

## CALL TO ACTION RESPONSE

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The Call to Action is an important United Methodist Document, and it is imperative that we study the document and take it to heart for the good things it has to offer. The leaders who formulated the Call to Action have, in a sense, affirmed the obvious – Mainline Christianity in North America, and United Methodism in particular, are in statistical trouble. But we knew this already, so there is nothing new on this front. What is new and even refreshing about the Call to Action is that we are doing more than wringing our hands over the statistical slide: We are taking proactive steps to slow (and maybe even reverse) the statistical slide. From an organizational point of view, this is absolutely necessary. A Lily Foundation funded study from the previous decade concluded that Presbyterianism in North America would be statistically inconsequential as a religious influence in America within a quarter century if their slide was not reversed. There is a direct inference here also with regard generally to mainline Christianity in North America. We could put this in question form, “What would American Society look like today without the influence of town square and main street churches in the twentieth century? What will happen when this expression of Christianity is ‘statistically inconsequential’? I do not take this scenario lightly!!

The Connectional Table that oversaw the Call to Action Team employed a pair of high-powered polling agencies to interview people in 32,000 congregations. This did, indeed, give us a classic snapshot of Methodism, but a lot of it was a view of laundry on the line that looked like it went straight to the rinse cycle. There were some good things to report from these interviews, but if we take the Letter from the Steering Committee on the Action Report at their word, most of it was not good news? I find it disappointing that the people to whom we paid good money for a report will share only their summary conclusions and recommendations and not share their actual information with us. I suspect that part of the reason for this is that it is information that was already at our disposal from the previous Duke

Study that was part of the “Pulpit and Pew” study, the Baylor Survey, The Chicago Survey, The National Congregational Study and a Lilly Funded research reported by Martha Grace Reece in her book *Unbinding the Gospel*. And there are others as well. All of this and more is also between the covers of Duke Professor Mark Chaves’ 139-page 2011 book (including the indices), *AMERICAN RELIGION. CONTEMPORARY TRENDS*.

I guess we wanted to know whether Methodism’s slide from 11M to 8M reflected that we are more or less like the rest of mainline Christianity, and sure enough, we are. But if we delve deeply into what these other surveys tell us, if the sliding statistics are not disheartening enough, what about questions that touch on foundational ecclesial issues? Let me touch on just one: Adults coming to faith and being baptized into the Christian Faith.

I don’t know if the raw data of polling people in our 32,000 congregations touches on this, but as a professor of evangelism I find the Lilly Funded study on this point deeply disturbing. They played with their analysis points until they got to a point that they could distill an actual reportable statistic, and that took a while. They finally worked with this question: *How many mainline congregations baptized an average of 5 or more adults a year over a 3-year period?* The answer: Out of 30,000 mainline congregations, 150 congregations affirmed that they had baptized as many as 5 adults over the previous 3 years. The statistic is .005% of reporting congregations (150 out of 30,000). In 25 years of attending UMC worship services, I doubt that I have seen 5 adult baptisms **in total**. In surveys of my classes since I first saw this statistic a few years ago, less than half of any class who responded to this question have **ever** actually seen an adult baptism in a Methodist Church.

The reason that I use this particular biblical and theological point is not simply because I am a professor of Evangelism, but because of a particular point in the Call to Action Report. On page 6 of the Executive Summary we find these words: “. . . *any ‘reordering’ [of the church] should be predicated upon sound and accurate understandings of how to best direct*

*leadership, time, talent, and money to cultivate more vital congregations.”* After lamenting the lack of baptisms, we proceed to describe vital congregations as:

- Effective pastoral leadership including inspirational preaching, mentoring laity, and effective management
- Multiple small groups and programs for children and youth
- A mix of traditional and contemporary worship services
- A high percentage of spiritually engaged laity who assume leadership roles

I actually do believe that a vital congregation is a place where people are coming to faith, professing Jesus Christ as Saviour and being baptized into the Christian Faith, but I do not find it emphasized in our profile of a vital congregation.

The Apex Survey report on Organizational Behavior is even more purely managerial in both tone and substance than the survey on vital congregations. After a ‘do better’ bullet point to the Council of Bishops and a ‘mend your ways’ finger wag to the general church that we can’t agree on what our mission is in the world, we read (p. 7) that the path to renewal is paved with the following:

- Less perceived organizational “distance” between and among the foundational units of the church
- Better-defined leadership roles, responsibilities, and accountability; with greater clarity about outcomes
- More standardized management processes and reporting systems
- Streamlining of connectional structures to achieve effective governance, lowered costs, and higher levels of performance.

On page 8 we arrive at a gospel affirmation:

*Thus, the adaptive challenge for The United Methodist Church is:  
To redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of **vital congregations** effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*

At this juncture I got really excited, thinking we were going to get into sound Scriptural language. I was disappointed. To accomplish this we have a listing of 11 'mores.' More of this and more of that. And it is here that I really get frustrated, because I agree with every one of these suggestions to do more, be more add more; and I could add some more. For the most part I agree with so much that we are being exhorted to do.

It is the institutional and managerial casting of the document as a whole that calls out for reform – the language of organizational productivity and outputs is expressed consistently in ways that seem to prioritize statistics. I am for better statistical reports, but the essence of this document implies that the church can organize and manage itself into better reports.

