
FROM CONNECTION TO CORPORATIZATION: LEADERSHIP TRENDS IN UNITED METHODISM

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United Methodism is one of the largest Protestant denominations in the United States, with a presence in over fifty other nations as well. Its polity and practice have evolved from eighteenth century beginnings under John Wesley through the ecumenism of the twentieth century to the challenges of the twenty-first century. The denomination, a union of multiple Wesleyan and Methodist branches, has had surprising struggles across its nearly forty years of existence in revivifying its language and articulating a fresh vision for its clergy and lay leadership. To some extent, the difficulties lie in the ambiguity of the term *leadership* and the multiple expectations and images that shape its use. Yet the more profound challenge for United Methodism has been to find ways to draw upon its rich heritage of polity and practice to shape its ministries for the future.

A Narrative of Leadership¹

Leadership is in some ways a native language for Methodism. In fact, arguably one of the earliest uses of the English-language term “leader” in Protestant traditions was found in eighteenth century English Methodism. John Wesley initiated a society within the Church of England for reformation and holy living in church and nation. This Methodist society was comprised of small groups of twelve lay persons in a neighborhood who met weekly as a “class meeting” under the guidance of a “class leader.” The leader was also a lay person,

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¹ For a fuller discussion of Methodist history and polity, see Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church*, 2006 Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), especially chapter 1.

gifted and trained in the disciplines of “searching the scriptures,” self-examination, and prayer that would lead participants to “growth in the knowledge and love of God.”

Methodism became a small but dynamic movement in England largely because of this lay leadership. Wesley carried on an enormous correspondence with these laity, which he published along with his sermons, interpretive notes on the New Testament, and tracts on Christian issues of his day, in large part to continue the formation of these leaders. He drew heavily on Christian wisdom about growth in the Christian life that he gained from reading extensively in the monastic literature of early Christianity, such as Clement of Alexandria and Macarius the Egyptian, as well as the spiritual writers of his time, such as Richard Baxter and John Bunyan. He traveled constantly around the nation, visiting towns and villages regularly to preach and teach, thus providing the class leaders with a living language of faith and encouragement to continue the practices of spiritual growth in their small group work. These practices he distilled into a document on “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies,” first published in 1743.

Class meetings were the sustaining element of a movement that gained more public visibility through preaching. Wesley viewed his preachers as exercising an “extraordinary” call to apostolic ministry, carrying the Gospel to the highways and byways, particularly to the working classes and the poor who rarely entered the parish churches of the Church of England. Most Methodist preachers were laymen. Some were ordained priests in the Church of England. A few, in settings out of the public eye, were women. All were outside the pale of canon law.

The more Methodism grew and gained notoriety in England, the more controversial it became. Lay preaching without a license was a violation of canon law. Moreover, since all of England was divided into parishes of the national church, there was no square foot of land in which a Methodist preacher could preach that was not in

the bounds of someone's parish. Some sympathetic priests allowed the preaching to take place inside the parish sanctuary. But most preaching occurred outdoors, literally outside church structures, often on the burial ground beside the church where the preacher could stand atop a gravestone to be heard. Or Methodist preachers would go up the steps of the town cross, usually mounted on a stone platform at the market center of the town or village, and speak to whatever public gathered around. Always they were to end their sermon with an appeal to a reformed life that would include participation in a class meeting led by a layperson.

As Methodism's message of scriptural holiness spread, some laypersons of means joined the movement. They gave funds for building chapels or "preaching houses" of which they served as trustees. A new challenge thus presented itself, as Wesley sought legal means of making sure that the pulpits of Methodist chapels were occupied only by preachers advocating the Methodist theology of salvation by grace and growth toward perfection in love. He began meeting with his preachers annually in 1744 to discuss "what to teach, how to teach, and what to do," that is, interpretation of doctrines, effectiveness of methods, and adoption of new directions in ministry. He concluded these conferences by assigning the preachers to their regional circuits for preaching.

