

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

REACHING THE “TIPPING POINT”: FOSTERING A CULTURE OF THE CALL IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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“How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.” The subtitle of Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *The Tipping Point*,¹ describes a certain kind of change. A system has reached a “tipping point” when: movement is dramatic instead of gradual, the force is contagious behavior, and little changes produce big effects. Tipping points depict everything from Stephen Jay Gould’s punctuated equilibrium to the jump in sales of Hush Puppies in 1995.

Why should seminaries be interested in tipping points? Because we sense the need for systemic change: we are all boats lowering on the ebbing tide of mainline Protestantism; we experience the growing disenfranchisement of graduate theological education; we are small institutions who yet believe we serve the church in a big way. And because we feel the church is, itself, approaching a tipping point as the gradual erosion of money and members becomes an avalanche into a generational gap of retiring clergy and empty pews.

What can seminaries do to turn the tide? We prepare men and women who master the subjects of divinity. The faculty assembled for that purpose provide scholarship. As we put it, “we provide the leadership of the church and we are a theological resource for the church.” The problem is it hasn’t worked or hasn’t been sufficient. During the 20th century, the graph of the line showing the increase of the M.Div. as the standard for leadership crosses the line showing the decrease in membership. There may be no causal link. But even if we

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¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. (New York: Little Brown and Co., 2000).

can convince the church that we are not part of the problem, it is difficult to show how we can be part of the solution.

It is no comfort that theological educators have been studying this issue for some time. From Robert L. Kelly's, *Theological Education in America* published in 1924,² to Daniel Day Williams, James M. Gustafson, and H. Richard Niebuhr's study in 1956,³ and Warren Deem's work in the late 1960s, culminating in Edward Farley's *Theologia* in 1983,⁴ all have observed the decline of the church and its ministry, and have been increasingly pessimistic in their predictions and radical in their proposals for systemic change.

At Wesley Theological Seminary, we began our own soul-searching in the late 1980s. The faculty studied Farley's book and we had established a dialogue with the leadership of the four surrounding United Methodist annual conferences. Our attention focused on the presenting symptom of the church's disease: the decline in the number and quality of candidates for ordained ministry.

Ultimately, our 1997 strategic plan set the course for a major change in institutional direction. The plan proclaims: "Our vision is to play a key role in the revitalization of the church in our region as we move into the new millennium." Two of the four goals of that plan required some sort of systemic change: "to strengthen our relationship with the church," and "to enlist high quality candidates for ministry." These goals were the basis for Wesley's proposal to The Lilly Endowment.

It is strangely appropriate that our effort is being funded by The Lilly Endowment because much of the literature describing systemic change draws on analogies to the medicinal arts. Gladwell himself uses the phenomenon of an epidemic both as an example and as a primary metaphor to describe the development of tipping points.

² Robert L. Kelly, LL.D., *Theological Education in America: A Study of One Hundred Sixty-One Theological Schools in the United States and Canada*. (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1924).

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson, eds., *The Advancement of Theological Education: The Summary Report of a Mid-century Study* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957).

⁴ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

In our case, the infectious agent is a phrase: “culture of the call.” Over several years of research, we determined that one of the reasons young people are no longer entering the ministry is they are not being encouraged to do so. In the past, the church fostered its future leadership in Sunday School, in worship, at summer camp, and in college. Now, the church had stopped talking about the “call” to ministry. In order to describe the remedy, we borrowed from contemporary language about “corporate culture” and proposed to “seek systemic change by first re-instituting a *culture of the call* in the church to encourage men and women to consider their call seriously.”

Tracing the spread of this phrase in the denominational programs, we see a small example of the tipping point phenomenon, which may be useful to others in contemplating how a seminary can effect change in the church. Gladwell describes “three rules of the Tipping Point” which help categorize the forces at work in our programs: the “Power of Context,” the “Law of the Few,” and the “Stickiness Factor.”

