

GENERAL BOARD OF GLOBAL MINISTRIES

GENERAL SECRETARY'S REPORT

Stamford, Connecticut

April 12, 2011

God's Grace and Church Growth

Good morning in the name of Jesus Christ.

Let me thank Rev. Bishman, Patrick Friday, Jorge Lockward, our missionaries in many lands, and all of those who took part in the worship and presentation on our Mission Initiatives. While it was not exactly planned, this look at evangelism and church planting worldwide is a wonderful lead-in to my report to you today.

My topic is "God's Grace and Church Growth," admittedly a broad topic, and I hope to focus it as I explore the implications of "growth" and "grace" for our work at the General Board of Global Ministries. As I begin, I want to acknowledge in thanksgiving some recent occasions when I have sensed the power of God's grace in our life as a mission agency. From God's "fullness we have all received, grace upon grace," the Fourth Gospel tells us in a passage that was a favorite of John Wesley. In our Wesleyan reality, God's grace, God's favor, is dynamic, active, unfolding, continuing, and constant, revealed in great epiphanies and small moments. The New International Version translates John 1:16 nicely as, "From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another."

But first, let me acknowledge the welcome we have received in Stamford for our meetings across many years. This is our last board meeting in this place. We have convened in this hotel for a dozen years and in other Stamford facilities prior to that. We appreciate the hospitality extended to us by Stamford, and will press on in other surroundings, next fall in New York. In a little less than a year we will be in Plano, Texas, meeting at Christ United Methodist Church. Yesterday we welcomed two people from that congregation and I want to again recognize Mary Harris, director of welcoming ministry, and, also, Tina Wilson. Thank you so much for coming to "get a sense of us," and thank you for extending your facilities for our meetings. It will be very good to hold our sessions in a church, where signs of worship and service are reminders of grace. Now let me mention some special recent blessings.

I. Signs of Grace

A. *"Take a Breath"*

We are now two years into our new organizational plan and I have been your general secretary for a little more than a year. One goal of the restructures and a personal priority of mine is to change the culture of the General Board of Global Ministries,

moving it in a direction that is more effective and efficient. We are making progress through the grace of God; we have not perfectly achieved our objectives, but, to borrow from the theme of the just-completed Russia Initiative Consultation, we are on the road with a map!

At board headquarters, a new staff opportunity is deeply spiritual. This is our weekly "Take a Breath" prayer services held on Wednesdays near midday. The sense of reverence for God and respect for one another is strongly present as we sing and pray--as we take a deep spiritual breath together. We are having large attendance and the level of trust in openly sharing personal joys and sorrows is impressive. By grace, we are refreshed, blessed, and equipped for our tasks, prepared for the joys and the frustrations that come with work for any organization, even, and maybe especially, a church agency.

We also have a new approach to staff development and recognition. In early January we held the first Professional Development Day for support staff. Our Global Ministries Leadership Academy is providing professional development to 24 selected candidates. The aim is leadership for the whole church as well as the board. We are holding staff recognition events three times a year. Let me be honest in saying that we have not worked out all the challenges involved in building a cohesive staff team. We have programmatic and administrative hurdles facing us. We are taking prayerful breaths, asking God's grace and guidance in the task of program focus and refinement. I invite you as directors to join us at 11:45 a.m. Eastern Time each Wednesday, wherever you are, to take a deep breath and pray for our lives in mission together.

B. Guiding Principles on Ministry with the Poor

In January, a set of United Methodist "Guiding Principles and Foundations on Ministry with the Poor" were published, following many months of dialogue and work within an interagency task force. You have received a copy in your box, together with the first in a series of Bible study and worship resources on ministry with the poor. Each of the 13 general agencies was actively engaged in this project, including several at the highest executive level. The Holy Spirit led this productive process--I am sure of that after one year of interagency relations! Through grace, Wesley's concern for the poor came alive in sessions where we probed what it means for the church to be in ministry "with" rather than merely providing "to" or "for" the poor. Out of this effort came our "WITH* campaign," related to the new ministry with the poor website, about which you will hear just before the break.

C. Japan Crisis

An awareness of grace emerged in the aftermath of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. The compassion of Jesus Christ arose in the rubble, alive in the response of the small, Christian community of that stricken island nation. We have seen from afar and felt in our hearts the power of God's grace as that band of believers, less than one percent of the population, ministers to any persons in need. They have laid aside denominational labels, building--with virtually no past experience--an ecumenical relief coalition.