Wesley himself was an ordained priest in the Church of England, but he gave his ministry essentially to the training and disciplining of lay leadership—preachers and class leaders. Never serving a parish himself, he built on his status and freedom as a Clergy Fellow of Lincoln College at Oxford University to organize and sustain a society. Such a society was essentially a voluntary association or para-church organization with a special purpose, as Wesley stated it, "to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." But it was not itself a church and in Wesley's view had no such intention. Early Methodism was in this sense much like earlier movements that grew

into orders in the Roman Catholic Church on the European continent. The Jesuits and Dominicans, for example, originated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as ministries of traveling preachers, and preaching houses were built for their mission even in parishes of the church. Roman Catholicism eventually absorbed these special ministries as religious orders, though tensions with the priesthood and episcopal hierarchy have persisted ever since.

The Church of England did not absorb Methodism as a religious order, but accepted it as a lay society. The movement persisted as a kind of secular monasticism, led by laypersons who continued in their everyday jobs while they preached or conducted class meetings encouraging growth in a disciplined Christian life. Methodism was never very large in England, certainly less than one percent of the national population. But its methods were the cause of much controversy and discussion. Laypersons were in leadership, as preachers, teachers, and guides. Inevitably they were in constant tension with the priests and bishops of the church.

Methodism did not organize as a separate denomination in England until 1836, over forty years after Wesley's death. But the spread of Methodism with English and Irish immigrants to the English colonies in the Americas caused Wesley to reconsider his commitment to the movement's work as a strictly lay ministry. In 1784, three years after the end of the War of Independence, it became clear that the new United States would have no established church and that priests of the Church of England were not particularly welcome in many regions. Wesley appealed to Anglican bishops to ordain priests for America so that Methodist people could have the sacraments. When the bishops did not respond with Wesley's sense of urgency, he took matters into his own hands.

Finding justification for the practice of ordination by elders in the early church of Alexandria, Wesley called together other priests to join him in laying hands on, first, two lay preachers to make them priests, and then

one priest to make him bishop. He chose a fresh and less ecclesiastical translation of the New Testament Greek terms for these offices, making *presbyteros* into “elder” and *episkopos* into “superintendent” (similar to the Latin terminology of continental Pietism). These three men then traveled to the United States and, at a conference of Methodist preachers on Christmas 1784, they ordained Francis Asbury, the leading Methodist lay preacher in America, as deacon, then elder, then superintendent on successive days. Asbury subsequently began to ordain other lay preachers, so that the Methodist people would have elders who could administer the sacraments.

Within a generation, American Methodism began to emerge in forms Wesley would not have recognized. Asbury insisted on being elected “general superintendent” by the preachers, and sought their consent to assume Wesley’s powers of appointment over all the Methodist preachers in the United States. Yet he took the title of “bishop” and expected to make appointments without the advice and consent of laity. The newly ordained elders assumed powers of constituting the movement as a church and organizing its spread with settlers moving west. The elders styled themselves as “members in full connection” of the annual conferences with no lay participation in conference deliberations on “what to teach, how to teach, and what to do.” At the same time, the elders made a lifetime commitment to serve the church’s mission by itinerating under appointment of the bishop.

Against these trends toward seeming *clericalization* of the church, though, U.S. Methodism continued to describe itself as a “society” organized in “class meetings” led by “class leaders.” Other lay offices, stewards, exhorters, and local preachers, were essential to the movement’s advance. Wesley’s advocacy of an abbreviated *Book of Common Prayer* (with its priestly rubrics) for Methodist worship in America was widely ignored, except for occasions when an elder was in town to celebrate the sacraments. Instead, Methodism joined whole-heartedly in lay movements of spiritual awakening

such as revivals and camp meetings. By the 1830s, when laypersons began to emerge as national leaders of Christian voluntary associations in education and missions, Methodists were in the forefront. And by 1850, Methodism had the largest lay membership of any church in the United States.²

Conclusions from the Narrative

Several conclusions about leadership in the Methodist tradition emerge from this narrative of origins. First, leadership by that name (“class leader”) was originally understood as a very specific practice: guidance and oversight of the disciplined Christian life. The leader convened the class meeting and led it in Bible study and prayer. The leader met with the members of the meeting weekly to help them examine themselves in their own growth toward Christian perfection in love. And the leader reported to the society on the conduct and growth of the meeting.

