

Connections

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An opportunity

In the United Methodist Church as in many other Christian denominations, bishops are the church's top spiritual and administrative leaders.

This fall 16 newly elected United Methodist bishops have taken office in the U.S. and 8 others have moved to new locations. Even the 25 who are continuing in their former assignments are starting to work with new groups of laity and clergy. It's an ideal time for finding new and better ways for bishops to give the church the leadership it needs.

Like most other church members I've had little first-hand contact with bishops. However, I've heard many of the United Methodist bishops speak, I read about them, and I see the effects of what they do. As a result I often think, "If I were a bishop, what would I do?" Of course I might have a completely different opinion if I actually *were* a bishop, but it's still worth thinking about.

What would you do if you were a bishop?

If I were a bishop . . .

If I were a bishop I'd make spiritual leadership my top priority. This would mean giving high priority to communicating what I see as the mission of the church: showing God's love to all people in today's world, as Jesus did in the world he lived in, and making disciples in order to spread that love throughout the world. I'd try to deliver this message in ways that would inspire and challenge the laity and clergy in my geographical area.

If necessary I'd get professional help to make my speaking and writing effective, and I'd get lay help in translating them into non-churchy conversational language. Besides being an effective speaker I'd want to be a good administrator, but I'd want my administrative style to carry the same message I was trying to communicate in my speaking and writing. I'd try to communicate that message strongly through every aspect of doing my job.

(continued on page 2)

An inspiration, a disappointment

Recently I heard lectures by two guest speakers at two different United Methodist universities. One speaker was a Christian sociologist and the other was a bishop. The sociologist demonstrated spiritual leadership. Unfortunately the bishop didn't.



The sociologist's specialty is southern U.S. churches. He sees that most Protestant churches in the South have become custodial instead of evangelical. They are preserving the society they live

in, instead of trying to change it. The speaker found this surprising because the founders of these denominations, including Methodism's John Wesley, were the very opposite of custodians. They were fiercely committed to changing the whole world.

Although we sometimes expect lectures to be dry and boring, this one was compelling. It reminded me what the church's true purpose was, and it strengthened my commitment to that purpose. In my view, that's exercising spiritual leadership.

Later that week I heard the bishop speak. Although it was announced as a lecture his speech was actually a sermon. And it *was* dry and boring. His delivery was lifeless, his style was dated, and his content was limited to platitudes that had no apparent relation to the everyday world of his audience.



I felt sad. Here in a church-owned university, where we especially need to be presenting the Christian faith persuasively, a top church leader was presenting it as dead, irrelevant, and boring.

That's not spiritual leadership.

(If I were a bishop..., continued from page 1)

Because knowing one's audience is an essential part of effective communication, I'd do a lot of listening and observing and asking questions, not just among my close associates and personal friends but out among the laity and clergy in local churches.

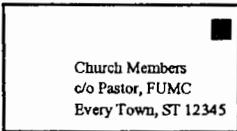
Doing these things would require trying new ways of being bishop. Bishops can do this if they choose to, because they're their own bosses. Unlike other clergy they're not in danger of being moved down the ladder or having their salary cut, even if they don't do the job in the way people expect.

Bishops also have a platform that other clergy and laity don't have. When bishops speak they automatically have access to a wide audience. So if I were a bishop I'd try to make full use of the opportunities that were uniquely available to me.

Letters to laity

If I were a bishop, I'd communicate often with all the lay members in my Conference, to keep them involved in a shared vision for the church. To do this, I'd write a short monthly letter and mail it to

every local-church pastor for her or him to copy and mail to every member of his/her church by including it with the church's newsletter.



Visits to local churches

If I were a bishop I'd make most Sundays work days because that's when I could reach the most church members. I'd make some other day my day off. Then I'd set up a schedule for speaking and listening in local churches on Sundays.

To make time for this I'd say no to a lot of ceremonial duties. I wouldn't go to the dedication of every new church building or cabin at the church camp, nor would I attend all the meetings of every committee I was an ex-officio member of. I'd even dare to say no to some overseas trips and some meetings of general-church boards and agencies.

At every church I visited on a Sunday morning, I'd preach at every morning worship service, pre-

senting my view of the church's mission. I'd hope to inspire the congregation to join me in working toward specific goals that would accomplish that mission in their own community and the wider world.

Focusing on the Gospel and real life

I wouldn't use much sermon time for telling stories about my close friendship with the pastor. These detract from the real message and reinforce the impression that clergy are a closed group that excludes laity. Instead, I'd talk about how the Gospel related to a specific current issue that needed attention, either in the local congregation or community or in the whole world.

At the Sunday School hour I'd meet with a large group of laity. This could be a Sunday School class or whoever wanted to attend, but it wouldn't be just the "church leaders" or the Staff-Parish Committee. I'd begin this session with a brief statement about my dreams for the church, but I'd leave most of the time for questions and comments from the group. For the rest of the day I'd keep having similar meetings with groups of laity, maybe at a different church nearby if the morning church was small, or with more groups in the same church if it was large.