UMCOR, our amazing relief agency, responded with contacts, emergency grants, and an appeal to United Methodists to give generously to increase our capacity to help. Since Japan asked outside agencies not to send in relief teams, our missionaries and mission partners became our presence, and we will be there for a long time to come.

I cannot say enough in appreciation of our missionaries and a group of long-time, full-time Mission Volunteers in the wake of the earthquake. We have nine missionaries and six Individual Volunteers assigned there. Their ministries continue to be unceasing. I have been personally in touch with each of them and have felt the strength of grace in their lives. Our personnel have shown particular concern for migrants and minorities, many of whom have lost so much and face uncertain futures.

Our agency's response to the Japan crisis illustrates Global Ministries at its best. All of our parts were in synergy: missionaries and mission volunteers; UMCOR as the channel of giving; long-time and newer ecumenical partners, and institutions related to United Methodist Women. Together we played all the instruments of Global Ministries.

God is in Japan with our brothers and sisters in faith. In grace, they labor in love for the welfare of all. Can we bow our heads in silent prayer for all of those who have lost loved ones or their homes and jobs, or been exposed to radiation in Japan? Can we give thanks for Japan's churches and our missionaries and volunteers there? Pray for our staff members who continue in diligent service in response to the needs caused by the disaster. Pray also for new ways to protect the creation that God has entrusted to us.

D. Women in Mission

I want to affirm United Methodist Women organized as a blessing--a grace--from God. I do this with greatest enthusiasm in the context of the historical proposal for Global Ministries and what is now Women's Division to become structurally separated and missionally connected. I thank God for the mission leadership of United Methodist Women and its predecessors across so many generations. I want to strongly affirm the continuing partnership between Global Ministries and United Methodist Women as we join in God's mission. United Methodist Women will continue to be a powerful force in United Methodist mission.

"Missionally connected" to me means vigorous joint-mission planning, including cross-functional teams, some of which are already in place, and collaboration in achieving the overall mission goals of our denomination. It means the joint planning of mission education resources, collaborating in planning and implementing Schools of Christian Mission, and joint involvement in the Prayer Calendar as an expression of the mission of the whole church. It means United Methodist Women providing a United Methodist presence at the Church Center for the United Nations, and keeping Global Ministries' staff informed on issues and opportunities involving the UN and nongovernmental organizations.

The General Board of Global Ministries will continue to be THE mission agency of our denomination. We will have a strong partner in United Methodist Women.

II. United Methodist Church Growth

A. Grace and Numbers

The 2012 United Methodist General Conference is one year and five weeks away. A great deal of preparation is behind us and much is before us. We are engaged in some of that work here as we consider legislation and resolutions for submission. The Council of Bishops, the Connectional Table, the general secretaries as a group, and dozens of caucuses, networks, and interest groups are in strategy sessions pointing toward Tampa. Reports of many study panels, some say too many, are ready or almost finished. In a matter of a few weeks, the annual conferences will begin the process of electing lay and clergy delegates, who will consider a myriad of issues facing The United Methodist Church in the early 21st century.

Among these issues, one that recurs with great frequency centers on membership trends; that is, church growth, or the lack of it in some places.

Evangelization and the expansion of the community of faith are of great importance to the General Board of Global Ministries as a mission organization. The Great Commission is quite clear: "Go...preach...make disciples...all nations..." We, as United Methodists, understand this mandate to include witness to Jesus Christ in word, attitude, ethical treatment of others, and service to all in need. The Great Commission requires such witness and it expects an increase in the community of disciples.

Our capacity to go...preach, make disciples, and serve depends on God's grace in Jesus Christ, on God's blessings, and on our apprehension and response to the gift of grace. The welfare of the church is always related to God's grace and our witness to and application of it. This I affirm with great certainty. I stress this, because some of the observations and questions I am about to offer might seem surprising if taken out of the context of an absolute dependence on God's grace.

On the matter of church growth, the common refrain is that United Methodist membership in the United States and Europe is declining, while it is growing in Africa and the Philippines. Indeed, the latest statistics from General Council on Finance and Administration, representing the year 2009, indicate that while US members dropped to a total of 7.8 million that year, an increase outside the US of 900,000 over a five-year period brought the global total to more than 12 million members.

