



*“Be Strong and of
Good Courage”*

A CALL TO QUIET COURAGE IN AN ANXIOUS TIME

BY GIL RENDLE

WE NEED A BETTER CONVERSATION ABOUT COURAGE.
THE ANXIETY OF THE DAY SURROUNDING THE MAINLINE
CHURCH LEADS US TO WANT.



PROLOGUE

We need a better conversation about courage. The anxiety of the day surrounding the mainline church leads us to want.

We quite naturally turn to our leaders wanting energy, clarity, even bombast. Our preference would be for heroics, for solution... indeed, for salvation. If, in fact, the knot that we face is Gordian in nature, we want for an Alexander great enough to cut through it with decisiveness. **And so we go in search of what we believe to be courage. We hope for characters larger-than-life with winning arguments and satisfying answers.**

I suggest that such heroics are not a measure of the courage currently needed from most congregational and denominational leaders in this post-denominational moment. The counterpoint offered in this paper is that the courage we now need is considerably quieter than that found in the noise of battle over truth or bold prophetic resolution that comes as "thus saith the Lord!" Our future will not hinge on resolution of issues of human sexuality, of global institutional organization, or divisions of resources.

WHAT IS NEEDED IS THE COURAGE OF STEADFASTNESS TO OUR PURPOSE AS WESLEYAN METHODISTS. "BE STRONG AND OF GOOD COURAGE." IT IS A QUIET, AND A QUIETING, COURAGE.

"Be strong and of good courage" is a phrase sufficiently repeated in the early books of the Hebrew Bible to be a pattern. The words encourage calmness and purpose when steps ahead are unsure. Consider the one use of the phrase in the book of Deuteronomy (31:6) – Having come through the wilderness, Moses tells his followers that they will have to go on across the Jordan without him. The land is unknown, and it seems even more unsure for the people to go ahead without their trusted leader. **So, Moses said, "be strong and of good courage, do not fear or be in dread of them; for it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."**

Courage was not in a heroic voice raising a banner, shouting "follow me!" The quiet courage in an anxious time comes from the leader who more simply keeps an eye on the purpose and who quietly says to those about, "keep moving."

However, being steadily purposeful in an anxious time requires courage because it is not the natural response, nor is it the response rewarded by an anxious people. Indeed, leaders need to do a considerable amount of preparation and reorienting in order to provide the quiet courage needed in this time of rapid and constant seismic cultural shifts surrounding institutions like the church that are struggling to change.

This monograph was originally written for use by the active bishops of the South Central Jurisdiction in a Conclave conversation, an ongoing gathering hosted by TMF for more than a decade. We believe that all leaders of the church need to practice active courage in the current unsettledness in which we live.

TMF has cared for the cost of preparing and publishing this monograph and offers it to you as a gift, an investment in your leadership in the church. Please feel free to share the monograph with others. You will find some resource questions and suggestions at the end, and we encourage you to host your own courageous conversations with your friends and colleagues in order to serve the purpose of the church.

THE NORTH STAR OF TMF: “To help the church become more purposeful and more clearly focused on her God-appointed mission.”



KNOWING WHAT TO BE AFRAID OF:

Having said that the needed courage is quiet and purposeful is not to say that it is passive. Courage requires the hard work of thoughtfulness and resolve. Beyond the easy idea that courage is a product of the heat of the moment, an alternative description of courage is suggested in the writing of philosopher John Silber. “Courage is very often misunderstood as a capacity to suppress emotions of fear,” he wrote. “Plato had a far more important and profound understanding of courage. He said that courage was not to be understood in terms of the emotions, but rather as the knowledge of what is or is not to be feared.”¹

Courage is less the response of the stirred heart than of the discerning mind. **Courage is knowing what to be afraid of.** This knowing takes a considerable amount of work.

To begin, consider an example of quiet courage. Recently, a consultant friend sent an email to me describing a planning session in a local church. My friend reported that in the midst of the meeting:

A powerbroker in the congregation tried to hijack the session when he stepped to the front of the room and said, "We have seven problems here, and I have seven solutions." Though the people were not rude to him, when he was done and had taken his seat, we picked up right where we had left off with people giving really powerful answers to the question at hand. The pastor is handling that powerbroker really well, and that's not easy since he's 70 and a former member of the [local] school board and several task forces of the mayor. She listens carefully and respectfully and thanks him for his advice and says that there is lots of good stirring in the congregation.

Courage need not be confrontational, pushing to win. In most settings, leaders don't need to win the day; they need to know to be more afraid of easy answers that do not lead to change, than to be afraid of displeasing the person who comes with the easy answer, or comes with a need for attention. It is the courage of a district superintendent making an appointment of a pastor friend because it is the right appointment to make, not because the friend will, or will not, appreciate the assignment. It is the courage of a pastor in a congregation that has slipped below the threshold of change, to end the search for yet another turnaround redevelopment program and to begin the conversation with church leaders about deciding what legacy of ministry to leave in the community or to turn over to another congregation. It is the courage of a bishop who, when invited into the broiling issues of a contentious denomination, does not take attention or resources away from the best leaders and most vital congregations where purpose is being accomplished.

Doing what is right because it aligns with purpose, as opposed to doing what is desired, is a courageous act because in church systems our leaders exercise their leadership "in community." The pastor, or the denominational executive, is a part of the community to which he or she offers leadership. In other words, the leader is dependent upon the very people he or she leads.

Being a leader in a dependent relationship with the people to be led is fraught with tension. One is free to lead, indeed, expected to lead. However, in a dependent system when the leader displeases or disappoints those led, the leader risks his or her own support system. Many stories have been told of pastors whose salary checks are late, or even withheld, because the church treasurer is angry. Pastors, their spouses, even their children, know what it is like to receive an angry word, a cold shoulder, or even the absence of a familiar invitation to a gathering because the pastor's leadership disappointed or disturbed equilibrium.

Leading "in community" means that pastors and denominational executives are leading in systems in which the terms of employment are set by the very people to be led. In such a system, exercising the leadership being asked for can jeopardize both the security and the relationships of the leader. In his compelling history of clergy in America, Brooks Holifield notes this distinctly American phenomenon that began centuries ago in the earliest settlements.

