith
- 25% of youth
- 26% of children
- 29% of people of color

This takes nothing away from other churches, but these numbers—which represent people reached for Christ—cry out for attention to what we all can learn from these congregations.

Issue: Pastoral Effectiveness

Provocative Question: Can we shift our attention from a few ineffective clergy to the many faithful pastors who desperately need help in becoming fruitful?

The report indicates that pastors and laity do not strongly affirm that clergy are well trained, expertly supervised, and appropriately assigned to churches.

Ineffective clergy take up far too much time and energy. There are not many, and every bishop and superintendent knows them by name. The church must provide just, compassionate, and

immediate ways, as the 1992 Episcopal Address put it, “to assist ineffective clergy to seek another vocation”

We know from the State of the Church and other research that most clergy receive high marks from laity on their character and almost as high on their competence in the functions of pastoral ministry. But what we are finding in our research at Lewis Center for Church Leadership is that clergy and laity agree that pastors are not doing well in accomplishing the “fruits of ministry,” a key concept for John Wesley. Wesley asked three questions: 1) Is there faith? 2) Are there gifts? and 3) Are there fruits?

A Future Worthy of Our Past

These ten questions lead us finally to wonder if we can have a future worthy of our past.

Without a new vision, the future does not look bright. When I was a child, Methodism in the U.S. was at one of its historic high points as a percent of population. Today the United Methodist presence in the U.S. is back where it was around 1820. At present rates, we will before long be back at the percentage at the time of the Christmas Conference.

It does not have to be that way. Indeed, it is in times of hardship that new visions often emerge. It was in a time of despair that Nehemiah and his people united to rebuild the wall. It was after hundreds of years of suffering that Habakkuk sought and received the vision of the just shall live by faith. It was in the midst of life-denying realities that Jesus proclaimed the vision that all might have abundant life.

Would it not be wonderful if at some future General Conference a bishop delivering the Episcopal Address might make the following statement and immediately all heads nod in instant recognition of its truth?

As I think back on United Methodism in recent times, the only fitting description is in the words written years ago to the church at Thyatira. “I know all your ways, your love and faithfulness, your good service and your fortitude; and of late you have done even better than at first” (Rev. 2:19 NEB).

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