The first rule to consider is the “Power of Context:” “epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur.” The primary context for our work was set by the 1996 and 2000 General Conferences of The United Methodist Church.

The 1996 General Conference produced several significant changes in the process of ordination. The candidacy process was made more rigorous and the length of time spent in candidacy was lengthened such that a student now has to graduate from seminary before becoming a probationary member of the annual conference, and must spend at least three years in that state before ordination. This means that seminary students, who were often under the care of conference boards of ordained ministry, are now under the jurisdiction of the local district committees on ordained ministry. The distinction is important because it means that Wesley, which once saw its chief partners to be the four surrounding conference boards, now has 38 local district committees with which to relate.

Wesley took advantage of this new context in the design of our culture of the call programs. We implemented a three-year study of the culture of the call working with the district

committees of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference. The study gathers information on how candidates are being identified and encouraged. The data is interesting, but equally important has been the way the study connected district committees together, and they with the seminary. This study model is now being made available to other conferences. Wesley also designed a web-based program for the continuing education component of the new probationary process which is now being used by several annual conferences.

The changes in the ordination process occurred in the context of a long debate in the church about the meaning of ordination and the status of ordained clergy relative to other forms of ministry. The 1996 General Conference established a separate and distinct order of deacon and created a structure to strengthen the vocational identity of the deacons and the elders. An educational requirement for the order of deacon opened up the potential for a new market for graduate theological education. But perhaps the most significant effect is that our whole connectional system is working out the new philosophy and the new programs associated with ordination. (And it now seems the debate will continue.) This means that seminary personnel are in demand as consultants and service providers.

These debates about the ordering of ministry are themselves symptoms of the larger issue: the widespread perception in the church that something is fundamentally wrong. The political class of United Methodism is characterized by a psychology of decline. The 2000 General Conference evidenced two manifestations of that psychology. First was the highly publicized and ongoing fracture over the issue of the ordination of homosexuals. The second was an ambitious proposal, ultimately defeated, to re-organize the denomination.

The power of this psychological context cannot be overlooked. As Wesley began to unroll our programs to foster a culture of the call, we were working within the context of a demoralized denomination facing a shortage of clergy because our young people are no longer entering the ministry. We encountered leaders at every level from every political faction who desperately wanted to change the subject

and find some new way to conceptualize the issues and attack the problem.

All of these developments in The United Methodist Church created the necessary context for tipping point change. They established lines of communications – “vectors,” to use the language of contagion – and a heightened degree of susceptibility to our message about the culture of the call.

The second of Gladwell’s rules to consider is “The Law of the Few:” “Any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts.” Gladwell describes three kinds of people who accelerate a message through a complex system: “connectors,” who are in positions to connect smaller conversations with larger ones; “mavens,” who collect and actively pass on new ideas; and “salesmen,” who have the ability to persuade others. Each of these types can be implicated in the spread of the culture of the call.

The United Methodist Church prides itself on being a “connectional system” with carefully proscribed committees and functionaries. In our project, the newly enhanced responsibilities of the district committees made those groups particularly important “connectors,” who have adopted the language of the culture of the call. Also, Conference Boards of Ordained Ministry invite us to consultations on the new processes of ordination, providing us quality time with key clergy connectors.

Equally important are a variety of mavens and salesmen who travel throughout the connectional system like bees pollinating a field of flowers. In the way one traces a piece of mail through the postal system, we have been able to identify the relatively few people (consistent with Gladwell’s model) who were responsible for spreading the use of the phrase “culture of the call.” There have been several bishops, a couple of administrators from other seminaries, a conference lay leader, some college chaplains, a fundraising consultant, several chairs of conference enlistment committees, and a denominational agency executive. In all these cases, their occupational position was helpful, but the important factor was their individual interest in the concept and their personal tendency to “gossip” an idea.