No trend affected the status of the clergy in early America more than the resolve of congregations to set the terms of employment. In the absence of a bishop, the Virginia assembly in 1643 authorized local vestries to choose their rectors and then present them to the governor for induction. Since induction virtually insured tenure, the parishes soon learned to offer ministers annual contracts, ignoring the governor and keeping the clergy under their control....

Not all the clergy found the arrangement satisfactory. Morgan Godwyn protested in 1680 that the vestries reduced the ministers "to their own Terms; that is, to use them how they please, pay them what they list, and to discard them whensoever they have a mind to it." Commissary James Blair bemoaned the "contrary Custom of making annual Agreements with the Ministers, which [the parishes] call by a Name course enough, viz. Hiring of the Ministers, that they may by that Means keep them in more Subjugation and Dependence." He thought that the practice drove good ministers away and dissuaded them from preaching "against the Vices that any great Man of the Vestry was guilty of."²

Setting the terms of employment is a constraint on leadership and is done in multiple ways in well-established systems like the United Methodist denomination. Setting the terms can be done very **formally** by the *Book of Discipline* so that episcopal initiatives or decisions can be constrained by calling the disciplinary question whenever the leader disappoints or disturbs beyond comfort. Setting the terms can be done very **informally** by measuring a pastor's performance by how satisfied members are with their own congregational experience, as opposed to whether ministry outcomes are being produced. Setting the terms is done regularly by quadrennial episcopal evaluations and annual pastoral evaluations that ask if the people want their leader's tenure extended without asking if outcomes of ministry are being accomplished.

Far from offering an argument that bishops or pastors be given more unchecked authority or guaranteed tenures, I simply want to acknowledge that **leadership takes courage. It requires courage to know to be more afraid of not stretching to be missional and purposeful than to be afraid that stability will be rocked and personal security threatened.**

In my ongoing TMF work with active bishops and with appointed district superintendents, **I have regularly encouraged these leaders to exceed the level of authority that their system is willing to give them.** For the relationship between leader and the people is always, quite naturally, measured by whether the people feel safe and comfortable. Led out of slavery, only 45 days after leaving Egypt, "the whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert," (Exodus 16: 2) because they were unsure of having enough food. This is not hyperbole; this is normative behavior. Whenever we are unsure or feel threatened we turn to our leaders, not to encourage them to continue their purposeful path, but to ask them to relieve our distress, to return us to comfort, even if the regain of comfort includes a return to slavery. People only naturally extend the use of authority to their leaders up to, but not past, the point of discomfort. If the leader does not act to reduce anxiety and to return equilibrium and comfort to the system, or if the leader does not give the people a good reason for their discomfort, the people will quite normally and naturally look for ways to sabotage the leader. We naturally look for ways to constrain the very leadership we ask for. My point with bishops and district superintendents is that, if they truly hope to make a situation different, if they want change, they must be willing to exceed the level of authority that people willingly and easily give.

To summarize, courage is knowing to be more afraid of not being able to move the church toward its missional purpose of changing people's lives and transforming their communities, than to be afraid of our own anxiety and loss of familiar comfort as we face change. Indeed, one of the definitions I have given to the work of courage is being willing to lead without regard for reward.

THREE CHALLENGES TO QUIET COURAGE:

There is a context for understanding the practice of courageous leadership defined by the limits of discomfort many in the church want to avoid, and by which they will evaluate and constrain their leaders. Let me name three issues within that context, and then explore each separately.

- 1. THE FIRST IS OUR DESIRE, AS CONGREGATIONS AND AS CHRISTIANS, TO WANT TO BE STRONG AGAIN AND TO LIVE AT THE CENTER OF OUR CULTURE, WITH THAT CULTURE'S RESPECT.** We want people to seek us out and to want what we have. We want to replicate an experience from the time when the mainline church was the *de facto* “established” church in a self-professed Christian nation. It is the challenge of nostalgia that encourages us to try to reclaim what we once had, rather than risk what we are missionally called to do next.
- 2. THE SECOND CHALLENGE IS THE CURRENT FORM OF OUR OWN CHRISTIAN VALUE OF EMPATHY THAT MAKES US SENSITIVE TO, AND FEELING RESPONSIBLE FOR, WEAKNESS AND SUFFERING -- PARTICULARLY WHEN WE SEE IT WITHIN OUR OWN FELLOWSHIP, OUR OWN CONGREGATIONS, OUR OWN DENOMINATION.** The sense of empathy, learned in our personal Christian formation, makes it difficult to know the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Widow's Mite and then be strategic about the use of our own resources in ways that do not immediately relieve the suffering of those around us whose names we so well know. Leaders who increase the anxiety and who won't carry the burden of our weakest congregations and our least able clergy quickly exceed their limit of authority and their terms of employment are quickly constrained.
- 3. FINALLY, COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP IS CONSTRAINED BY THE INTERNAL DIVISION THAT THREATENS ALIENATION AND SCHISM.** We have too easily defined community as agreement – an idea that worked rather well in times of great cultural consensus and cohesion. However, communities that agree to agree as the basis of being together, actually condemn themselves to be pseudo-communities. Mature, healthy communities engage in honest discourse over differences and willingly live with the discomfort of the tension produced. Our current unwillingness to live together in disagreement and discomfort prompts us to search for bold decisive leaders who will identify winners and losers and return us to an equilibrium from an earlier remembered time.

Let us then explore each of these three challenges briefly.

1. QUIETLY STEADFAST IN THE FACE OF NOSTALGIA:

Steadfast, without regard for reward, is an apt description of the courage currently appropriate at a time when the church needs to "keep moving" – to continue to pursue a path ahead and avoid the temptation of looking back. In any wilderness situation, comfort is always located in where we came from in the past, because the only thing lying ahead is the unknown. So, rather than the bold "follow me" that is wanted from leaders who claim they know the way ahead, or the tempting comfort of leaders who promise to take us back to easier times, the steadfastness of being fixed on an unknown future guided by purpose and being constant and unswerving to find new steps ahead is the truly courageous act.