I rejoice at the central conference increases, and I worry about US and European declines. I also worry about the nostalgia that can cluster around memories of an American Methodist "heyday" in the 1950s, a description I recently saw, when membership in this country was almost as high as the total figure today. The term "heyday" does not speak to my German ear, but I understand from the dictionary that it means "period of greatest vigor," or the "best time." The description of the US church of the 1950s as the Methodist "heyday" sets me to wondering: By what standard is a decade of highest membership in a particular country the "best time" for the church, especially when the culture and the church itself of that decade was racially segregated and women were just being allowed to step into the pulpit? Maybe the time of greatest vigor happened in the early years of the small Wesleyan movement in England? Or in the young United States when women and blacks were allowed in Methodism a

standing available nowhere else? Or, maybe the loudest hurrah--the basis of the term "heyday"--for United Methodism is yet to come!

B. The Larger Picture

This morning I want to step back from the inside/outside US church figures to focus on other indicators of how we are doing as a missional church in the world at large and within the Christian family. Such information should say at least as much to us as a mission board as numerical comparisons of our own strength year to year, or from one geographical location to another.

Let me set a context. A hundred years ago delegates at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh regretted that only one-third of the world's people were Christian. At the centennial conference last July, a speaker noted that today we rejoice that one-third of the world's people follow Christ.

While the aggregate has grown, the percentage of the world's population that is Christian has not increased over the last one hundred years and is not growing today, according to those who monitor such things (2009 *Atlas of Global Christianity*, published by Edinburgh University Press). What has happened is a significant shift in Christian demographics, including both geographic concentrations and membership in particular denominational families. We already know this.

According to the World Methodist Council, there are 74 million Methodists or members of Wesleyan churches in the world today, but they are not in the same places as a century ago. The demographic center of Christianity has shifted from north and west to east and south. A variety of sources have tracked this movement, locating the current center of Christian gravity in central Africa, far from the origins in the Middle East and the once-dominant centers of the North. [Map]

The center has shifted and so has the composition. Growth today is most prominent among Roman Catholics and Pentecostals, the latter having arisen little more than a century ago. We United Methodists are among the mainline Protestant denominations declining in relative proportion to the total. But what, we may ask, about the recent statistics on growth in the Philippines and Africa? Professor Dana Robert of Boston University School of Theology has anticipated our questions, and along with David W. Scott, a Ph.D. candidate, looked into the matter of how United Methodists are doing growth-wise in a range of countries for which comparable statistics are available. Their paper was sent to me for comment and I have permission to use some of the contents here. In addition, I have invited the authors to address our next board meeting in New York. The paper will be published shortly in the online journal, *The Methodist Review* from Candler School of Theology at Emory University. It represents a research agenda more than a complete study, but it is nonetheless instructive for our purposes.

The picture for United Methodist worldwide growth is not as happy as we might wish, according to preliminary research. Robert and Scott looked comparatively at United Methodist membership growth in relation to what they call historically related "sister" denominations, including Anglican, Nazarene, historic African-American denominations,

and, in some cases, indigenous Methodist bodies. They looked at 25 countries, including the United States. And here is what they found:

Growth rates for the UMC from 2000 to 2010 were generally anemic. Overall, UMC branches tended to grow more slowly than Christianity as a whole on a country-by-country comparison. When United Methodist growth rates are compared to growth rates from the sister denomination, the UMC fared especially poorly. The Church of the Nazarene not only tended to have a higher growth rate by country of any of the churches..., it outgrew the UMC in 14 out of 16 countries [where both are represented]...Independent Methodist churches fared better than the UMC in seven out of eleven cases. The Anglican Church outgrew the UMC in 15 out of 22 countries.

I wonder what the comparisons would look like if the Pentecostals were included.

C. Tough Questions

In looking at their statistical data, Robert and Scott reflect on ecclesiological, structural, sociological, cultural, and theological reasons for the anemia; they raise several "tough" but highly relevant questions for United Methodism and this agency.

