

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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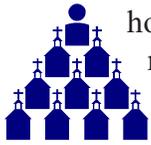
A movement or an institution?

In his newest book, *Back to Zero: The Search to Rediscover the Methodist Movement* (Abingdon, 2012), church consultant Gil Rendle gives advice that I believe every church needs to follow. Speaking especially to delegates to this month's United Methodist General Conference, Rendle urges them to help the UMC recover the strong points of the early Methodist movement rather than remain as bureaucratic and top-down an institution as it now is. But his advice doesn't apply only to United Methodists.



We all have skin in the game

For years, Rendle has worked with many denominations and has become informed about how all kinds of institutions function and about what effective leadership requires, so all mainline churchgoers, not just United Methodists and certainly not just UMC General Conference delegates, can benefit from his observations. What he says about how today's churches need to become more like movements and less like complex, top-down bureaucracies applies to all of today's mainline denominations.



"We've all got some skin in the game," Rendle assures us. All of us who are part of the mainline church in North America in this time of great and deep change, he sees, have something to lose in what happens in our churches right now. Our futures depend on the outcome of our churches' present actions and failure to act.

We can't wait for anyone to do it for us

"The change in the mission field has already happened," Gil Rendle reminds us, "and is all around us in a postmodern world which is now global, deeply diverse, and rife with competing beliefs and

A crucial time for the UMC

The 2012 General Conference of the United Methodist Church meets from April 24 until May 4. It is the UMC's worldwide decision-making body, which only meets every four years. This GC is crucial because UMC membership is declining, UMC financial prospects are poor, and big, controversial changes are being proposed. Some *Connections* readers are GC delegates. Many others are also UMC members, so will be affected by what GC does. Still others face similar issues in other denominations, so I'm writing about some of those issues here.



Some needed changes

One change that I see the UMC urgently needing to make is removing all references to sexual orientation from UMC rules and policies. I believe that both the teaching of Jesus and an awareness of how the Bible reflects culture demand that we stop calling homosexuality sinful and denying non-heterosexual people the right to participate fully in the UMC.

Another change I see the UMC needing is to stop clinging to all of John Wesley's terminology and methods. Much that is now known about the Bible and the universe was unknown in his time, and his culture was very different from ours. Yet one current proposal (<http://missionalmethodist.org/missionalmanifesto/>) calls for commitment to Wesley's "General Rules" (<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1658>). For joining a Methodist group, these rules written in 1739 require having "a desire to flee from the wrath to come." And they urge Methodists to avoid the evil of wearing gold jewelry. That's preposterous to expect of people in 2012!



Promoting the "social holiness" that Wesley advocated is still needed, but that's because Jesus and the Hebrew prophets advocated it and every culture still suffers from its lack, not just because Wesley advocated it. The UMC needs to be as innovative now as he was in his day, not to preserve what were innovations then but are outdated now. And the UMC needs to aim at following Jesus, whether or not it uses Wesley's methods or words.

value systems.” Consequently, in his view we all need to get in the conversation right away to help

Don't remember the prior things. Don't ponder ancient history. Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up. Don't you recognize it?
—Isaiah 43:18-19

our churches address this change. We can't just keep blaming their failure on the constraints of current rules and past practices that have until now let us avoid responsibility for getting the church to act in new ways.

Whatever our role in the church is, Rendle observes, to get the church improved we can't just wait for our denomination's rules and structure to get changed by the people at the top. Neither can we wait for our congregation to get what we consider a better pastor, if we're lay members, or for our bishop to appoint us to a place that suits us better, if we're clergy. We can't wait for anyone to fix the church's problems for us. We've got to risk promoting and becoming part of the needed changes ourselves, even if it means abandoning some traditions, breaking some rules, or refusing to obey some church policies. And we've got to risk doing some of these things even if we suffer personally as a result.

Gil Rendle acknowledges that we need to take such steps appropriately, so that we don't dismiss the mission of our denomination or put parts of our community unduly against each other, but we need to take the steps. “We need to learn how to honor the inheritance of our highly structured denomination,” he advises, “and yet set ourselves free from the constraints of being so highly structured.”



We need to become more like a movement. That's what early Methodism was and the early church was, and their being movements rather than institutions evidently had a lot to do with how their effectiveness differed from our frequent ineffectiveness.

Did we join to change the status quo?

The essence of a movement, Rendle points out, “is to commit to work toward a change that we all address together. If we are to be a movement, we will need to claim a common spiritual task and connection that supersedes our differences.”