One of the descriptions of leadership that I have long appreciated is that **the first task of a leader is to give people an honest description of the current reality.** Our current reality is that we are not in a turn-around situation. Leaders cannot take us back to a more comfortable time when the church (especially the mainline church) was established at the heart of the culture as a bedrock, trusted institution. We have steadily lost members and participants since 1965 – for more than 50 years. Our members have steadily gotten older, not replaced by younger generations in numbers sufficient to keep us as young as our communities. As demographics change, a large number of our long-established congregations are now located away from easy access to the people they wish to attract. We hold an immense investment in property that is often dramatically underused and poorly maintained. Organized religion (meaning congregations) attracts a continuously shrinking percentage of each successive generation since the Second World War. Ours is not a turnaround situation, and we have little that we can return to.

Importantly, we need to understand that the losses we have incurred and the challenges that we face are shared by all other membership-based organizations that have had similar experiences of loss and aging since the 1960s. The story of loss can also be told by organizations and activities from Kiwanis, Rotary, Masons, Elks, Eastern Star, bowling teams and bridge parties.³ Concern over the lack of institutional trust which plagues organized religion is also shared, deservedly, by the whole host of large organizations within government, business, education, the military, as well as the church.⁴

In the 1970s and 1980s the mainline church began our deep investment in ways to renew, redevelop, or transform (we argued back then on what to name this work) our congregations with the assumption that if our congregations got stronger we could reclaim the strength of our recent past. **The current work of strengthening our congregations through denominational and local efforts of "vital congregations" is still critically important -- when focused on congregations that actually have the potential to be vital. But, it will not reclaim our past.**

There are times – epochs, ages, cultural moments – when a convergence of unique conditions creates an environment that births and sustains a flourishing that is uniquely tied to that moment, but which cannot continue beyond the moment that created it. Consider that in the mid-10th century to mid-

11th century a Chacoan Indian culture suddenly flourished in remarkable ways in what is now New Mexico territory. The **Anasazi Indians** lived together in populous great houses, developed elaborate irrigation systems that nourished their farming, built razor-straight highways, established "lighthouses" on distant mesas to send messages in signal fires, developed a powerful priesthood, and were able to follow the movements of stars and planets in ways sophisticated well beyond their time. All of this was unprecedented in the history of this prairie/desert land. And, it was not to be repeated. As Hampton Sides tells the history of the Anasazi, after about 100 years "just as quickly as they had burst upon the scene, the Chacoan culture ebbed. The agent of their demise seems to have been an environmental collapse brought on by two devastating droughts in 1085 in 1095, and in part by the impact of a dense population living on a marginal desert landscape. Their expansion had been predicated on a kind of meteorological accident; they had been living in a hundred– year cycle of aberrant wetness...."⁵ **The Anasazi were a strong and vibrant people who could not sustain their present nor reclaim their past because the time in which they thrived was an aberration, it was not the norm.**

The Anasazi experience is noteworthy for us in our own moment because it can help us to see the impact of our own recent past which was also an aberration – a confluence of conditions that prompted growth and strength that later could not be sustained, not only by the church but by a myriad of other organizations and institutions. Yuval Levin offers a masterful description of our own 20th century in his recent study *The Fractured Republic*, subtitled "Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism."⁶ He describes the first half of the 20th century as an age of growing consolidation and cohesion. It was a time of massive growth of economic industrialization and centralization of government. A 15-year period of challenge and sacrifice through the Great Depression and World War II bonded the American people into a cohesive force built on a consensual national and global agenda. It was a time in which people agreed to agree and sublimated their differences in order to work together on a great, common agenda. It was particularly in this time of consensus and cohesion that the American culture pushed people toward membership in congregations and a legion of other membership organizations. The US exited World War II as the only global economy not devastated by the war and for a period held its remarkable position of producing a full half of all global manufacturing and production. We were a unified people with resources at hand.

Levin then goes on to describe the second half of the 20th century as an age of growing deconsolidation and decentralization in which our economy diversified and deregulated in energizing ways. There was a sustained push back against uniformity and cohesion (consider Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*–1950; Whyte's *The Organization Man*–1956; Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*–1945). An upsurge of individualism and the need for personal identity began to rise, supported by newfound interest in psychology and tied to the economy through advertising and technology.⁷ It was an energizing and vibrant age.

Levin captures the aberrant moment saying, "keeping one foot in each of these two distinguishable eras, midcentury America combined cohesion and dynamism to an exceptional degree."⁸ It was in this mid 20th century time that the mainline church, like so many other institutions and organizations, aggressively pursued growth, bureaucratic structure and strength, as well as resource and property

development. We became large, strong and institutional in a cultural moment that favored large, strong and institutional.

However, the age of large and consolidated strength has waned, and "micro powers" and small expressions of community are now taking the global stage.⁹ **Ours is not a turnaround situation in which we can recapture the size and strength of a large institutional system once sustained and nourished by a culturally aberrant time.** It is encouraging to recall that the church has gone through other aberrant times, such as the several Great Awakenings and the Western expansion of the United States – and we found ways to thrive in the aftermath of each. It is less encouraging to note that we are now living into this current aftermath which is defined by micro powers and small communities, but are still dependent on our memories of size and strength, and still constrained by the polity, policies and practices once effective in a large institution.

Perhaps one of our greatest challenges now is nostalgia – our fine tuned and rose-colored memory of how good things once were. The average age of United Methodists as of this moment is 57, which suggests that as a people we are particularly sensitive to, and bound by, the baby-boomer memories of our own golden mid-century shared experiences of the large institutional church. However, nostalgia invites us to go back, not forward. With his focus on our current debilitating American impasse in which neither political party can develop an agenda for the future, Levin makes the observation:

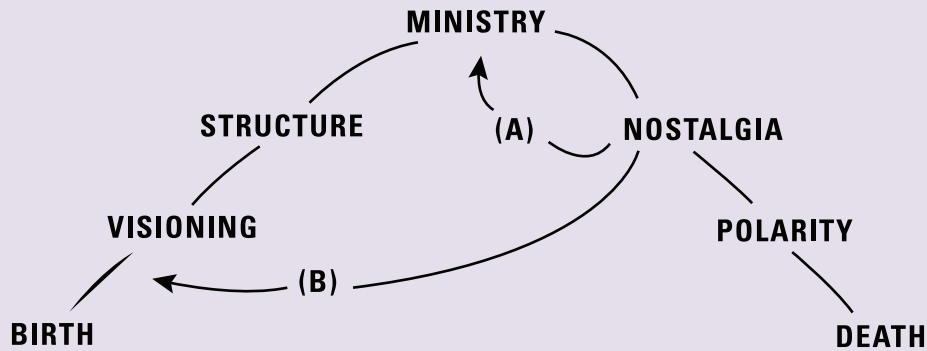
The lost Golden age at the center of these [nostalgic] stories occurred in the decades that followed World War II. A great many of our current political, economic, and cultural debates are driven by a desire to recover the strengths of that period. As a result, they are focused less on how we can build economic, cultural, and social capital in the 21st century than on how we can recover the capital we used up. That distinction makes an awfully big difference.¹⁰

It is a distinction that courageous church leaders need to clearly understand.

