

**A CALL TO ACTION**  
**for**  
**The United Methodist Church**  
***Final Report of the Interim Operations Team***  
*September 2012*

This report is a final update from the Interim Operations Team (IOT) named by the Council of Bishops (COB) and the Connectional Table (CT) in late 2010.

The 2010 Call to Action Report envisioned that the IOT would be a diverse team, accountable to the COB/CT, charged to identify issues and to develop a plan based on successful approaches used in other organizations that could be adapted and reapplied to the church. The objective was to identify strategies that would lead to significantly improved results in creating and sustaining *more* vital congregations.

Much has transpired since the fall of 2011 when the IOT reported its recommendations to CT and the COB. CT incorporated the recommendations in a refashioned set of legislative proposals that were later further reworked through the legislative processes at General Conference (GC).

A new proposal for action, use of resources, and structure emerged. It included some parts of the CT legislation but changed or deleted other parts. The final plan was adopted by nearly 60% of the GC delegates. That plan was subsequently ruled unconstitutional by the Judicial Council.

As will happen over time and given the original thinking, spirited conversations, and controversies that have ensued, what is recalled and recounted about the Call to Action and IOT work is at times quite accurate and at other times bears little resemblance to the original documents and their intent.

With the completion of our assignment, we want to reiterate the core principles and recommendations that we shared in the fall of 2011. It was our consensus then, and remains our conviction now, that attention to these specific aspects of UMC life could, in time and with competent execution, lead to reordering the life of the church for greater effectiveness and vitality in its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We affirm:

***That the local “charge” or congregation is the primary venue for making disciples. We believe there is an urgent need for redirecting significant leadership, time, and money toward the adaptive challenge of building and supporting United Methodist people and their witness on the ground and, in particular, working to increase and sustain the number of vital congregations.***

This can be accomplished by:

- 1. Creating clear expectations and metrics for all leaders**
- 2. Creating a non-residential bishop to lead the COB and build collaborative work on the adaptive challenge**
- 3. Cultivating a new generation of young UM clergy with education and support systems that focus on the adaptive challenge**
- 4. Creating a unified UM Center for Connectional Mission and Ministry constituted from 10 existing agencies with a new governance structure.**
- 5. Redirecting apportionments in 2013–16 by up to \$50 million for work on the adaptive challenge including:**
  - Intentional and substantial focus on new faith communities for new people**
  - Increased emphasis on recruiting and developing young clergy under age 30 who are called by God and confirmed by the church for leadership**
    - Fostering consensus about the personal and professional gifts, skills, and practices needed for effective clergy**
    - Fostering a "culture of call" in which congregations regularly invite and encourage persons with the needed gifts to consider if they are being called**
    - Providing financial support through scholarships**
- 6. Redirecting \$5 million of general church receipts for theological education in the Central Conferences**
- 7. Redirecting \$5 million of general church receipts for focus on developing young laity as UM leaders**

## 8. Reforming the clergy system

- **Making the recruitment of gifted young people to full-time ministry a priority and devote resources to helping them complete their theological education**
- **Expecting and working with seminaries to train for the skills and practices most needed to revitalize existing churches and start new ones**
- **Continuing to purposefully avoid deploying clergy based primarily upon seniority/salary and toward deploying persons where their gifts can have the greatest impact**
- **Improving ability and processes to more promptly exit low-performing clergy from the system**

## 9. Reforming the episcopal system

- **Greater consensus about leadership qualities needed for Bishops in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**
- **Bishops have public accountability for improving vital indicators in their residential areas**
- **One bishop dedicated and accountable for encouraging and supporting others on the Council of Bishops**
- **Align appropriate work of the general church more closely with annual conference strategies for embracing the adaptive challenge**

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### **The Continuing Call to Action**

“You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith. This salvation is God’s gift. It’s not something you possessed. It’s not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives” (Ephesians 2:8-10 CEB).

“We assert that God’s grace is manifest in all creation even though suffering, violence, and evil are everywhere present. The goodness of creation is fulfilled in human beings, who are called to covenant partnership with God. God has endowed us with dignity and freedom and has summoned us to responsibility for our lives and the life of the world” (Par. 101, *The Book of Discipline* 2012).

Having been called, justified, and sanctified by grace, we—the people called United Methodists—repent of our sins and stubbornness and renew our covenant with God and one another.

Over the last two years, emerging through our prayers, discernment, watchfulness, listening, study, and deliberations, we've come to a deep and shared conviction that the 2010 Call to Action report continues to be a compelling and accurate telling of truths that by God's grace United Methodist leaders will have the courage to embrace and implement.