Second, Methodism was led in both preaching and spiritual guidance by laypersons, with the striking exception of Wesley himself (and a few other priests). Wesley viewed this extraordinary, apostolic ministry as supplementary to the priestly offices of Word and sacrament authorized under canon law. Wesley’s leaders and preachers were not set apart for pastoral duties in the “congregations of faithful men” gathered in Anglican parishes, in the words of the sixteenth century Articles of Religion. They exercised a different ministry, but one that increasingly seemed to compete with parish ministry.

Third, Methodism undertook to ordain only under exigent circumstances, the independence of the United States, resulting in a “low” theology of ordination in which membership in the conference of traveling preachers was primary over ordination. Methodist polity

² See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 56; and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

privileged preaching and the quasi-monastic “order” of preachers willing to go wherever the bishop sent them. Methodist societies in local places grew accustomed to receiving Holy Communion only when an ordained “presiding elder” visited to conduct a “quarterly conference”—and that pattern of communing once a quarter has continued in many local churches to the present.

And fourth, Methodism continued to depend on lay leadership for its vitality. Bishops and full conference members (ordained elders) planned the expansion of Methodist work in preaching circuits across the growing western territories, as preachers called people together and organized societies in local places. But lay leadership then carried the work. Laypersons took leadership in education and missions. As the personal intensity of the class meeting practice gave way to the Sunday school, lay persons assumed significant roles as teachers and organizers. By the end of the nineteenth century the lay Sunday school superintendent was on a par in influence with the appointed pastor, and popular church architecture placed the auditorium in which the superintendent presided back to back with the sanctuary in which the pastor presided. Methodist laity gave major gifts for establishing colleges and universities and served on their boards. By the early twentieth century, Methodism sponsored nearly 150 colleges and 20 universities. Meanwhile, mission societies grew in scope and activity; particularly notable were the laywomen’s organizations that founded hospitals, schools, and homes across the United States and in many other nations.³

Forms of Leadership in United Methodism

Against the backdrop of these major characteristics of Methodism revealed in its narrative of leadership, issues of contemporary leadership in United Methodism come to sharper focus. The United Methodist Church was created in 1968, its polity formed out of predecessor

³ Frank, *Polity*, chapter 2.

denominations. The church's book of law, the *Book of Discipline*, did not use much explicit language of "leadership" at first. A major exception was, and continues to be, the local church office of "lay leader," which resonates with the old "class leader" term. The lay leader is charged with "fostering awareness of the role of laity" in church ministries and in their everyday-life witness and service, with advancing opportunities for laity to be trained in these ministries, and with "meeting regularly with the pastor to discuss the state of the church and the needs for ministry" (§251).⁴

Laity also continued to govern the local church more broadly, including its programs for ministry and mission and its property. A lay board of trustees is charged with stewardship of the physical property and permanent assets of a local church, holding them "in trust" for the denomination. A lay finance committee is charged with creating a budget and raising the funds to support it. While the denomination claims ultimate title to local church assets under the trust clause, the *Discipline* clearly places everyday responsibility for them under laypersons.

The new church also charged laypersons with key positions in governance of denominational bodies. The governing body of the church, the General Conference, was mandated in the 1968 Constitution to be half laity and half clergy. The annual (regional) conferences likewise were placed under an equalization rule so that there are equal numbers of lay and clergy members (including all the retired clergy, most of whom do not attend). The denominational boards for mission, education, discipleship, and other ministries were structured so that their governing boards would be comprised of two-thirds laity and one-third clergy.

The new church retained the ordained offices of ministry from earlier traditions. In keeping with the Anglican heritage, candidates were ordained deacon for a time of "probationary membership" in an annual

⁴ All disciplinary references are to the *Book of Discipline 2004* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004).

conference during which they were “on trial” as a testing of their gifts and graces for ministry. Deacons could serve as pastors but could not administer the sacraments. They were members of the conference but could not vote on constitutional matters, on delegates to General Conference, or on the “conference relations” of ordained clergy. Approved candidates were then ordained elder in conjunction with being elected by their peers as “members in full connection” of the conference. As elders, they could administer the sacraments and, as full members, were eligible to vote on all matters and to serve as delegates.