Nostalgia carries the temptation to work harder at what we already know how to do in order to recapture a time and strength that no longer exists. Nostalgia does not ask us how to be different for the future.

An early, well-known model of the **life cycle** of a congregation identified the stages of the development of the congregation from its **birth** – to the stage of **visioning** (agreement on its "why") – to the stage of **structuring** (agreement on its "how") – to the stage of **ministry** (actually living out its mission). That early life cycle model pointed out that a prolonged settled time in the stage of ministry would inevitably lead to the stage of **nostalgia** (remembering how good it used to be) to the stage of **polarity** (divisions and disagreements on whose fault it is to no longer be strong) to the inevitable stage of **death**, if the decline is not interrupted.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF A CONGREGATION



There is a temptation in the stage of nostalgia, very familiar to those who work with congregations, for leaders to reach back and to try to recapture the most recent stage of strong, vital ministry by doing problem solving that is familiar – let's get a new pastor, let's start a new program, let's improve our music, let's put media screens our sanctuary.... Full of multiple “answers” that seemed promising, this hard but ineffective work is captured by line (A) above. However, when the aberration of time has shifted to a new and different moment – when the time of familiar ministry is over – the much more difficult work of line (B) above is required. The questions of “what to do” are replaced by the much deeper questions of **identity** (who are we now?); of **purpose** (what does God asked of us now?); and, paraphrasing the words of the Psalmist, of **context** (how do we now sing the Lord’s song in a land that has become foreign around us?). These deeper questions require not the hot, bold frenetic heroism of redevelopment experts who claim to come with answers and activities in hand, but the quiet, steadfast leadership of courage willing to walk into a wilderness not yet understood but uncomfortable and inhospitable to how we have learned to live in the past.

2. QUIETLY STEADFAST IN THE FACE OF EMPATHY:

Empathy is the capacity to understand and feel what another human being is experiencing. Stemming from the Greek *pathos* (passion or suffering), empathy is what leads us to the common good. In a recent visit to Emory and Henry College in Virginia, I was part of a group in conversation with Tal Stanley, director of the Appalachian Center for Civic Life. Emory and Henry College lies deep in the liberal arts tradition where the purpose of education is not just to prepare the student for the workforce, but to form the student as a person. Stanley talked to us about citizenship and the college's commitment to form persons connected to others in their place, their community, through imagination (a picture of what does not exist) and through empathy (the ability to see beyond themselves and be mutually connected to others). Empathy makes us part of community. Empathy is equally at the heart of the Christian experience and our concern for “the least, the last, and the lost.” It is reflected in our mission outreach, our concern for nurturing Christian community, and our pastoral care of one another in times of need. Empathy connects us to one another.

In our current cultural American moment which is driven by individualism, Hugh Heclo argues that our national social contract is now understood as the right of every person to pursue his or her own

happiness as long as their pursuit does not infringe on the right of other individuals to do likewise.¹¹ Empathy, as embodied in our churches, our schools and our families, is deeply needed as a corrector to this individual pursuit of happiness gone awry. It is easy to argue that individualism, unchecked, leads to a consumerism that produces emptiness, to greed that robs us of meaning, to personal security that endangers others. Empathy reminds us that we are more than individuals, we are also community and are responsible to a common good. It is the difference that Peter Block points to between being a *consumer* and being a *citizen*.¹² Empathy motivates us and moves us from the focus on our own desires to the needs of the common good of the fuller community.

Note that, at its heart, empathy is sensitive to and engaged by suffering, by pain. Empathy connects us to others and quite rightly leads us to want to reduce the suffering and to relieve the pain of those others. **However, the argument I want to pursue in this exploration of courage is that, despite empathy living at the heart of our faith, in our current situation unconstrained empathy can lead us away from our purpose. Individualism unchecked, leads to emptiness. Empathy unchecked, I will argue, can lead us to paralysis. Unchecked empathy for the pain that we see about us in our own denominational system can easily become a Christian strength practiced to the point that it becomes our missional weakness.**

If, indeed, we built a large, strong, bureaucratic denominational institution in an aberrant era that thrived on institutions that were large, strong and bureaucratic, then we cannot hope to sustain what was created when those earlier aberrant conditions changed. We are now in a place where we are living off the increased giving of a smaller and smaller number of people who are getting older and older – an unsustainable formula. We have thousands of congregations once appropriately located for easy access to the travel patterns and distances of an earlier age, but that no longer relate to the demographic shifts and transportation patterns of the current time. The average worship attendance needed to support the salary and benefits of a full-time ordained clergy person is 150. The current average worship attendance across all congregations in the United States is 75.¹³ We now require a congregation to be twice the size of the average just to satisfy our institutional economic model. We have vital congregations, most of which tend to be larger. Projections of survivability of our small congregations indicate that over a period of a few decades our United Methodist denomination should expect to close about a third – over 10,000.¹⁴ **The bottom line of our current situation is that, denominationally, we cannot avoid internal pain and suffering.**

While it takes hard work and can be exhausting, growth is not necessarily painful. Thomas Friedman has pointed out that **it does not take a plan to grow**.¹⁵ In a time when all is growing around you, when consensus breeds agreement and when resources are both available and constantly increasing "a rising tide raises all ships." When only decades ago a culture of consensus and cohesion pushed people toward our congregations in search of membership, when an expanding economy made resources both available and cheap, our earlier generation of leaders were tireless, effective and efficient. We grew, we started new churches and built new buildings, we became complex, and we managed ourselves through a centralized structure. Tiring, yes. But, it was not painful work. It was highly rewarded.

