

Living in the Kingdom of God: An Alternative Call to Action

by Howard W. Hallman¹

In response to a four-decade decline in membership and worship attendance and other unfavorable trends in the United Methodist Church, a Steering Team of dedicated church leaders has issued a *Call to Action* to reverse these trends. The Team's recommendations have received approval from the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table and are before the church in preparation for action by the 2012 General Conference.

Although their report contains many good ideas, on the whole it is disappointing. It works from an assumption that membership decline is primarily a problem of structure and management that can be reversed by reordering connectional life and practices. I believe that the greater challenge is for the United Methodist Church to understand, articulate, and carry out its primary mission, as defined in *The Book of Discipline*: "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Transforming the world is modern language. In the Gospels this is known as seeking the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. That's what we ask in the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:10). That should be the focus of the United Methodist Church: endeavor to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, enable its disciple members to live as inhabitants of the kingdom, encourage and assist local congregations to function as units of the kingdom of God.

Such a mission would get us back to the original gospel of Jesus Christ. Remember, at the outset of his ministry Jesus indicated that the purpose for which he was sent was to "proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43). From his teachings it is clear that this isn't

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some future eschatological kingdom. Rather, as Jesus explained to some Pharisees, “in fact the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17.21). That’s the NRSV translation. The King James Version reads that “the kingdom of God is within.” Both are correct: the kingdom of God can be within and among us. That’s good news! We can actually live in the kingdom of God here and now.

Beyond the personal dimension Jesus also dealt with the societal dimension of the kingdom of God. Thus in his inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth he opened the scriptures and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4.16-21)

This is a call for justice for the poor including the redistribution of wealth (the meaning of the Jubilee, the acceptable year of the Lord). It is a call for liberation of those oppressed in many different ways. This is the kingdom in the process of becoming as God’s reign shapes the institutional life of humankind.

In our world today a local church can be considered an outpost of the kingdom of God. In a vital congregation disciples of Christ experience the presence of God in their lives and in worship. This provides a sense of joy and the peace that surpasses all understanding. They bond with one another through mutual love and handle disagreements with mutual respect. They welcome all who want to worship with them and encourage newcomers to participate in their fellowship. Committed disciples work together in practicing mercy and seeking justice in the broader society. They may not achieve perfection, but they know that they are heading in the right direction. Congregational vitality should therefore be judged first and foremost on how

effectively a local church serves as a unit of the kingdom of God rather than by its methods of operations as done in the *Call to Action*.

The foundation for living in the kingdom of God is built on the Two Great Commandments: love God with all your heart, soul, and might and love your neighbor as yourself, which Jesus enlarged to encompass enemies. They are more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33). All the law and the prophets hang on them (Matthew 22:40). They are the key to eternal life (Luke 10:25-28).

A vital congregation seeks to carry out these commandments in various ways. Love of God is expressed in worship which can occur in different styles that reflect the variety of religious experience. (The *Call to Action* is correct in recognizing both traditional and contemporary forms of worship.) Love for neighbor is expressed in caring for one another within the congregation and for others near and afar. Jesus' enlargement to love for enemies is expressed through forgiveness and overcoming evil with good. Love for neighbor also requires working for social change to bring about a more just society and a peaceful world.

To help its members live in the kingdom of God, vital congregations can use Jesus' training manual for disciples: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Here let me highlight a few of his teachings.

Jesus taught not only do not murder but also curb your anger and seek reconciliation with persons you have a quarrel with you before offering your gift at the altar (Matthew 5:21-26).

The passing of the peace in Sunday worship provides such an opportunity.

Jesus rejected the idea of limited revenge (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) and instead instructed us to respond to evil doers with positive initiatives (Matthew 5:38-42).

Modern scholars indicate that the older translation “do not resist an evildoer” is more correctly

expressed as “don’t react violently against one who is evil”. During the past century nonviolent action has emerged as an effective way for responding to aggression and oppression. Vital congregations and disciples can study, apply, and advocate use of nonviolent methods.

Loving your enemy and praying for your persecutors (Matthew 5:43- 48) is one of the most revolutionary of Jesus’ teachings. Yet his explanation was simple: “so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good; and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Previously in the Beatitudes Jesus described peacemakers as children of God (Matthew 5:9). You cannot love your enemies when you are trying to kill them. Because the kingdom of God has no place for war, vital congregations can encourage youthful members to become conscientious objectors when they register for Selective Service.

Loving our enemy draws us into forgiveness. Jesus taught us in the Lord’s prayer to ask God to “forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). He told his disciples not to expect God to forgive their wrongdoings unless they first forgave others (Matthew 6:14-15). On the cross Jesus prayed for his persecutors, “Father, forgive them for they do not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Forgiveness is so important a factor in human relations that it deserves constant study and application by disciples of Jesus Christ and vital congregations.

Working for justice and peace brings vital congregations into the public arena. That’s because political, economic, and social institutions provide a means for achieving a more just and peaceful society.

In his allegory of the Great Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) Jesus specified a set of tasks to serve “the least of these”: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers (in our

day, immigrants), provide clothing to the naked, take care of the sick, visit prisoners. Although in this story it is nations that are standing before the judgment throne, individual disciples and local congregations can also expect to be judged on how well they perform these tasks. They can act locally and also at the societal level where congregations can work together in public advocacy in behalf of food and housing programs, better health care, employment and income support programs, fair treatment for immigrants. To deal with underlying causes of poverty efforts should be made to reverse economic trends that are making the rich richer and the poor poorer. That's what justice requires.

Vital congregations work for peace within communities, nations, and the whole world. Because as the United Methodist Social Principles state, "war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ", disciples and their congregations should oppose war and also work for ways to remove causes of conflict and achieve resolution by peaceful means when conflict occurs.

In promoting justice and peace vital congregations need the strength of working together. This can be facilitated by general agencies of the church which can provide resources, bring advocates for justice and peace together, and on occasion speak on behalf of the church as a whole. General agencies are also needed to assist congregations in other tasks. The Methodist tradition also has a hierarchical structure of bishops, conferences, and district superintendants that can facilitate the work of local congregations.

In fulfilling their roles, church leaders should apply Jesus' advice to his disciples. After James and John sought a favored place in the future kingdom, Jesus told all the disciples,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be first among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave (Matthew 20:25).

This is a model for servant leadership. It doesn't absolve local congregations from being accountable on how well they fulfill the mission of the church, but it stresses cooperation rather than command.

I believe that congregations functioning as outposts of the kingdom of God will experience renewed vitality. They will draw in new members, particularly from the younger generation who are longing for greater meaning and relevancy in their lives. Living in the kingdom of God provides this opportunity. Techniques described in the *Call to Action* may be useful, but they are means, not the end for revitalizing congregations.

Yet congregations living in the kingdom of God have no guarantee of increased membership. As has been pointed out, the Methodist Church lost members when it eliminated racial segregation in its structure. Local churches have lost members upon the appointment of women clergy to their pulpits. Jesus himself saw his public support dwindle from the admiring crowd that greeted his arrival in Jerusalem to the raucous mob that cried out, "crucify him" after he took on the Jewish and Roman establishment.

The true test isn't numbers. It's faithfulness.