These definitions of office and authority were clearest in the early years of the new denomination. Soon the waters were muddied. United Methodism has over 35,000 local churches spread over 95% of the counties in the U.S. About 70% of these churches could be considered small membership congregations. The UMC was not willing to see these places go without pastoral leadership.

Across the generations, the Methodist heritage of lay preaching had continued as local ministries in rural and small town areas. Bishops commonly assigned lay preachers to conduct worship in local places, or to serve as “supply” pastors, theoretically until a full-time pastor could be found. In 1976 the UMC standardized this local preaching under the title of “local pastor,” a category divided in turn into full-time, part-time, and student service. The church authorized local pastors to administer the sacraments in the local churches to which they were appointed by the bishop, and assigned local pastors the same duties of a pastor outlined for elders. Local pastors, in short, are laypersons that exercise all the functions of an elder without holding the ordained office.

In the thirty years since, the number of local pastors has mushroomed to over 7000. A number of explanations for this have been advanced, including a smaller number of persons entering the ordained ministry of elder, which in United Methodism entails a willingness to itinerate under appointment of the bishop, and the costs to local churches of supporting an ordained pastor at the salary

and pension level expected by the annual conference. The consequence, though, has been the widespread acceptance of pastoral and sacramental ministry by laypersons without benefit of ordination, and a growing number of fully functioning pastors who do not itinerate as elders must.

At the same time the UMC was expanding its “local pastor” ministries, the church was advancing an ever-higher standard for ministry as an ordained elder. Continuing the practice established in 1956, the UMC made completion of a Master of Divinity degree (itself contingent on holding a bachelor’s degree) a prerequisite for ordination as an elder. New seminaries were established in the 1950s and ‘60s to accommodate what was expected to be a large flow of candidates for ordination.

Thirteen freestanding seminaries and university schools of theology related to the UMC currently serve this student population, yet only half of UMC seminarians attend these schools. The other half attends dozens of schools of other denominations (or non-denominational schools) as approved for ordination studies by a United Methodist body, the University Senate. Moreover, the many denominational colleges are no longer the primary feeder schools for seminaries. Most theology students come from public or non-United Methodist private colleges and universities. Thus a denominational ethos to support preparation for service as an ordained elder is diffuse at best.

Lacking this ethos for service as an elder (in a conference environment that in some regions includes over half of pastoral appointments being served by local pastors and with sacramental authority residing in those pastoral appointments more than in the ordained office itself), the office and status of elder has become deeply ambiguous. Elders have fought fiercely to retain their rights as members in full connection of annual conferences by ensuring that local pastors cannot elect clergy delegates, vote on constitutional matters, or engage in the process of evaluating candidates for conference

membership. To date, elders have successfully held on to those conference rights.

Meanwhile, though, General Conference has continued to increase lay authority in clergy matters. Lay persons now serve not only on local church Pastor-Parish Relations Committees that consult with bishops about pastoral appointments and approve candidates for ordained ministry from that local church. Lay persons are now also members of district committees that review and approve ministerial candidates as well as conference boards that bring final recommendations on ordination and clergy conference membership for approval by an annual conference. In fact, up to one-third of a conference Board of Ordained Ministry may be laypersons, a striking change from an understanding of ordained elders as comprising a self-sustaining covenant community or order. That is, up to one-third of the body that approves entry into elder's orders and the concomitant covenant to itinerate under appointment from the bishop does not share the obligations and commitments of that covenant.

Yet another complexity has been added to this already ambiguous and confusing system. In 1996 the General Conference decided to create a permanent diaconate. Ordination as deacon was no longer to be a category for probationary conference membership preliminary to ordination as elder and full conference membership. Now deacons held a permanent office of Word and Service, embodying the relationship between service in worship and service in the world, leading congregations and institutions in ministries in their communities. This new office of deacon required completion of a master's degree either in a field appropriate to a particular deacon's ministry (with supplemental theology courses) or an M.Div. The office also brought with it full annual conference membership, with an appointment that must be approved by the bishop but is arranged by the deacon. The clergy category in annual conferences now includes, then, not only elders, but also full and part-time local pastors, and now deacons.