Actually, I am pretty sure we can. I just do not believe we should. Joel Olsteen does a great job of this each week in Houston. To produce numbers he has it all together, and when we set up a preeminent statistical reporting system that becomes the measure of ministry faithfulness and effectiveness, we are in danger of chasing the wrong norms. This has little or nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. These are kingdoms of a different realm.

This report implies strongly that pastors who don't "produce" will be suspect. The dashboards will appear on a regular basis counting the statistics, and statistically challenged dashboards are obviously the byproduct of 'ineffective pastors' who are not producing the numbers. How far are we willing to take this? How about District Superintendents who oversee districts that are not "producing" ? Will they be taken off the district?, and then if they still do not 'produce', what will we do with them? How about Bishops in Annual Conferences that are not growing? Will they be required to stand for re-election?

Once we set things up on business models of productivity and measure effective leadership by statistical outcomes, how far are we willing to go? We paid a lot of money for statistical surveys, and they returned to us some rather uncomplimentary specific snapshots of who we are. The problem with this kind of statistical reporting is that it is mostly about us,

when there are deep and wide issues in religion in America that are producing the trends by which we are being victimized.

May I be so bold to suggest that our survey information is not sophisticated enough to place the church's dilemma in its larger sociological context. I spent two months in Europe this Summer, and I came home and told Dean Hays: "I have been to the future, and it ain't pretty." For Europe the dominant issue is rampant secularity in its many manifestations. Their problems are not really our problems **yet**, but we are not exempt from them either.

In North America, still much more comprehensively and pervasively religious than Europe, the issues around secularity are complicated by the rapidly changing definitions of what it means to be religious, even what it means to be Christian. I take just one example from Mark Chaves new book (p. 57) : *"About one in five Protestant churches is now independent of any denomination, and about one in five Protestants now attends those independent churches. Percentage wise this is a growth from 14% in 1989 to 19% in 2006. It is undoubtedly 20%+ by 2011.* Chaves also notes that if we took all the members of independent churches and put them in a single group, they would be second only statistically to the Roman Catholic Church in North America.

Even as we are holding our pastors dashboard accountable, they will be working against a social religious trend that demonstrates that joining denominations is increasingly unimportant to North American Christians. So when I ask, how far are we willing to go with this statistical gamesmanship, I am wondering whether we realize fully what we are doing. The demographics of our congregations are a mirror reflection of Protestant America, where the median size of a local congregation is 75 members. Even as the number of mega-churches has increased (a huge number of them nondenominational) the median size of 75 has remained constant. This means that around 90% of our congregations lack the membership and budget to compete in a statistically defined environment. This is a recipe for frustrating pastor and lay leaders alike.

My point is that I am deeply concerned about whether we have formulated a plan to lead us down the wrong path of confusing statistical outputs with Gospel transformation. Can you imagine the early church wondering about ways to be relevant to the Roman empire so they could reach them with Christian salvific truth. Why do we seem to think that North America was more plural than the Roman Empire and that we need to worry about asserting Gospel truth?

This past Spring, thanks to the generosity of Bill McCutcheon, I was at a NYC Leadership event where Bill Hybels spoke and answered questions for about an hour. He confessed to us that his leadership team was in a period of repentance for being inattentive to the Gospel claims on the lives of people who attend Willow Creek. They were getting them in the doors and they were keeping them entertained with all the things our survey agencies tell us we need to have vital congregations:

- Effective pastoral leadership including inspirational preaching, mentoring laity, and effective management
- Multiple small groups and programs for children and youth
- A mix of traditional and contemporary worship services
- A high percentage of spiritually engaged laity who assume leadership roles

His confession to us was this: “We were doing all this, but we were not seeing people converted and professing faith in Jesus Christ.” I fear that this report is fixated so much on an economic of statistical and fiscal scarcity that we are missing the divine economic of abundance available to the Church seeking the Kingdom overseen by a sovereign God. Lurking in the shadows of our fixation on managerial and organizational efficiencies is a heresy of self-sovereignty.

In all the good stuff that appears in the CTA Report, there is just too little explicit Christology and Soteriology; and I suspect I know why: Middle Class America finds it offensive. Actually, a really large number of Methodists find it offensive. I hope you will allow me to respectfully but strongly disagree with the Call to Action words: *Any ‘reordering’ [of the*

*church] should NEVER BE PREDICATED upon sound and accurate understandings of how to best direct leadership, time, talent, and money, NOT EVEN to facilitate vital congregations when we have defined vital congregations in ways that are fundamentally about bulking up our institutional dashboards. The 'reordering' predicate for Methodism should be this: God was in Christ reconciling the world, and God has raised up the Methodists to announce this Good News with clarity and conviction. We must again become a transformational movement of Christ's redeeming love in a broken world. It is not about market share, but sharing Christ.*

In 30 years of teaching theology students, I have never heard a single one testify that God called them to the ministry of reversing the decline of the institutional church. The men and women that God is calling are much more eschatological both in their language and in their expectations. God has called them to join the heavenly throng marching to Zion; rescuing our own Zion is simply not in the picture.