There are myriad examples of effective disciple-making, prophetic witness, and ministries of justice and mercy across the Connection. But we are in denial if we fail to take note of the trajectories of a number of trends affecting our Church that have unmistakably unwelcome consequences. The many examples of faithful, innovative, and fruitful work that abound do not obviate the effects in the United States and Europe of our increasingly older membership and aging leaders; declines in the numbers of professions of faith, worship attendance, baptisms, and Sunday school attendance; and growing financial burdens accompanied by decreasing revenues. Amid numerous critically important theological and spiritual considerations there are also unassailable organizational and operational realities that both illustrate and affect trends we must disrupt and turn around.

John Wesley was not afraid to identify the loss of spiritual vitality and true effectiveness in the Church. He knew that only plain speaking about and commitment to address the hard problems of his day would change the situation. In a famous bit of prose he suggested that survival of the Church was not his worry: *"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast to both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out"* (*Thoughts Upon Methodism*, London, August 4, 1786).

All that we have learned and all that we have experienced reaffirm our findings that when it comes to both the spirit and discipline that are required, United Methodist leaders—beginning with the bishops and including lay and clergy across the Connection—must lead and immediately, repeatedly, and energetically make it plain that continued use of many current approaches, structures, policies, and practices is likely to produce the same results we've seen and continued overall decline with decreasing mission impact.

*Business as usual is unsustainable. Dramatically different and new behaviors, not incremental changes, are required. We have not yet seen the degree of shared sense of urgency or commitment to systemic adaptations with the redirection of leadership expectations and sufficient resources that our situation requires.*

We confidently affirm the quality and utility of two valuable research projects conducted by independent experts: the Operational Assessment of the UMC Connection completed by the Apex Group and the Vital Congregations Research conducted by Towers Watson (both available online at <http://umccalltoaction.org>).

Those studies and additional work by the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table resulted in adoption of an emphatic statement of the adaptive challenge of The United Methodist Church:

***To redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources for an intense concentration of fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.***

To this end we must:

- Change our mindset so that our primary focus and commitment is on fostering and sustaining congregational vitality (vitality is a dynamic forward-leaning state of engagement that connects people to God, each other, and the world), celebrating and using many examples of faithful fruitfulness to guide us.
- Articulate and commit to dramatically higher performance expectations for all levels of the church.
- Expect and provide courageous, accountable leadership that assumes responsibility for upsetting current paradigms and shaping and adopting new understandings that result in more effective practices. We believe this must begin with the bishops (both as individuals in their assigned areas and collectively as the Council of Bishops).
- Track and report measurable performance results in all sectors of the Connection on an ongoing and regular basis, enabling us to learn and adjust the ways we invest and use our talent, time, and money.

This requires reordering the life of the church to:

1. **Refocus a higher share of resources and attention on congregations to promote and cultivate the drivers of vitality.**

Reaffirm and invest in the role of the annual conference as the basic unit of the UMC and its primary mission as increasing the number of vital congregations, build up and out from pockets of achievement, establish teaching centers that enable peer-to-peer support, redeploy underperforming assets such as real estate, and invest in places showing marks of vitality.

**2. Become equally driven by passion for increased accountability with measurable results—alongside the important values of guaranteeing vibrant diversity in leadership and the articulation of visionary intentions.**

Foster appropriate uniform standards of performance for bishops, clergy, and lay leaders; set high bars as guiding criteria for leadership recruitment; assure ongoing evaluation of performance for all leaders; establish preferential relationships with seminaries preparing clergy who are equipped to lead vital congregations; place concerted emphasis on identification and development of young clergy and lay leaders.

**3. Streamline structures; reduce the sense of “distance” between parts of the Connection; require much higher levels of alignment throughout the UMC.**

The COB provides for active bishops to give denomination-wide strategic leadership. Emphasize the role of bishops in their areas to support and guide work to increase congregational vitality; reconceive the general church and annual conference funding schemes so that expenses align even more with striving for an increase in the number of vital congregations; create a general church plan of organization and governance that is more agile, less costly, more responsive, and better integrated—with a primary focus on continuously improved congregational results in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

These affirmations and expectations resonate with many across the Church and were endorsed by both the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table.

- Many pastors and lay leaders in congregations, cabinets and staff in annual conferences, the Council of Bishops, and leaders and staff of the general agencies have embraced aspects of the analysis and strategies for change management and made commitments to achieve ever greater fruitfulness.
- Annual conference leadership teams are building on and extending ideas and action plans for increases in the number of vital congregations using objective measures to track progress.
- Pastors are voluntarily teaming up to share ideas and encourage one another in rededicating themselves to the work of fostering local church vitality.
- The UMC Vital Congregations Project is enabling and encouraging networks for peer-to-peer support and sharing learning among local church and annual conference leaders who are working to achieve observable results based on the “drivers of vitality” identified in the Towers Watson research.