Over 1200 persons have been ordained as permanent deacons in the UMC. The vast majority serves as education or program directors in local churches. This has given them a status and salary and benefits program that duly recognizes their ministries. It has also added another category of persons in full-time ministry, with rights of full clergy membership in an annual conference, who do not share the office of elder or the covenant commitment to itinerate under appointment by a bishop.⁵

Finally, over the forty years of the UMC, and reaching back across the twentieth century, the office of bishop has also continued to evolve. The central status of this office was apparent in earlier denominational names of American Methodism—Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, and others. These traditions defined themselves by the episcopal form of authority in ecclesiology. Bishops held exclusive authority to appoint the pastors to their places. They nominated or appointed clergy and laity to governing boards of denominational agencies. They approved the reading list and requirements for the “course of study” through which pastors prepared for ordination (a theological degree not yet being a requirement). In some branches, bishops were the arbiters of whether General Conference actions were in accord with the church’s Constitution. They were elected by the General Conference as bishops of the whole church and traveled throughout the “connection” of Methodists, preaching and presiding in annual conferences and overseeing boards for education and mission.

In 1939, the northern and southern branches of the Methodist Episcopal Church merged, joining a third partner, the Methodist Protestants, in forming the new Methodist Church. The word “Episcopal” was dropped from the name, in part to accommodate the Methodist Protestants whose movement had originated in the 1820s as a protest against episcopal power in Methodism. One racial jurisdiction (later abolished) and five regional

⁵ For fuller discussion of forms of ministry, see Frank, *Polity*, chapter 7.

jurisdictions (still in place) were created for the U.S., in which bishops were to be elected and within which they would serve. These changes of name and scope also signaled a dramatic change in the authority granted bishops in Methodism polity.

In the intervening years, much of the authority and work of oversight (*episkopē*) in the church has been transferred from bishops (*episkopoi*) to conciliar bodies comprised of laity and clergy. Nomination of governing board members now belongs to a nominating committee. Educational requirements for ministry are now proposed and managed by a general agency and its governing board. General Conference actions are now reviewed constitutionally by a Judicial Council of clergy and laity. Even in appointment making, the bishops must now consult with lay members of a local church, as well as the pastor involved, before pastoral changes are made. The bishop has become less a figure embodying authority of office, and more of a super-pastor and administrator of regional conference initiatives.

Yet the expectations of bishops are as high as ever. Their presence in every major event or meeting is a significant stamp of legitimacy, as they continue to symbolize the larger United Methodist connection. Many laity and clergy look to the bishops for “leadership,” though what exactly they hope for or expect remains ambiguous.⁶

From Structural to Functional Polity

In the past ten years, United Methodism has continued to make dramatic changes in its forms of authority for organizing ministry and mission. These changes mark a shift from a structuralism of established governing boards overseeing specialized work units, to a functionalism of objectives and tasks in pursuit of ever-changing goals. The changes also mark a shift from authority of office to authority of “leadership,” which the

⁶ See Russell E. Richey and Thomas Edward Frank, *The Episcopacy in Methodist Tradition: Perspectives and Proposals* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

church increasingly defines as measurably successful performance.

The United Methodist polity of 1968 set out a tightly integrated structure for ministry and mission, building on long-standing practices of using common language and offices for every local society. A remarkable feature of this structure was the mirroring of units for specialized areas of ministry in every sphere of the church. For example, the local church was expected to have an evangelism committee with a chairperson who was a member of the Administrative Council (governing board) of the church. Training for that committee, as well as coordination with other churches, was available through a district committee on evangelism (relating to about 70 local churches). The annual conference (roughly 300-1000 local churches) also had a committee on evangelism that provided resources and training events for districts and local churches. And an office of evangelism at one of the general board locations in Nashville provided professional staff and resources for churches across the nation.

Clergy and laity served as members of these committees in every sphere. In the local church, the structure meant that the Administrative Council had to come up with laypersons to serve on and chair a whole range of committees for ministry and mission. This task fell to a Nominating Committee, whose nominations were then forwarded to a meeting of the Administrative Council for election.