Congregations can be important connectors, mavens, and

salespeople. The net decline in the denomination hides the fact that many congregations are thriving and growing. These congregations are trees showing the promise of bearing fruit and who are already sending people into ordained ministry. Consequently, Wesley has established a “Partner Church Program” whose primary aim is to foster the culture of the call. We have prepared a video, liturgical resources, and response devices to assist churches in the conduct of a “Ministry Sunday.” Our targets are those few in every congregation who can act as Eli in the lives of others. We say that the call to ministry is a “voice-activated system,” and that a responsibility of each generation is to encourage potential leaders in the next generation to consider their call to ministry.

Finally, in order to reach high school-aged people, Wesley has partnered with Salt ‘n Light Youth Ministry, a small team of dedicated specialists in youth ministry who have a tremendous multiplier effect through their training of youth workers, their rallies and special events, and their leadership in summer camps. They now emphasize God’s call to ministry in all of their programs.

All of these programmatic initiatives meet two of the conditions in Gladwell’s prescription for reaching a tipping point: they follow the natural grain of the context, and they target the few who can leverage the efforts of a small staff. His third rule has less to do with programming and more to do with the nature of the message: “The Stickiness Factor.” Here, the most helpful analogy is to advertising, where the question is, “what will stick in the mind of the consumer to form an association with the product?” As Gladwell says, “Ideas have to be memorable and move us into action.”

The phrase “culture of the call” is sticky. No doubt, part of its appeal is the simple alliteration. It gains currency from contemporary interest in “culture” as a sociological concept. The “catchiness” of a phrase is critical for reaching a tipping point because it must be easily transmitted by a number of people from a few connectors.

“Culture of the call” is also a serviceable title for a speech or sermon because it is iconic: both the word “culture” and “call” can be unpacked with meanings stored neatly in a phrase. To put it another way, culture of the call will preach.

We benefited from the fact that our context relies heavily on the spoken word, transmitted by people who are ravenous for talking points and memorable phrases.

With Gladwell's three factors accounted for, did we, in fact, reach a "tipping point?" Our only real evidence is anecdotal. The people that talk with us are enthusiastic about the concept and ask about the programs. Many of those now contacting us did not hear the phrase from us, and some are unaware that we were the source. When we hear the phrase second and third hand, we realize that the thing has taken on a life of its own, a critical indicator of the tipping point phenomenon.

Recalling that a seminary's mission is twofold, to prepare the leadership of the church and to be a theological resource for the church, we are gratified with our success on two levels. First, we have identified many people in the course of the last three years who are now thinking about ordained ministry because of our work. But we are also pleased that we were able to be a theological resource for the church by helping to change the terms of the conversation about the "clergy supply crisis."

"Call" language is theological language and has proven to be a useful antidote to the tendency to talk about ministry as "job" and "profession." Consider, for instance, the ecclesiology implied in the phrase "culture of the call," which suggests the work of the Holy Spirit and the abundance of God's grace. By contrast, a document recently produced by one of our denominational offices defined the clergy shortage as "rusty pipelines." As Methodists, we believe in the active work of God's sanctifying grace. In a post-Christian environment, use of the language and logic of grace is an important means of grace and providing that language is a particularly appropriate role for the seminary. It has been part of our contribution to the recovery of "theologia."

At the same time, we recognize that this was not a controlled experiment. There are other forces of renewal at work in the church, many of them now using call language. What is undeniable is that the program has changed Wesley's position within the church. Because we were able to change the subject, Wesley is now seen as part of the solution to the

problems facing the denomination. That itself was a tipping point in the reputation of the institution.

Therefore, this project may be useful to other seminaries as they consider change strategies in the life of the church. But there is a final word of caution. We often use another metaphor from chemistry to describe the role of the seminary in the life of the Body of Christ when we speak of being a “catalyst.” A catalyst is an agent that instigates a significant chemical reaction but which is not itself changed or depleted in the process. That metaphor of the catalyst is not completely accurate in our case because we have been changed in the course of the “treatment” and we must now wrestle with the question of whether we can support the changes necessary to continue to nurture the culture of the call.