I want to cite just four of these questions, making minimal comments. You as mission board directors will get the points. Remember that these questions are in relation to comparative growth rates alongside sister denominations in various broadly scattered countries:

- Do "bureaucratic, unwieldy, outdated structures" hinder the "type of flexibility and indigenous initiatives necessary for strong growth?" I simply note that at Global Ministries we observe greater growth in Mission Initiatives where the forms of mission are most closely aligned with indigenous social and cultural structures.
- What about the efficacy of "one size fits all" theories and practices "in which North American middle-class culture is a normative value imposed on United Methodism outside the US?" I ask: Do we need to look again at the vitality of mission-founded, now-autonomous Methodist churches that have modified American and European norms? I am thinking especially of Latin America.
- Has a culture of dependency created "over-reliance on American resources" by some parts of the church and "neo-colonial attitudes on the parts of others?" May I point here to the impressive struggle of our congregations and annual conferences in Eurasia to achieve both spiritual and organizational maturity, including an increasing degree of financial self-sufficiency? In his leadership in this pilgrimage, Bishop Hans Växby is a missionary pioneer and prophet.
- "Could it be possible that the efforts of leadership elites to create a so-called 'global' United Methodism are wasting energy and resources that could be better spent in paying more attention to local needs, lay mobilization and regional partnerships?" This is a question with which we as a denomination have struggled for years and will again in Tampa.

In summing up their questions, Robert and Scott asked whether it might be that the United Methodist culture is inadequate for the challenges of the 21st century. They wonder, "Have we made a decision as a denomination to sacrifice church growth in order to maintain other important commitments? Or is it the case that holistic ministry (including numerical growth) gushes from a deep well of confident faith that United Methodists lack, relative to the stronger theological or liturgical identities of sister denominations?"

I thank God for the courage of Dana Robert and David Scott in raising these questions. I am convinced these are questions we must hear and to which we must respond with a strong sense of grace upon grace. I do not personally know Mr. Scott, but no one in our Wesley heritage cares more about this denomination and its witness than does Dana Robert. She and I share the conviction that tough questions can be asked because God's grace is large enough, and strong enough, to mold and make us--to remold and remake us--if we allow the love of Jesus Christ to have its way in our lives and our institutions. This I believe with all my heart and soul and mind.

I am pleased that the Robert-Scott research project reminds us of the possibilities of greater collaboration with our schools of theology; it invites us to become more proactive in the field of missiology. I am glad that Robert and Scott have agreed to be with us in October. There was a day when this organization and its staff played major roles in forming and analyzing mission theology. Can we enliven that spirit?

III. Growing in Grace

A. God's Grace in Mission

Are we as United Methodists growing in grace in ways that others can see, value, and reach out to join our community of faith? Do those we encounter experience God's love in and through us and want to be part of us? These are fundamental mission questions. It is also fundamental that we as United Methodists never confuse justification by grace alone ("sola gratia")--getting right with God--with justification by growth alone ("sola auctia")--filling up the house. I would warn us against ever assuming that a premise or action is necessarily warranted just because it results in church growth. All growth must be measured against the standard of God's love. Does church growth result in an increase of love for God, for one another, and for neighbors? If not, numbers are meaningless.

St. Paul had no doubt that the churches he started and those he visited would grow. It was not a matter of who started them--Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos. What mattered was an awareness of the power of grace to change lives and to build the community of faith and love. Not only was Paul totally aware of grace in his own life, he saw it enveloping the world through the ministries of believers. In Ephesians, speaking of how he became a servant and preacher through God's grace, Paul reminds the church of God's purpose in Christ Jesus, "in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him." (Ephesians 3:12)

How bold in faith, how confident in grace are United Methodists today. Dana Robert and David Scott ask us whether we have a sense of holistic ministry gushing "from a deep well of confident faith?"

John Wesley drew from a deep well of confident faith in God's grace upon grace. It is notable that "Grace Upon Grace: God's Mission and Our Calling" is the title of the last comprehensive mission statement of The United Methodist Church, adopted by the General Conference of 1988. I cannot say definitively whether Wesley expected the originally small movement he triggered to grow, but once the societies began to multiply he understood the growth to stem from an awareness of God's freely given grace. Wesley famously distinguished three forms of grace:

- Prevenient or preparing grace,
- Accepting or justifying grace, and
- Sustaining or sanctifying grace.

God's grace interrupts our business-as-usual lives, perhaps even our church life; offers us acceptance; and sustains us in faith's journey. These are essential parts of our Methodist theology. Do we reflect a confidence in our individual, congregational, and corporate lives? Do people beyond our number see God's love in us and want to be a part of a loving church? Are we bold? Are we confident?

B. Steps Toward Greater Mission Confidence

In our strategic planning process and other forums, I see measured steps toward greater awareness of our need for deepening, expanding mission confidence. Earlier we celebrated and learned about new and recent mission initiatives in more than a dozen locales. I can think of another dozen places where I would like to see new United Methodist initiatives.

