

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

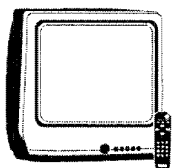
NUMBER 80 - JUNE 1999



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## Sending horses against tanks

The church now lives in a culture that is mainly electronic, but most mainline churches are still trying to communicate the gospel using the methods of a culture based on print. That's the opinion of Thomas E. Boomershine, a professor at the United Methodist Church's United Theological Seminary.



"A child of today's culture walking into a United Methodist Church," Boomershine observed recently (Ministers' Week, Perkins School of Theology, February 2-3, 1999), "is going back into an earlier culture where images are static, where books are still read out loud, and where organ music and the cultural atmosphere and the hymns of the nineteenth century dominate."

Boomershine compares the UMC's current methods to those of the Polish army in the 1930's. In response to the Germans' buildup of tank divisions, the Polish army leaders built up their cavalry, following years of Polish army tradition. When Hitler invaded Poland, a Polish general sent wave after wave of men on horses against Hitler's tanks. The result was slaughter.



## We're not getting our message across

We're getting an equally disastrous result from using nineteenth-century communication methods as the twenty-first century arrives, Boomershine warns. The growing percentage of older members in the UMC since the 1960's clearly shows, he believes, that the UMC is not communicating to the people of the electronic culture, the generations that grew up with TV. We're sending our print-culture horses against the world's electronic-culture tanks and being slaughtered.



## Becoming invisible?

The UMC "is becoming increasingly invisible and irrelevant to society, in part because we refuse to commit time, energy, and financial and human resources to interpretation of our ministry and mission through church and public media." So says M. Garlinda Burton, editor of the UMC's *Interpreter* magazine (in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, Russell E. Richey et al, editors; Abingdon, 1999). Burton believes we urgently need to take these steps to improve our situation.



**You are the light of the world. ... No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.**

—Matthew 5:14-16

- Train bishops, D.S.s, seminary faculty, pastors, and prominent laity to be bold spokespersons through the media on behalf of the church. Emphasize the voices of women, people of color, and non-U.S. UMC members.
- Join other denominations to fund and lobby for prime-time programming that would reflect Judeo-Christian interests on mainstream TV networks.
- Stop trying to prevent media coverage of meetings of top UMC decision-making groups.

- Stop making church media be slaves of UMC programs and bureaucracy. Let them feature news, opinions, and people-oriented stories that reflect and inform the thoughts, actions, and civic activity of grass-roots UMs.
- Create a UMC-wide computer and fax network for sending church records, disaster information, and news. Collect opinions with chat lines and other methods.
- Require public-media-relations positions in all conferences, but don't use them as dumping places for ineffective or hard-to-place clergy. Hire professional journalists.

"Media images ...", Burton points out, "communicate more effectively than an altar call in a sanctuary where an unchurched person may never come ..." For most people in today's world, whatever doesn't happen in the public media virtually doesn't happen, she finds.

Her message is vitally important. Will we heed it?

## Our tradition—leading the culture



What's ironic about this, Boomershine observes, is that mainline churches, especially the United Methodist Church, haven't always had this compulsion to stick with outdated communication methods. By refusing to move into electronic culture, we're trying to preserve tradition, yet the real tradition of Methodism has been to lead the culture in communication. We were once at the forefront of communications technology.

In the nineteenth century, Boomershine points out, the Methodist Church led in transforming the dominant communication system—print—for building up the church and for creating a communication system to liberate rather than oppress people. Methodism's founder John Wesley led in writing, publishing, and establishing schools. U.S. Methodist Bishop Asbury continued Wesley's emphasis on books by importing them to the U.S. from England.



The Methodist Church became the main sponsor of the literacy of women. It also sponsored the development of mass literacy, empowering people by teaching them to read and thus enabling them to get an education. The secular culture had been using literacy mainly for developing a system of power that primarily benefited rich men, but Protestantism in general and the Methodist Church in particular changed that system.

## A huge operation from a tiny start

The big innovation made by the U.S. Methodist Church, however, started in 1784 and turned into a huge, vertically integrated publishing and distribution operation. It started from a church member's brainstorm. With his 25-year-old wife's gift of the proceeds of the sale of her father's plantation, a New York City pastor started the Methodist Book Concern. His parish ministry and the formation of the Book Concern were totally interconnected, and he soon added a school and a publishing operation. The Book Concern became one of the nation's largest publishers, as well as the most innovative force in Methodist life and the most important factor in connecting Methodists to each other.



## Nurture and outreach



The whole church entered the publishing business in 1789 with a magazine, and the position of Book Agent became a leading position in the church's missionary outreach. By 1834 a Methodist newspaper was the largest-selling daily newspaper in the U.S., with sales greater than the New York Times. It became the main means of unifying the far-flung enterprises of the church. It also provided nurture for pastors and church members, and it was a means of outreach to many who weren't yet members but soon became members.



As the church's publication capability increased, the itinerant Methodist preachers provided a highly effective distribution system. In their saddlebags they constantly carried newspapers, books, and pamphlets that they sold for the Book Concern.

By the 1820's, Methodist publications included not only devotional books, Bible commentaries, theological treatises, and hymnbooks. The list also included Greek, Hebrew, and Latin grammars and other schoolbooks, as well as works of general cultural interest. By the time an 1836 fire destroyed the Book Concern, it was second only to Harper and Brothers among New York publishing companies.

