**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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**UNITED METHODISM’S CORPORATE CULTURE AND THE INABILITY TO CHANGE (PART 1)**

McDonald’s announced a few days ago that Don Thompson, its CEO, is being replaced. The problem? McDonald profits are lackluster. Needed? Someone to turn things around. New branding, new products, new advertising, new tactics--who knows what? In the business world leaders are called to produce or they are replaced. At the news that the CEO was being replaced McDonald’s stock jumped 3%.

The Church should not be run like a business. We are a different kind of organism. All the same the question needs to be asked: since the United Methodist Church has shown lackluster results not for several years but for nearly 50 years, is it not time for serious leadership evaluation? Why is it the Church continues with the same kind of leaders following the same kind of ideology using the same kind of strategy when it is obvious the church is in serious decline? The more our mainline churches talk about relevance the more irrelevant we become. The more the churches talk about change the more things remain the same. We endure top-down pronouncements about diversity and justice when there is not much diversity or justice. If the church elected its leaders by political parties the same way the government does, somebody surely, sooner or later, would run on the platform of new ideas, new directions, cleaning house, and improving the bottom line.

One area that needs attention is the church bureaucracy. Let it be clear that church bureaucracy is only one of United Methodism’s problems. The evangelical renewal groups always and from the beginning have identified United Methodism’s major problem as doctrinal: the failure to lift up Jesus Christ as Lord; the failure to uphold and defend the historic faith of the church as summarized by United Methodism’s doctrinal standards; and the failure to preach salvation by faith through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. There will never be renewal without doctrinal and Biblical renewal.

Be that as it may, church bureaucracy is an attending problem. Four years ago a Call to Action plan proposed mild reform: consolidate nine of the 13 general agencies into a Center for Connectional Mission and Ministry under a fifteen member board. The plan was the result of an independent study which indicated, among other things, that the agencies were out of touch with the local churches and there was duplication of efforts. This proposal to General Conference was opposed by many agency staff, by caucuses (less representation on boards) and by progressives generally. The plan failed spectacularly at General Conference. It was nearly rescued by some brave souls working around-the-clock to negotiate a workable plan before the end of the conference only to be ruled unconstitutional by the Judicial Council. Progressives and institutional types cheered with the Judicial Council ruling.

So we continue as before. Consider: paragraphs 701 to 2499 of the *Book of Discipline*, or nearly 2/3 of the entire *Book of Discipline,* is given to the church’s general church level bureaucracy (Administrative Order). There are probably 1,600 total paragraphs in this section. This is 16 times more than the Constitution; this is 16 times more than everything devoted to Doctrine, Doctrinal Statements, General Rules, the Ministry of all Christians, and the Social Principles; this is 16 times more than the paragraphs that cover the Local Church; this is 16 times more than the Ordained Ministry; this is 16 times more than the Superintendency; this is 8 times more than the Conferences; this is 16 times more than Church Property.

What do we get for these 1,600 paragraphs? We find that general agencies refer to councils, boards, commissions, committees, divisions, units and subunits, constituted within the various levels of church organization such as general, jurisdictional, central, annual, district and charge conferences. We find that we need these agencies because they are important to our common vision, mission and ministry. (?) (Isn’t the local church where the vision, ministry and mission takes place?) We find inordinate amounts of space given to how the institution is to be structured: how persons are elected to boards, how agencies relate to each other, what are the lines of authority, how funds can and cannot be raised, and of course, how various quota systems, official or unofficial, are to be applied.

For those not up on such things, the quota system means that board membership on agencies is determined not primarily by gifts and commitment to the body, but by such things as age, gender, and race. Qualifications for church agencies take into consideration ethnicity (Asian American, African American, Hispanic Americans, Naïve Americans, Pacific Islanders), persons with disabilities, and size of church. The jurisdiction’s membership on each agency should be at least 30% racial and ethnic with one-third clergy, one-third laymen, and one-third laywomen. When I served on the Jurisdiction Nominating Committee on one occasion the conference I was representing couldn’t pick the most capable person out of the pool of qualified persons for an agency. We were told what agency we might nominate for and instructed that the person to be selected needed to be a Hispanic young adult laywoman.

With this kind of corporate culture and mind-set it is no wonder that the General Conference spends inordinate amounts of time arguing over the make-up of various agency memberships. I recall one discussion at the last General Conference which took about half an hour debating whether or not and how many “youth” should serve on an agency and where they would come from. In the legislative group I observed at the 2012 General Conference there was a half-hour discussion on how old or young “young adults” needed to be (not solved because there are several definitions). All this at something like $1,800 a minute for the cost of the conference.

When local churches pay “apportionments” (church tax, or, “fair share” in order to keep the general church in business), much of it goes to support these agencies: salaries of staff, expenses for meetings (originally the Board of Global Ministries in 1972 had a board of 160 members flown to and housed in New York, one of the most expensive cities in America), development of “programs,” and, in some cases, financial grants given to groups that qualify. Supposedly the general agencies exist to enable, encourage, and resource the local church. Most local churches have not the slightest idea how this works in real life.

The work of the agencies is coordinated by a super-agency called The Connectional Table (CT). The problem is that the Connectional Table is made up of the very kind of people it is supposed to be evaluating: institutional types with vested interest charged with evaluating the very agencies they represent. In the business world ineffective and irrelevant and unnecessary agencies would be eliminated or reconstituted. This never happens in the church. The Connectional Table reflects the corporate culture of the institutional insiders. It is dominated by bishops and agency heads. Africa, with 40% of UM membership, is represented by 6% of the table membership. The Western Jurisdiction, the most liberal of all jurisdictions with 3% of UM membership, seats 17% of the board. The Executive Committee has nine Americans, one European and no Africans.

The Connectional Table has a big task. But for all the big issues facing the church hours have been spent at the last several meetings of the Connectional Table responding to homosexual advocacy groups who by disruption took over the agenda. Hearings have been conducted, arguments made, stories told that cover ground covered many times before. Meanwhile the church languishes. If hearings are to be conducted on a general church level let them be directed toward whether or not there is a theological basis for United Methodist unity.

Can the United Methodist Church begin to address the matter of how its corporate culture might be changed? More on this later.