In 1996, the General Conference did away with virtually this entire structure. Local churches were now free to organize in their own way, the only mandated bodies being those that would be required for any organization—a board of trustees to oversee property, a finance committee to manage money, and a personnel committee to handle staff matters. Beyond that, local churches were now charged by the polity with developing strategic plans and visions of ministry, with teams, task forces, and working groups to be created as needed to accomplish particular tasks.

In 2000, the General Conference changed the name of the local church Nominating Committee to the Committee on Lay Leadership. The adoption of leadership language signaled the shift from structure to function. Local churches were now to look for persons who could help them achieve their goals and objectives. What was perceived by its critics as the static bureaucracy of specialized units for ministry gave way to the dynamic resilience of working groups that could pursue initiatives, achieve them, disband, and its members join other working groups on other goals. All the initial capital letters of local church and annual conference units were deleted and all church bodies (except constitutional bodies of the denomination as a whole) were now in lower case in the *Book of Discipline* (as in the first sentence of this paragraph). They were not structures or entities with names any more. Their work was a function of the ministry and mission to be accomplished.

Similar reforms were instituted in annual conference polity. Only the boards overseeing ordained ministry, church property, and conference funds were to be continued in structural forms. The other ministries of the conference were now to be organized; however, a conference was needed in order to achieve its goals. Offices of oversight in a conference, including the bishop, were increasingly reconceived as positions of leadership in articulating a vision, devising goals and objectives to reach that vision, and marshalling the resources to realize those goals.

The general agencies of the church had to shift accordingly. They now became resource centers for helping annual conferences and local churches accomplish their strategic plans. They were now in a competitive position. If they provided what conferences and churches wanted and needed, they did a thriving business. If they were not in touch with those realities, they risked seeing their constituencies turn to independent congregations, consultants, mission associations, and other para-church organizations for resources.

The Emergence of “Servant Leadership”

The changing ethos of United Methodist polity was symbolized and exemplified by the most significant innovation of 1996. Entire paragraphs of the *Discipline* offering a theological and ecclesiological framework for the ministry of the laity and the ministry of the ordained were either deleted or totally revised. In their place were foundational paragraphs describing the call of all Christians, lay and ordained, to “servant leadership.”

The previous ecclesiology of ministry had been crafted in the ecumenical dialogues and statements of the 1960s and ‘70s, in which United Methodism, itself a church union, had been an active partner. In keeping with the declarations of Vatican II, with the *Consensus* statement of the Consultation on Church Union, and other documents, the *Discipline* declared that all the *laos*, the people of God in the world, are called to ministry by virtue of their baptism. The task of the church was to help all its members realize this calling, name their gifts, and provide training and opportunity for all persons to be active in the particular ministry to which God calls them.

Ordained ministers were understood to be set apart as representative ministers within the people of God, sharing the vocation of the whole *laos* but serving a specialized vocation within the Christian community. Through Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service, the ordained represented the calling of the *laos* to be a sacrament of God’s presence through their ministries in the world. Ordained ministers exemplified and reflected back to the laity the vocation of all the baptized to serve in the name of Christ.

Subsequent to 1996, the *Discipline* retains the basic theology of the ministry of the laity. But the theology of ordination has largely been replaced by an appeal to servant leadership. Lay persons, deacons, elders, bishops, all are called to servant leadership, a charge that is repeated at many points in the *Discipline*. Strikingly, however, no paragraph interprets what “servant

leadership” is, what are its marks or features, or how it relates to the Methodist or broader Christian heritage.

This leaves the term with two implicit meanings. The first is that all persons, but especially persons who assume responsibilities within the church and its working entities, are to understand themselves as “servants.” Brief reference is made to Jesus Christ as servant in this regard. But how that is understood in relation to a large contemporary denomination is not described. Certainly “servant” language communicates a desire to invert the pyramid of hierarchy, diminish the unwonted exercise of power, and eliminate any form of intimidation or coercion. The term communicates a desire for open communication and for making sure that all participants have a voice and role in activities, with the “leader” serving the mission shared by all stakeholders.