However, as Friedman further notes, **when conditions change, you *do* need a plan to shrink.** Shrinking is harder work than growing. Resources (people, dollars, time) become limited and restricted. All agendas can no longer be satisfied, all preferences cannot be honored, all traditions cannot be continued, all expectations cannot be met. In other words, leaders must make decisions. Priorities must be set and acknowledged so that people will understand that resources must be directed in the most purposeful and strategic manner. Leaders must be able to say that "this" is more important than "that" and direct attention and resources accordingly. At such times, some congregations will feel discounted, some clergy will feel uncared for, some constituent wishes will not be satisfied, some issues of ministry will not be funded or supported.

When a system shrinks from an earlier large size, when resources once dependable become restricted, the result is felt as pain. As noted, pain engages empathy. Every year, as local churches get smaller, the aggregate dollars available to pay clergy salaries shrinks by as much as \$250,000 or more in a single annual conference. Yet, the expectation that lingers from a time of growth is that clergy, throughout their career, will, with every appointment, be sent to a larger congregation with a larger salary. When reality intrudes and a pastor is appointed to a smaller congregation, receives a reduction in salary or is deployed to a community that is not preferred, it is often received as being misunderstood, underappreciated or disregarded. **Pain is felt and empathy is invited.** When a congregation shrinks to a size when annual giving can no longer support the pastor's salary, leaders may wish that the district superintendent find dollars from the general church to allow them to continue as they have been. The congregation might argue that they have been in place in that community for multiple generations, even hundreds of years. To not be subsidized by the denomination to which they have sent their missional apportionment dollars year after year can be felt as callous, as part of a system in which the larger church always takes but never gives. **Pain is felt and empathy is invited.** When a member of the annual conference seeks the continuation or increase in funding once directed to a place of personal importance (the church camp where they met their spouse, the college where they felt their call to ministry, the caucus or ethnic group to which they belong, the specialty of ministry for which they have great passion), and the funding cannot be provided, **pain is felt and empathy is invited.**

Courage, being steadfast in the face of empathy, requires leaders to practice the Christian disciplines of caring, mercy and justice in their personal lives but not be swayed by all expressions of pain or dissatisfaction in the church where they are called to be missional and strategic leaders. Unconstrained empathy in the face of necessary institutional restructuring and redeployment can lead to paralysis. When the difficult but necessary decisions of leaders lead to expressions of pain, and when empathy calls forth a reflexive response to reduce pain, then we will naturally sanction our leaders from making difficult decisions – we will choose comfort over purpose, we will choose to forgo mission rather than to appear callous to colleagues or feel guilty about unaddressed suffering. **Unchecked empathy in a stressed system paralyzes in at least two ways:**

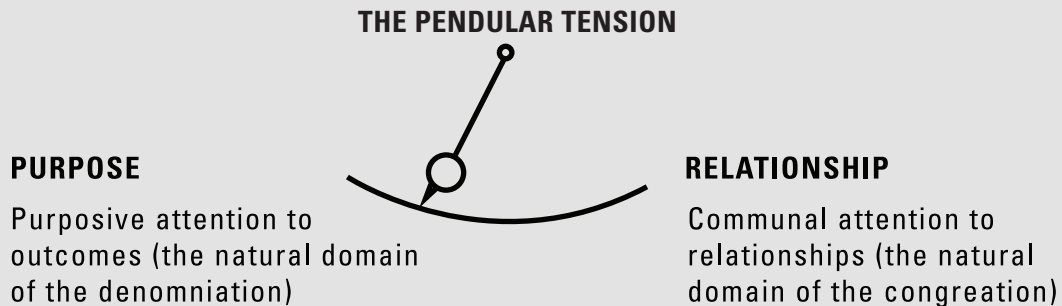
- Unchecked empathy favors relationship over purpose.
- Unchecked empathy favors weakness over strength.

■ **Unchecked empathy favors relationship over purpose.**

Denominational systems are composed of two separate parts. We are a **purposive organization**. Expressed missionally, this is the UMC claiming its purpose to make disciples and to transform the world. We are also a **communal organization**. We give great attention to socializing, to attending to one another within the organization. At our best, we care and are cared for.

Each of these two sides calls forth different responses and each is rewarded differently. The purposive side is rewarded when progress is made on intentional outcomes. The communal side is rewarded when we feel cared for, and when relationships are not disrupted.

As early as 1980, sociologist Peter Takayama noted that denominational agencies and seminaries commonly give preference to the purposive side of the church while congregations, quite naturally, give preference to the communal side.¹⁶ These two sides of a denominational system function in a pendular relationship, each expressing their own truth but moving in opposition to the other. Purpose demands discipline and sacrifice in order to address outcomes – which commonly intrudes on personal satisfaction and comfort to make its gains. Attention to personal satisfaction and unstrained relationships to avoid disagreement or disappointment commonly intrudes on missional strategies, constraining decisions that favor priorities over other preferences.



Denominational executives work more freely in the purposive side of the system because they are somewhat less fettered by closeness to the staunchly communal side of most congregations. Local church clergy, accountable to the denomination for purposive gains, but also accountable to the congregation for smoothly managed relationships, commonly find themselves caught between the different reward systems of the two pendular expressions of the same institution.

Nostalgia for the highly cohesive, consensual, mid 20th century resource rich, institutional church favors the communal side of the healthy tension between purpose and relationship.

We remember a time of agreement and rewards. Simply by tenure, clergy could expect successive appointments to ever larger congregations, with ever larger salaries, over the years of their career. We remember a time when resources were plentiful and could support a very wide range of “good work” simply because it was good work for a Christian people to do, not because it was missionally strategic. Nostalgia makes us long for such a time of an abundance of resources, high rewards and secure relationships, and we long for the leaders who can take us back to that time.