Methodism has a clear, confident message: God loves us, a love expressed in creation. God through Jesus Christ makes us acceptable to God no matter how far off we have wandered, and God in the Holy Spirit sustains us when we accept God's acceptance.

Are we confident enough as a mission board to launch more mission initiatives based on grace upon grace? To increase, or at least sustain, the present level of international missionaries, now budgeted at some 220?

C. Young Adult Mission

Are we ready to take a bold step and dramatically enlarge our young adult mission program? We introduce so many youth and young adults to mission in our wonderful volunteer trips. Enthusiasm runs high for witness and service, and, alas, we provide too few opportunities for follow-up. Yet we have a great deal of experience in equipping young adults for mission; we have a large network of contacts for recruitment of participants and placements. This year we are marking the 60th anniversary of the US-2 program. This now venerable channel of service has enriched the lives of thousands of young men and women, and through their witness touched uncountable youth and

adults. US-2s and our other young adult mission programs are great blessings, producing many church leaders.

From my very first report to you a little over a year ago, I have spoken about the need to expand our young adult program. My vision is for Global 2s--G-2s--500 of them a year, working in communities that face such issues as poverty, violence, substance abuse, racism, human rights violations, immigration, health challenges, childcare, environmental justice, and criminal justice.

Work is already underway on this concept, which would involve annual and central conferences, multiple general agencies, and the Council of Bishops. Perhaps each annual or central conference could provide five-to-seven young persons each year and the same number of placement sites. Conferences could host training and commissioning events, facilitate itineration, and host the young people coming into their geographic areas.

Communities and congregations would benefit, and we would be making a significant contribution to shaping ethical, prophetic Christian leaders, aware firsthand of the basics of mission in a world of injustice and need; encouraged to engage in disciplined theological reflection; equipped to discern God's calling for their lives; and schooled in the experience of grace upon grace.

Are we bold enough to take this step--to be proactive in grace in a way that could even begin to enlarge our United Methodist community? Let me stress that I see this expansion as mission-driven, focused on exposure to God's grace in real places, and stressing the need to rely on God's grace in order to do God's mission.

In this context of our hope for mission expansion, I want to mention the denominational budget planning that has serious implications for our work. Roland addressed both process and amounts in his report yesterday, and you have received quadrennial budget documents in your boxes. The figures fall into the "possible bad news/maybe better news department," given that one budget level would reflect a 15.4 percent reduction in World Service income. Two other levels would be less dramatic. If we shall face a dramatically smaller budget, we will again face the question, confronted in the strategic planning process: "What should we not do anymore?" Yet, in the interagency budget negotiations, Global Ministries fared reasonably well. We do not expect any significant percentage reduction, and that is a blessing!

Finances will determine the speed by which we can realize our commitment to establish regional presences, notably Asia and Latin America. Work is underway on both, with the goal of basing staff in those regions. In addition, we strongly anticipate a Global Ministries China Office, located either on the mainland or in Hong Kong, to accompany the church's growth and changing religious landscape of that vast country. The Council of Bishops has asked Global Ministries to organize a visit to China by a United Methodist delegation, representing the entire church, for February 2012.

IV. Wrapping Up

Friends, this brings me to a good place to pause, not to conclude, for the story of God's grace and United Methodist growth is a continuing story. Perhaps you can tell that I am feeling more at home in my role of general secretary each time I report to you, and perhaps I become a little bolder each time. I am filled with confidence that we can face tough questions and find promising answers when we rely on God's grace. I know the power of Methodist theology and witness. I want it to expand and keep expanding, enriching the world.

I am in daily prayer for the 2012 General Conference, just as I am for this agency, its directors, and staff; I pray that our church and our agency will make wise decisions, befitting the Gospel of Jesus Christ and reflecting our reliance upon God's grace. I pray that Tampa will avoid displays of petulance, bad temper, and infighting. I pray that the 2012 General Conference will be a great Christian love-in, a mission celebration that says to the cosmos that United Methodists love God with their whole hearts, and minds, and strength; that we love our global neighbors as ourselves, and that we are determined to grow in grace.

I pray the same for the General Board of Global Ministries and United Methodist Women.

Amen.

Thomas Kemper

General Secretary

General Board of Global Ministries

The United Methodist Church