Connecting with church members

During these visits I'd say no to private country-club lunches with the pastor or a few prominent laypersons. I'd want meals that could be attended by all the church members who wanted to come--either no-host meals at a restaurant, or catered or covered-dish meals at the church.

At all these meetings I'd deliberately keep my conversations focused on my vision for the church and on members' feelings and thoughts about the church. To make clear that I had come to do a job and not just to socialize, I would rarely take my spouse on these church visits. After all, doctors don't take their spouses to the clinic with them, and business executives don't have theirs accompany

them to the office. (Remember, I've saved other days to spend with my family.)



I'd want my District Superintendents to follow a similar pattern, speaking and listening in different local churches most Sundays, and never in the same church I was visiting. So I'd choose D.S.'s who were good communicators and spiritual leaders, not just good administrators or cronies of other D.S.'s.

'Yes' to ability and diversity

If I were bishop I'd try to appoint clergy on the basis of how their abilities matched the needs of churches and communities. I wouldn't give top priority to length of service or personal friendship. In my cabinet I'd want clergy with a variety of styles, talents, and viewpoints. I wouldn't want that powerful group to be carbon copies of me or of each other or to be mere yes-men.

As bishop I'd work hard (and as fast as possible!) to remove ineffective pastors from the system. Many clergy and laity seem to know who these pastors are, yet they keep being inflicted on other congregations or even rewarded with top administrative positions. Despite guaranteed-appointment rules there must be a remedy for this, and if I were bishop I'd try to find it or create it in a hurry.

'No' to secrecy

As bishop I'd try to get rid of the secrecy that breeds dishonesty and mistrust among laity and clergy. When pastors were to be moved, for example, I'd insist that from the very beginning they let their congregations know that a change was in the works. I'd want laity and clergy to be the first to hear the news about their own congregations and their own job prospects rather than hearing it from the grapevine when it was too late to have a voice in the decisions that were being made.

'No' to self-importance

If I were a bishop, I'd be super-careful to avoid the appearance of glorifying myself and my office. I'd ask the clergy and laity I worked with to call me "Barbara" instead of "Bishop Wendland," and when

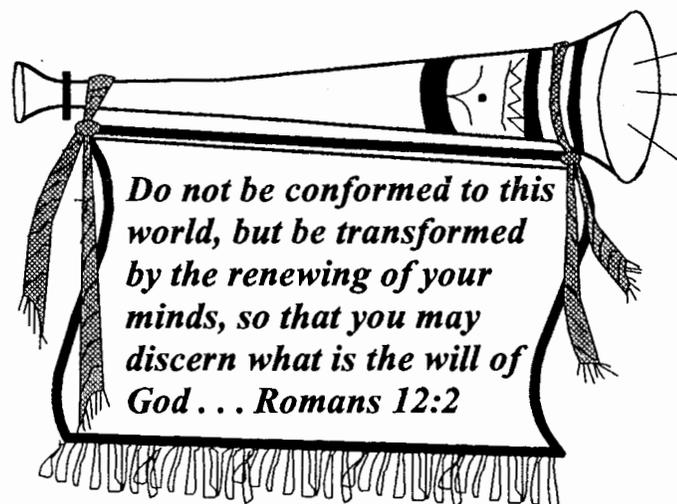
anyone failed to do that I'd repeat my request so they'd know I really meant it. I wouldn't refer to myself in the third person. I'd say "I think . . ." instead of "your bishop thinks . . ."

I wouldn't let my portrait or those of my predecessors be displayed prominently in church offices. I'd use wall space instead to display Bible verses and whatever else would remind everyone in the office what our purpose was.

As bishop I wouldn't accept gifts from church groups or individual clergy or laity. I'd say no despite all claims that a gift represented pure love and appreciation. I'd either buy my house and car out of my salary or have them clearly listed in Conference financial reports as part of my overall compensation. I wouldn't let them be furnished "on the side" by any individual or group.



Who could penalize a bishop for making changes like these? No one. For a bishop, the only higher authority is God.



If I were a bishop, with God's help I'd refuse to conform not only to the world but also to my church when its methods didn't match God's will. I'd try to inspire the laity and clergy in my area to do the same. That's the kind of spiritual leadership that I think God calls bishops to give to the church.

What about you? What would you do if you were a bishop? Maybe you are one. Some recipients of this letter are. If you are and you're already making needed changes, I heartily applaud and thank you.

Maybe if bishops, pastors, and laity all begin openly discussing what kind of leadership the church needs from its bishops, we'll come up with some changes that will help both the church and the world. Let's give it a try.

Again, thanks for reading. And remember, I'd like to hear from you whether you agree or disagree with me.

Next month . . . power—a dirty word, or a gift from God?

Merry Christmas!

Barbara Wendland



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