What is less clear, however, is what it means for a “servant” to serve a large institution. Is a “servant leader” beholden to whatever goals and objectives the church devises? Does “servant leadership” mean deference to a majority constituency who advocates certain forms of ministry and mission? The language is especially problematic for women in offices of ministry and episcopacy, since men often expect them to be deferential anyway.⁷

The second meaning of the phrase is that authority apparently now derives not from office but from performance. That is, an ordained minister or bishop may hold an office, but what matters is their “leadership” as a “servant” of the goals of the institution. The overwhelming bulk of these goals in recent years have been initiatives in response to the statistics showing that there are fewer total United Methodists in the United States now than there were when the denomination was created. The primary goal, therefore, is growth in

⁷ See the critical essay by Shirley J. Roels, “Organization Man, Organization Woman: Faith, Gender, and Management” in Roels, with Barbara Hilbert Andolsen and Paul F. Camenisch, *Organization Man, Organization Woman: Calling, Leadership, and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 17-79.

numbers of members, based on measurable data from each local church.

Today pastors and bishops are considered “leaders” primarily if they produce membership growth. This institutional mandate is expressed in the slogan also adopted by General Conference in 1996, that the “mission” of the church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” Even though the *raison d’être* of the Methodist movement from the beginning has been the formation in holiness of persons who sought to grow in the knowledge and love of God, United Methodism jettisoned its historic language in favor of the jargon of 1980s church-growth evangelicalism. The metaphor of “making” clearly shows that the church seeks measurable products of this organizational mission, and that “leadership” is ascribed to those whose performance and productivity are notable.

Similarities with the ethos of business corporations in Western commercial societies are unmistakable here. The church speaks less consistently in its historic language of office. It has overlaid it with the corporate lingo of “servant leadership”, widely popular among business “leaders”, and its related expectations of performance and production. This is hardly the first time Methodism has mirrored the business world. One could argue that the specialized national boards for ministry and mission established in the 1880s and ‘90s reflected the rise of centralized corporations in the Gilded Age. But in the early twenty-first century Methodism has made an even more dramatic turn from long traditions of ecclesiology toward a more corporative image of how organizations succeed.⁸

⁸ On the shift from authority of office to the authority of performance in ministry, see Stephen Pattison, “Management and Pastoral Theology” in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, eds., *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 283-93; and Pattison, “Some Objections to Aims and Objectives” in G.R. Evans and Martyn Percy, *Managing the Church? Order and Organization in a Secular Age* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 128-52.

A Narrative of the Corporate Model of Leadership

In the 1964 *Book of Discipline* of The Methodist Church, the last before that denomination united with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, a structure for encouraging “Christian vocations” was established in every sphere of denominational life. The local church was to have a “secretary of Christian vocations” and, if possible, a committee as well “to see that the philosophy of Christian vocation and the opportunities and challenge of church vocations are regularly presented to the youth and adults of the church ... and to give encouragement and guidance to candidates for the pastoral ministry and other church-related vocations” (§145.9). A district secretary of Christian vocations communicated with each local church, partly as liaison with the annual conference Commission on Christian Vocations. The Commission’s charge was also to develop “a program for presenting to youth and adults the opportunities and claims of the pastoral ministry,” as well as teaching “the potential sacredness of all useful work” as a Christian in the world (§676). These forms of “promotion and guidance” were, in turn, supported by an Interboard Committee on Christian Vocation charged “to develop plans and correlate efforts for the more effective enlistment and guidance of persons in vocations in the church and its agencies” in the national sphere (§1415). The executive secretary for this Committee was a staff person in the Division of the Local Church within the Board of Education of the national church.

This entire structure disappeared in 1968 and was never replaced in The United Methodist Church. Perhaps it had seen its day. But the church has not been as articulate or structured since then in speaking about and encouraging Christian vocation.

Today’s *Discipline* has only scattered paragraphs about the ministry of the laity in their everyday life worlds of work, school, leisure, and home. The *Discipline* has little to say about the relationship of lay vocations and ordained vocations. All are called to “servant leadership,” but what that term means specifically as the work of

Christian vocation is not explained. The *Discipline* contains little about identifying persons who might be called to ordained ministry and supporting them in their preparation.

