

A Possible Future – Bryant Oskvig

A unique element of the spiritual life promoted by John Wesley and the early Methodist movement was the sense of commitment and covenant in Christ expected of the gathered community to each other. From that history and sense of spiritual connection, I have spoken and written a few times about the future of our church being a reconnection and recommitment to that spiritual heritage. Recently, a friend of mine wondered in response to these suggestions whether "committed leaders and happy thoughts" would really be enough to rescue the United Methodist Church from the current oncoming crisis. No, I really believe that in fact it will not be enough, but that is not my point.

Given current demographic and financial realities and trends, we are headed into a significant crisis in the very near future and at most we might slow down how quickly we experience that crisis. Good feelings and happy people are not going to stop this. I suggest, however, that the manner we address our present concerns implies who we intend to be for our future.

The question then is how we address this current crisis (which is also a crisis of confidence as well as finances) while maintaining this covenant together? How do we continue to become the community we seek to be with the recognition of the current state of the General Church? I think that the path forward is a recommitment of the connectional covenant that is the defining character of United Methodist polity and history, while acknowledging the broken state of the General Church.

The Annual Conference is the central body of the United Methodist Church; the clergy are ordained into the community of elders of the Annual Conference, and local church property is held in trust for the Annual Conference. Our primary covenant as a connected church is then with and through the Annual Conference. The Annual Conference could therefore make a decision for its own future, potentially leave the denomination and do so while maintaining the connected covenant of our church. This is more honest than just defunding the General Church (as others have suggested) by actively acknowledging the state of our relationship. I think it would also encourage the congregations and clergy of the conference to gather and give great, sincere, and prayerful thought to the presence of Christ we seek to be together for our area.

I do not pretend that such a decision or action could be quickly made. There would be some parliamentary jousting required to even get to a vote; some Disciplinary debate needed to chart a path forward, and legal wrangling might be inevitable. But, such a move is possible and has been done before.

Some might be concerned about clergy pensions and benefits if an Annual Conference actually made such a choice. The impact would actually be minimal at best. Past obligations would still need to be honored through whatever system they were acquired

independent of the relationship to the General Church. Beyond this, there would be an opportunity for the Annual Conference to make benefits decisions that made the most practical sense for the area; medical insurance, for example, is already a localized decision.

An Annual Conference that left the General Church could still choose to provide funding to specific General Church agencies and thus remain involved with the larger connection in a meaningful way. These agencies would have to explain their ministry, impact, and value to the Annual Conferences for funding. Such a conversation might strengthen a sense of stronger connection to the work of the agencies and encourage more Annual Conference participation beyond funding. The congregations and clergy would also be more able to speak to the work of the broader church.

A decision for our Annual Conference to leave the General Church would not be an easy or gentle path. The choice would impact how we think about ourselves; it would raise some serious theological consideration about our understanding of the body of Christ, and it would change our involvement in broader national and international ministries. But significant hard change is already coming to our church whether we ready for it or not. We can be reactive to the coming change or proactive. Rather than breaking our covenant, we should strengthen the central covenant of our Annual Conference striving to exemplify those unique and connectional elements that make us United Methodist. Maybe, this can be a faithful way forward into our future.

Anyone who talks with me knows that I am hope filled for our future. Not because I fail to recognize the oncoming challenges, but because I am so inspired by what new thing God is doing. We see that witness in the cross, from the tragic to the joyful. Through the cross then, I am constantly assured of the Spirit's refreshing movements into our future; whatever that may be.