Our more recent history of membership decline, aging populations and shrinking congregations has required the church to be more purposive. Resources are shrinking, which forces the need to make decisions, which means that some things must be identified as more important than others. Ours is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an uncaring church. But, all things can no longer be cared for. So, we are now faced by those about us who are disappointed, discouraged, even angry. Our natural expression of empathy, a cultivated emotion of discipleship, will want to bend us toward our communal side. The temptation to want to relieve our own internal suffering will paralyze our purposeful, missional side which is now needed to be dominant as the means by which we will live in this new cultural mission field.

■ **Unchecked empathy favors weakness over strength.**

At its worst, over-attention to stress and discomfort invites us to align our decisions and resources to favor our weakness, not to favor our strength. When threatened, denominations and congregations (like all organizations, families or individuals) are driven by anxiety. Ed Friedman has given a lot of attention to this normative response in his work with family systems theory and speaks of us now living in a culture of “free floating anxiety.” We are all living in the stress of economies that are shifting from local to global, of industries shifting from production to information, of decisions and directions shifting from macro power centers to micro power centers. We are generally uncertain what to expect in most areas of our lives.

Such anxiety, Friedman contends, invites people to become reactive, to herd together for safety, to blame others for their anxiousness, to seek quick fixes, and to sabotage leaders.¹⁷ Friedman also writes about the “fallacy of empathy” under this condition of anxiety.

As lofty and noble as the concept of empathy may sound, and as well-intentioned as those may be who make it the linchpin idea of their theories of healing, education, or management, societal regression has too often perverted the use of empathy into a disguise for anxiety, a rationalization for the failure to define a position, and a power tool in the hands of the “sensitive.” It has generally been my experience that in any community or family discussion, those who are the first to introduce concern for empathy feel powerless, and are trying to use the togetherness force of a regressive society to get those whom they perceive to have power to adapt to them.¹⁸

“A power tool in the hands of the sensitive” may feel like an overstatement in many cases within the institutional church. But anxious people too often call upon empathy – either wanting to express it, or receive it. And, since empathy is a response to pain and suffering, it can be used as a “tool” to ease the pain of the suffering and assuage the feelings of the disappointed by interrupting (sabotaging) leaders whose decisions are seen as the cause of the pain.

Courage, in the face of empathy, is the act of leadership keeping attention and resources on those people, and that part of the system, with the most potential to align with purpose and to move toward identified outcomes. Courage is to choose missional strategy over relational comfort – and to resource the strategy as needed. Courage is to choose not to be redirected by empathy when pain cannot missionally be avoided.

The Pareto principle (also known as the 80-20 rule, or the law of the vital few), named after 19th century economist Vilfredo Pareto, states that roughly 80% of the effects in any system come from 20% of the causes. Phenomena in nature, as well as in organizations, roughly seem to follow this distribution of causes and effects. The Pareto principle suggests that 20% of an organization (its vital few) will produce 80% of its intended outcome. Conversely, we can speak of 20% of an organization that will produce 80% of its problems or challenges.

If we were to consider a very simple example of a shoe store with 10 salespeople, general management strategy would be to resource and support the top two salespeople at all cost (the 20% vital few). These two most productive salespeople would be scheduled during the most productive business hours on the busiest days, they would be highlighted as persons in ways to encourage customers to form relationships with them, attention to their sales numbers would let them know their managers were aware of their efforts and motivate them to do even more. This 20%, this vital few, carry the purpose of the shoe store and make it thrive. Wise managers would direct few resources and little attention to the two weakest salespeople. Managers would not assume that additional training for unproductive people would improve performance by teaching what the poor performers seem unmotivated to, or incapable of, learning. By focusing on the strongest part of the organization, resources and attention are directed appropriately to accomplish purpose. Partly because a shoe store is not a communal organization, but also because it is clearly purposeful, empathy for those not receiving substantial resources and attention does not redirect or misdirect the organization from its purpose or the managers from their leadership.

Precisely because religious organizations are so communal, and precisely because empathy is an emotion connected with Christian discipleship, religious institutions over the second half of the 20th century have been tempted and trapped into an inverted missional strategy.

We have routinely directed 80% of our attention and resources to congregations and clergy least capable of making disciples and transforming neighborhoods. We have subsidized dying congregations. We have required continuing education of clergy uninterested in learning new ways. We have promoted and required attention to programs of congregational redevelopment for congregations unwilling to change. I do not wish to make an argument of blame. Some congregations have simply slipped below the threshold of vitality and purpose because the conditions about them, or within them, have naturally changed. Some clergy have passions, capacities, or motivation that no longer correspond to the deeper needs of the current challenges to the church. There is no part of conversation that needs to be directed to separating the good from the bad – congregations or people. The courageous leadership question is more clearly one of strategic deployment of limited resources – how does a missional leader identify and steward the potential that is within individuals and congregations to make disciples and change communities? Despite our empathetic impulses, leaders must attend to strength. We cannot be paralyzed by empathy.

3. QUIETLY STEADFAST IN THE FACE OF DIVISION:

*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

“The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats

Yeats’s poem about World War I has resonance for the mainline church that has been beset over past decades with issues of internal equity and survivability, with issues of social justice and with issues of moral behavior. The current issue greatly testing the unity of the church is human sexuality – same gender marriages, ordination of self-avowed practicing gays, abortion and, to a lesser degree, divorce. The church is clearly divided and, increasingly, it feels as if "the center cannot hold." Our bishops, upon consecration, take a vow to uphold the unity of the church, but are now left wondering unity at what cost and by what definition – particularly if unity is in tension with mission and purpose.

Heterosexuality was the norm throughout the first half of the 20th century, undergirded by law as well as by the church. A gay lifestyle and the gay community, present throughout human history, was as much a crime as a sin and considerably hidden by the culture of cohesion and consensus. The earlier part of the 20th century, driven by consensus and cohesion, was not hospitable to sub-cultures of any form, and alternative communities did not thrive easily in the open. If one was different from others, it was expected that the difference be hidden and the different individual was pressured to look and behave like the norm. Looking back, it made sense that there were no gays in my high school class in the 1960s. Those of my classmates who were gay were pained to hide their difference in order to blend in with the consensus and cohesion required by the culture. Now it makes sense, as I go back to my high school class reunions, to expect to greet my gay classmates, who in a current culture of individualism and diversity are now at pains to be identified as gays in order to have a sense of authenticity in their own lives.