- The General Conference allocated \$7 million for the 2013–16 quadrennium for expanded work to intentionally identify, recruit, and support young people under the age of 35 who experience the call and prepare for effective local church ministry.
- The Council of Bishops has adopted an organizational plan that gives more time and emphasis for active bishops to concentrate on the work of increasing the number of vital congregations in their areas.
- General agencies are adopting patterns for governance, evaluation, and new ways of doing their work that hold promise for increased responsiveness and streamlined operations and may help boost the number of vital congregations.

The 2012 General Conference generated an array of legislative actions that contained important elements of the Call to Action agenda and mirrored some but not all of the proposals from the Connectional Table. The nearly 60% vote in favor of Plan UMC, a compromise that emerged after a series of stalemates in the General Administration Legislation Committee, demonstrated the readiness of the body to affirm significant changes in emphasis, leadership, use of resources, and ways of measuring results in UMC life.

While the subsequent ruling just a few hours before adjournment by the Judicial Council—asserting that the plan was unconstitutional—made that particular constellation of organizational changes null and void for the time being, the majority of delegates spoke with a full voice and clear intent: ***business as usual will not suffice, and we are ready to make significant changes in how we work and live together.***

The illustrations of post-General Conference activities listed above demonstrate that the people called United Methodists are not sitting on their hands or languishing in depressed resignation to the status quo. They are leading the way in experimentation, testing new approaches, creating vibrant networks of mutual support and shared learning, and building a foundation for renewal based on intense missional imperatives that will not be derailed because of legislative gridlock.

Now a full four years after the first stirrings of imagination and conversation emerged and led to creation of the Call to Action Steering Team and our Interim Operations Team, some ask if the time and money invested in prayer and holy conversations, intense and time-consuming research and deliberations, consultations with leaders, and planning with groups to generate proposals were all in vain.

After careful and prayerful reflection, we humbly offer this answer in response:

We are privileged to be a part of a Church that is deeply in love with God and seeking first and foremost be a faithful witness to the grace, justice, and mercy we know in

Jesus Christ; a church restlessly eager to discern the will of God, share the Gospel, learn from history, and assess with unflinching honesty our strengths and weaknesses, challenges and potential; a church that is ready to embark on new adventures and take risks; a church that understands that renewal often requires disruption of familiar and treasured paradigms.

We give thanks to God that The United Methodist Church is unfailingly focused on making and reinvigorating disciples of Jesus Christ for the audacious aspiration that through the grace of God, we will help transform the whole wide world.

Our team repeatedly said that the Call to Action endeavor should not be equated with or bound by any one set of legislative proposals. We strongly believe that the most significant, needed, and consequential change will be in the ways we think, converse, live, and work together and by the degree to which we embrace with our hearts, minds, and souls the work of increasing the number of vital congregations—self-evidently effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We are not overly concerned that this or that piece of legislation did not make it through the legislative machinery and judicial review at General Conference. But we do caution that we not mistake the several but ultimately small measures of progress that emerged at and after General Conference as representing a sufficient degree of change in light of the challenges we face.

What matters is that we have clarity in giving focus to shifting resources to increase the number of vital congregations, urgency in paying attention to measurable results, and intentionality in the development and recruitment of young people for leadership along with support and evaluation of all leaders based on very high expectations for fruitfulness. What matters is that we sustain an unrelenting emphasis on integration and alignment of work to replace the current celebration of diffused activities and self-interested independence that are rampant across the UMC.

We repeat for emphasis and to assure that there will be no misunderstanding:

*Business as usual is unsustainable. Dramatically different and new behaviors, not incremental changes, are required. We have not yet seen the degree of shared sense of urgency or commitment to systemic adaptations with the redirection of leadership expectations and sufficient resources that our situation requires.*


What has been and remains most essential is that leaders in every part of the Connection demonstrate faithful love and obedience to God, courage, resilience, political will, active continuous learning, willingness to risk, and a transparent accountability for observable and planned results.



We hope to join hands with others, and with their support we will seek to invest in that kind of leadership in the places we serve in the years to come.

We pray that you will choose to do the same.

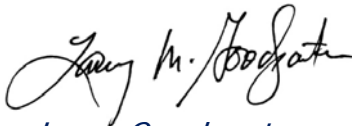
*Respectfully submitted,*



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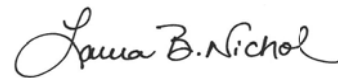
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