“A movement,” he continues, “is a group of people who intentionally, at their own risk, join together to make a change in the status quo.” That's what the early Methodist movement—the Wesleyan movement—did, and it's what the UMC urgently needs to do now, in Rendle's view. In mine, it's also what every other branch of the church needs to do, and soon. And in the UMC, we don't need to insist on being a specifically Wesleyan movement; what matters is being a Christian movement.



A big part of our churches' problem, it seems, is that many members joined not to change the status quo but rather to be personally comforted, to get what they see as a guarantee of going to heaven when they die, and to help *preserve* the status quo of the church and the society rather than change it. Some members feel that the church should work toward changing the status quo but only by helping more people to get these benefits, not by promoting the kind of changes that Jesus advocated. And the church too often gives self-preservation higher priority than following Jesus.

Aiming at the wrong purpose

Part of being a movement, Rendle sees, is being clear about who is in the movement and who is not. Movements need to be clear about their purpose and the outcome they want. For the church movement, those are essentially defined by the story of Jesus. The varied interpretations of it leave room for disagreement about who is in and who is out and about exactly what outcome we need to aim at, but the Jesus story seems to make clear that institutional survival—the purpose we too often seem to be aiming at currently—can't legitimately be our purpose.

“The historic thrust of the early Methodist movement,” Gil Rendle reminds today's United Methodists, was “to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.” An especially hard part of that, Rendle observes, is reforming the church, because we're part of it, and we're rarely as willing to change our-



selves as to try to get others to change. The UMC's official purpose is "making disciples for the transformation of the world." Yet to change the world, we must begin by changing ourselves.



Time to vote against our self-interest

He finds that we will need to give up what we have come to see as an entitled dependence on our denominations. Bishops, clergy, and agency people, he observes, will need to vote against their own self-interests in order to help their denomination move ahead. Congregational leaders and members will need to look beyond their congregation's mere survival. They will have to ask what its purpose is, and act in ways that promote that purpose.

? If we do these things, Rendle assures us, the years ahead will not be comfortable. But is making ourselves comfortable our churches' purpose? Apparently not if we want to be followers of Jesus.

We need bold people now

In recent decades, Gil Rendle observes, "our denominational life has become more regulatory than missional. We have become a rule-following people." And church denominations, like government and industry, have kept adding new rules continually. "By the latter part of the twentieth century," Rendle observes, "the effect of such orderly and ordered life began to be experienced as constraint in a technologically quickened world that required agility and personalization."

In the church now, says Rendle, "rather than additional rules, we need bold people. While organizations do not have the capacity to break their own

logjam of rules and norms, individuals do. However, individual rule breakers have a difficult task. They must be focused on purpose and mission."

Questions to ask about our rules

The UMC and other mainline denominations are currently in a paradigm shift, a nonlinear jump of mission in North America, Rendle observes. In this kind of shift, he points out, everything goes back to zero. Former practices are found to be ineffective, and old rules don't apply.



In such a situation, he finds, church leaders must break rules purposefully and responsibly if we want to create a spiritual movement again. They must lead us to think differently, behave differently, and even risk our security to move faithfully beyond our own self-interests. "Credentials and regulations are established for reasons," Rendle reminds us. "They serve an institution in their season. But there are times when the rules need to be placed in tension with greater need and purpose." We must ask:



- What is the rule's purpose?
- Is the rule still appropriate?
- Does it serve or prevent our mission now?

I hope UMC General Conference delegates will ask themselves these questions as they vote on rules.

Catalysts and champions

In Gil Rendle's opinion, what the church needs now are people who stand for the whole purpose of the movement rather than for their own piece of it or interest in it. They can't be just dependent, passive consumers of what denominations and congregations are providing, as many members are now.

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 19 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Rendle says we especially need catalysts and champions now, and I think he's right. In chemistry, a catalyst initiates a reaction without fusing into it. Organizationally, catalysts get a decentralized organization going and then relinquish control. Champions are relentless in promoting new ideas, behaving more like salespeople than like organizers. These roles, Rendle observes, aren't commonly represented in institutions, but they are prominent and highly praised in movements.



Will you be a catalyst or champion in your congregation or denomination? Or if this isn't your tal-

ent, will you at least actively support the catalysts and champions? Our churches urgently need all of us to play one of those roles now.

There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

(From *Julius Caesar*, by William Shakespeare)

Is the UMC facing this kind of tide now? I think it is. Will it take the current or lose its ventures?

Barbara



Connections

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A movement or an institution?

April 2012

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Details and registration information are coming in later *Connections*. Watch for them!