As an early baby-boomer, I am now a part of the resident memory and nostalgia of an aging institution, caught by the naïveté established by the earlier consensual time. When I was ordained, I was questioned about debt and my use of alcohol. No one thought to ask if I would perform the

wedding of a same-sex couple or counsel a young woman to have an abortion. It was not then part of the cultural context. Divisions over some aspects of morality and behavior, both within the church and among the clergy, were largely hidden from view giving a sense of unity that may have been more of a cultural veneer than it then appeared.

Normative, acceptable, Christian behavior has always been contested among the various theological expressions of the church. There were once clear fault lines between the mainline, the evangelical, the Pentecostal, and the independent expressions of American Christianity. These fault lines were marked and managed by assumptions held about the appropriate use of Scripture in guiding the Christian life. Different strands of Christianity positioned themselves along a continuum of modes of scriptural interpretation producing a subsequent range of behaviors and lifestyles that were acceptable or unacceptable depending upon where one's Christian tradition was located on the continuum. Definitions of acceptable lifestyles morphed as one traveled from independent and Southern Baptist standards, through mainline, and on to Unitarian Universalist traditions. In mid-20th-century America, family and friendships were defined and delineated by location on this continuum. Internal unity within a theological tradition was fairly well stated and somewhat easily maintained by its location on the continuum.

By 1991 James Davison Hunter was able to describe a critical shift in American Christianity in his book *Culture Wars*, subtitled "The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law and Politics in America."¹⁹ Hunter very ably described how the differences **between** American denominations and theological traditions had moved to a new location **within** the denominations and theological traditions. Differences that once separated Southern Baptists from United Methodists we're now dividing Southern Baptists and dividing United Methodists, each within their own tents.

The differences by which Christians approach Scripture may yet in the future be further nuanced by our theologians and our practices, but the differences will not be resolved by any agreement. One gift of Holifield's study of the history of American clergy, funded by the Lilly Endowment, is its recognition that our divisions over Scripture have been with us unabated since the discovery of North America.²⁰ These differences fueled the historic and still on-going debate over whether clergy should be seminary educated, and if so, how to appropriately educate clergy since seminaries are where assumptions about the truth and the use of Scripture were set. The location of our differences over Scripture has changed from between to within our different denominations – but the differences themselves have not shifted. One conclusion from this history is that in this current culture of individualism and diversity we will not find agreement within the church on those parts of life in which we define appropriate behavior by Scripture. For our most troublesome questions of an appropriate Christian lifestyle, there is no scriptural answer that will be conclusive, except for those people for whom the way they read Scripture provides their own conclusive answer.

The current contest within the mainline church over same gender marriage and the ordination of gays is a *positional* argument. On any proposition, one vocal cohort will say yes while another equally vocal cohort will say no. Our history, as noted above, tells us that the differences between these positions, at their roots, will not abate. Our experience, having been through so many debates and

differences in the church, tells us that the way forward is not to seek agreements in an attempt to resolve or erase these differences – since they will not go away. One of the most helpful propositions guiding efforts to resolve conflict and negotiate agreements is the “truth” coming out of the work of the **Harvard Negotiation Project** that people do not negotiate their positions in a fight.²¹ A position is a conclusion. By whatever path, once we come to our conclusion about what is right or what is wrong, we do not negotiate further because whatever is negotiated is, by definition, no longer our established position. If our position is that Scripture says a lifestyle or behavior is right or wrong, that position cannot be abandoned, and any negotiation toward agreement with others constitutes an abandoning of the position.

As a new quadrennium begins following the 2016 General Conference, a new commission will be constituted by the Council of Bishops with the task of addressing the division(s) developing in the denomination. **One of the first tasks in the formation of this commission will be the framing of its purpose.** If the intended outcome of the work of the commission is **agreement** over issues of human sexuality, the commission will have little hope of success because agreement requires contesting parties to abandon their clearly claimed positions. If the intended outcome of the work of the commission is **unity** within the denomination, the work will again struggle to bring any resolve because unity will ask compromise by disagreeing parties. Compromise on any hard claimed position is again, by definition, not the position – and therefore an unacceptable step. As in politics, so in the church, compromise is better than gridlock, but it requires that everyone lose a bit of what is important to them in order to move ahead just a bit. It is a strategy of progress that uses checks and balances to avoid out-and-out winners and losers. But it does not engender passion, it does not build authentic community. Compromise that allows only parallel monologues instead of true dialogue was identified by Scott Peck as “pseudo-community.”²² It is livable, but only with a sense of falseness. Peck identified pseudo-community as the first stage of an immature community that requires **the courage to enter the chaos of disagreements** in order to grow into the kind of authentic community that many believe is reflected in Christian origins in the book of Acts.

For the purpose of this monograph, I will argue that **the real work of the church and of quietly courageous leaders is not the work of agreement or unity but rather the work of connection.** It is connection that finally brings us back to purpose. For, if we are to be connected to one another, we need to know clearly what holds us together that makes our discomfort with one another worthy. Our institutional ways are not enough.

In my book *Back to Zero*, I traced, in a very broad way, the connections of our earliest American Protestant denominations that began in the 1600s on American shores. In that earlier time, people were connected by the Western European regions from which they emigrated, connected by the American location to which they immigrated, connected by their distinctive theologies, and connected by their distinctive polities.²³ The connections were strong and strength-giving and their purpose was freedom and community. I argued in that book that over a long period of time, which included the homogenization of the American Protestant denominations and which included the institutionalization and bureaucratization of our denominations, the connections that once focused on our identities and theologies were reduced to much weaker institutional connections. What now

connects our congregations and clergy to their denominations are apportionments, pensions, health benefits and clergy deployment (appointments.) When denominational identity is expressed only in the aspirations of mission statements and media branding, and when the connectors that keep us together are institutional issues of operation and security, it is easier for congregations and their leaders to follow a culture of individualism, developing their own theological or behavioral litmus tests of faith. It is not a surprise that the data from the National Congregations Study indicates that ties between congregations and national denominations have now loosened.²⁴

I will argue that the question now facing our denomination is not whether we can agree, nor whether we will find unity. Our current question may be better focused on what connects us now that uniformity and consensus among churches and clergy has been replaced by individualism and diversity. Do we have a shared purpose, are there operational and clearly stated outcomes to that purpose – clear differences, beyond the aspirations of our mission statement, to which we are called to put our hands – which keep us connected to one another with a sense of call?