## The most creative and effective system

When seen in a cultural context, Tom Boomershine points out, the Methodist system in the nineteenth century was the most creative and effective communication system in the whole culture. It had these important characteristics.



- It mastered the communications technology of the age, and it fully integrated the use of its productions into every part of the Methodist connection. Every local church, Sunday School class, woman's society, and class meeting used the most advanced communication technology of the age.



- The oral network of preaching and teaching in local churches was supported by the church's highly advanced print communication system. This combination was a major factor in allowing the church to succeed remarkably in evangelism

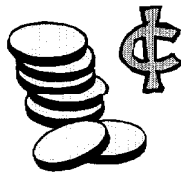
and to transform the culture by caring for people who had no safety network of social services.

- It combined the resources of the age to produce an interpretation of the gospel that was both intellectually tenable and technologically viable.



### This century—a very different story

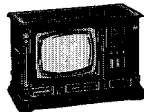
Unfortunately, Boomershine tells us, the use of communication technology in the church in general and the UMC in particular has been very different in recent decades. The UMC and the predecessor churches that formed it have lagged far behind the other institutions of the culture in their use of electronic communication, today's dominant system.



The institutionalization of electronic media in the Methodist Church started in 1940, Boomershine reports, with the creation of Methodist Information. It was a tiny

news bureau with a tiny budget, and it was merely a public-relations agency for the church. The communication and extension of the gospel, which had been the main aim of earlier Methodist publishing and distribution efforts, was never its goal.

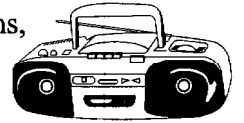
A Methodist radio and film commission was formed in 1948. Including TV in its name was proposed then but rejected until 1956. The Methodist General Conference established the agency but gave it no money and no staff. Its duties were merely to unify and coordinate the audiovisual programs and materials of the various Methodist agencies. It was located in Nashville where most Methodist Church agency offices were, not in New York where it could be part of the world of broadcasting, film-making, and other leading communications media. So this step into the future was crippled from birth by being made a mere servant of the past.



The twentieth-century Methodist Church took a few notable innovative steps in communications, but without giving them enough support or enough time to develop their potential. In 1960 the church created a nation-wide radio phone-in program that was the first in the communications industry, but then refused to keep supporting it.



We left it for the Rush Limbaughs, Dr. Lauras, and Don Imuses to use in conquering the airwaves.



In 1983 there was a major initiative in the church to raise a small amount of money to buy a TV station, but it was decisively rejected.

### A network Time Warner would die for?

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Methodist Church was what we now call a vertically integrated network of institutions—a system in which all aspects of creation, production, and distribution are controlled and integrated. The Methodist communication system, Boomershine observes, was that day's equivalent of what we now see in conglomerates like Time Warner, which owns amusement parks, record companies, video



production companies, sports teams, film creation and distribution companies, and networks of theaters, whose products all support each other.

In fact, says Boomershine, the Methodist Church was a communication and distribution system even more fully integrated than some of today's conglomerates, because it had a vast network of oral communication outlets, its local churches. It was the kind of network, Boomershine notes, "that Time Warner would die for." What's ironic is that we still have that network, but we haven't made it part of today's dominant communication system.

### A revolution that we're ignoring

The development of electronic communication, says Tom Boomershine, is the most extensive revolution in communication technology at least since the invention of the printing press, and maybe since the mass implementation of writing in ancient Hellenistic culture. Many other observers come to similar conclusions.



A recent *USA Today* technology column by Kevin Maney (February 3, 1999) even talks about a second Reformation. The first one, Maney points out, came after the invention of the printing press in the 1400's, when the cost of information plummeted and its availability rocketed. Institutions built on the pre-Reformation order existed side-by-side with those built on the new order for a while, but soon the old ones

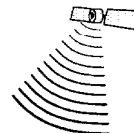
withered and the new ones took off. That's what's happening again now, it seems, and the question for our churches is whether we'll stay as withering institutions or take off and thrive.



### Will we wither or thrive?

At present, the needs of the print culture and the people who prefer it are commanding most of the church's resources, Boomershine points out. We need to continue our ministries to the people who still live in that culture that was formed in the past, but we need to integrate those ministries into a

larger electronic system and redirect our main resources to that system instead of to the older one. We'll need to make some other major changes, too, reorganizing church institutions at every level for doing ministry in the electronic culture instead of the horseback culture that our system is still designed for.



Are we willing? Will we transform the electronic communications media and turn them into a force for good, or will we keep letting them slaughter us like the tanks slaughtered the Polish cavalry?

*Barbara*

### World-changers? Christ's representatives?

"Will you serve as Christ's representatives in the world?" That was asked of the young people who were confirmed recently at my church, and for some reason it got my attention more than it previously had. What would happen, I wondered, if we all took seriously the job of being Christ's representatives in the world?

**"These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also ..."**

—Acts 17:6

Worship ended with a prayer song. "Take now my life. Let me live for thee. Fill me with your power, Lord. Change the world through me." We tend to forget, I'm afraid, that God wants that to happen. We forget, too, that changing the world usually requires speaking the gospel to it in its language. We need to remember that.

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