The denomination regularly sponsors special “Exploration” events for young people, appealing to them to consider the ministry to which they are called and, specifically, to consider whether they are called to ordained ministry. Seminaries also hold such exploratory events. The denomination raises a general fund to which each local church pays an apportioned amount, much of which is distributed to the United Methodist-related seminaries in support of their work, and some of which is held by the annual conference to provide scholarships for theological education and to support continuing education events. But this fund covers only a small percentage of the budgets of the schools and the costs for the students.

Certainly it is striking that a major funding source for recruiting and supporting theological students today, and for underwriting initiatives in the schools of theology, is the endowment arm of a large American pharmaceutical corporation. The endowment is not itself a church, but it has taken on a leadership-training role that once belonged to denominations like United Methodism. A recent event for grant recipients of this endowment, dozens of seminaries across the U.S., included worship services, sermonical inspirational talks by endowment officers, and lectures by Ronald A. Heifetz, a business writer and consultant whose rabbinic style is also highly regarded in the churches.⁹

The institutional crossover is astonishing. Bill Hybels, founding pastor of an independent congregation idolized by United Methodists for its growth among “seekers” (Willow Creek Community Church) co-authors a book about biblical principles of leadership with Ken Blanchard, a leading motivational business writer. Peter

⁹ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

Senge, whose model of leader as steward and teacher for the “learning organization” has had great appeal in the participatory communities of Protestant churches, devotes a section of his major book to “*metanoia*”—the transformation of practice and perception necessary for organizational progress. And United Methodism replaces its structure of connectional ministries with a performance-based functionalism deeply influenced by business theories like Total Quality Management.¹⁰

Toward an Ecclesiology of Leadership

If United Methodism is going to continue to advocate “leadership,” the denomination must find ways of dynamically integrating the wisdom of its traditions with contemporary circumstances. Methodism has always been pragmatic in approach, as Wesley’s exigent ordinations and the widespread appointment of lay pastors attests. But when this pragmatism degenerates into a functionalism of performance and productivity, the character of the movement is lost.

The tradition has little excuse for being so inarticulate about the formation of lay and clergy leadership, not only in the church, but also in everyday life. The pandering of the denomination to mega-churches, many of which are notable only for having large numbers, represents a loss of wisdom from generations of Methodist practices of personal and social holiness. After all, no amount of church growth will make the least bit of difference if human communities are not transformed toward the well-being and justice that is God’s intention for the world. United Methodism must reclaim its voice as a movement of the church universal that draws on the riches of

¹⁰ See Kenneth H. Blanchard, Bill Hybels, and Phil Hodges, *Leadership by the Book: Tools to Transform Your Workspace* (New York: William Morrow, 1999); Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990), 13; Ezra Earl Jones, *Quest for Quality in the Church: A New Paradigm* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1993). As General Secretary of the General Board of Discipleship of the UMC, Jones led workshops on TQM (Total Quality Management) in over thirty annual conferences.

ecclesial traditions to form more faithful witnesses of God's Reign in the world.

United Methodist adoption of "servant leadership" jargon could be viewed as a contemporary expression of its continuing identity as a popular lay movement. But the church must reframe in its own terms the buzz about "leadership," drawing on the rich heritage of office that has long provided a sound structure for Christian community. Without the grounding of a logic embracing the vocation of all the baptized and the specialized vocation of those set apart from within the baptized to represent and exemplify their ministries before God, little remains but the logic of the market. The "leader" with the biggest congregation wins. But so what, if the world is not transformed toward God's Reign.

If leadership is truly an ecclesial practice, then its form and content must express the images, culture, languages, and vision that are the heritage of centuries of Christian communities.¹¹ Methodism has been among the more dynamic of those communities for nearly 300 years. United Methodism can draw upon those riches to attract, call, and form new leaders for the twenty-first century.

¹¹ For further discussion see Thomas Edward Frank, "The Discourse of Leadership and the Practice of Administration," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1:1 (Spring 2002), 7-30, and "Leadership and Administration: An Emerging Field in Practical Theology" *International Journal of Practical Theology* (forthcoming).