If we can, as United Methodists, move our conversations from human sexuality to purpose, we will have moved from **dividing positions to shared interests**. Positions are conclusions, and as noted, they demand allegiance and are non-negotiable. Interests are the reasons that lie beneath the positions. Interests are always negotiable because they are connected to our purpose.²⁵ **It is time to claim our clear purpose and ask about the ways in which we can be connected around that purpose, given differences and discomforts.**

We are now faced with prospects of division, if not schisms, over our positional differences. Anxiety is running high. People are looking to our leaders to solve the problem, relieve the anxiety, and return us to the comfort we had known in the past. The situation in our church has all the markings of the "free-floating anxiety" that we all see about us in politics and our global economy, in our institutions and corporations, in our families and our neighborhoods.

Such times and tensions of division are not new to the church and we can be instructed by history. Invited to speak about historical moments when the Roman Catholic Church faced such times in its history, Father Thomas Tifft, professor of church history at St. Mary Seminary identified six major examples from the past. Most instructive were his comments about the Council of Trent in the 16th century when the church was beset and divided by the Protestant Reformation (another positional argument shaped by Scripture.)

Never before had so many priests and religious women abandoned the church, with as much as 50% of Europe embracing Protestantism. The response, 20 to 30 years later, was the Catholic Reformation, which did not try to reestablish relationships or reunite with Protestants but set out Catholic doctrine in the areas of papacy, episcopacy, and the pastoral role. The church responded by going back to what was essential.²⁶

"The church responded by going back to what is essential." Rehearsing and reclaiming *who* we are and *why* we are (our identity and our purpose) allows us then to consider *how* and *if* we will be together. **One cannot talk about connection without talking about what connects us. This is**

the conversation now needed, and our current divisions are providing us opportunity for the conversation.

To be a diverse community around a shared purpose is possible and is evidenced continuously in our largest churches. It is common in our largest congregations to have members/participants span the fairly wide continuums of politics, socio-economics, social justice commitments and moral behavior. I have been in large congregations where young husbands hold bible studies focused on being the head of the household, while women in the same congregation meet in COSROW groups to strategize female leadership. I have been in large congregations where small groups advocate, while other small groups oppose, same gender weddings. I have been in large congregations where some small groups have a deep passion for evangelism while other small groups follow passions for mission, youth, or issues of justice – each seeking (competing for) funding and staff attention.

Large congregations manage their vitality despite, or because of, these differences by following **two principles. The first is that they never ask the people in the congregation to negotiate their own differences.** Be clear that the differences are not hidden in or from the congregation. People on one side of an issue are aware of, and know that the leaders are aware of, people on the other side of an issue. After worshiping together in shared space, rich in diverse individual and sub-group differences, individuals in large congregations are then free to, and are encouraged to, seek out their subgroups of agreement. Negotiating the differences in terms of who gets attention, resources or action is managed by the senior clergy and the governing board. Which then leads to **the second of the two principles. The senior clergy and governing board very clearly set the vision, the outcomes, and the priorities of the church.** Deployment of attention, resources and action is determined by the senior clergy and board because of alignment with vision, outcomes and priorities.

I have been in large vital congregations where passionate members and passionate subgroups are told by senior clergy and the board that their passion is recognized but will not be staffed or funded because it is not the outcome intended for the church at this time. I have been in large congregations where the senior clergy and board have recognized oppositional subgroups in the church with a very clear message that there is room for both, and for all, as long as each agrees with and supports the vision, outcome and priorities that drive the church. In other words, people and groups with deep differences are invited to stay as long as they share in the identity and purpose of the congregation, despite how different they may be from others in the congregation. It is not by accident that the mission statement and established outcomes of these large vital congregations show up engraved on the building, in all communication vehicles, and even in the liturgy. People are constantly being reminded why they are there and what connects them.

Healthy communities can live with differences. Differences must be resolved only if we seek to live in agreement or unity. Perhaps the most important point to consider is that our culture is now constructed of co-mingled differences. The differences, and the co-mingling of opposites, are now part of the very warp and woof of the individualistic and diverse mission field in which the church hopes to learn to live. Charles Murray (*Coming Apart*, 2012) describes for us a new demographic in the United States where the middle has been hollowed out and the strong, different ends of the

continuum hold sway. Yuval Levin (*The Fractured Republic*, 2016) gives us the picture of a larger culture now shaped by subcultures. William Strauss and Neil Howe (*The Fourth Turning*, 1997) describe generations whose values separate them from the generations that both precede and succeed them. Joseph Turrow (*Breaking Up America*, 1997) has demonstrated how the marriage of industries of technology and advertising has followed the strategy of dividing the American population into multiple, fragmented consumer units. Moises Naim (*The End of Power*, 2013) offers a convincing global argument of how old, national, corporate and institutional boundaries have disappeared giving room for "micro-powers" to hold greater influence. **In none of these significant studies of current shifts in both American and global demographics and values is there evidence of the pursuit of uniformity, agreement or unity.**

If – and perhaps this is the greatest challenge and opportunity now facing the church in its divisions over human sexuality – the church hopes to live in the current global, individualistic, diverse mission field with a word of Christ that others will be willing to hear, then the church will have to learn to live internally as a global, individualistic, diverse people who hold all of their differences but are connected by a shared purpose. Quietly courageous leaders will need to put into perspective the pain that some in the church currently feel. Quietly courageous leaders will need to avoid reacting to threats of division, withdrawal and withholding. Quietly courageous leaders will need to manage the anxiety of those around them. Quietly courageous leaders will need to give the church a better question to answer – a question of identity and purpose, not questions of correctness, agreement or unity. John Wesley, aware of the differences held by people around him, said that if others' hearts were as his heart, then he welcomed their hand in Christ's work. Quietly courageous leadership is the means to bring us to this place again.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT QUIET COURAGE (SO FAR...)

The argument in this monograph, so far, is that **courageous leadership is quiet, discerning, and above all else, it is purposeful.** I believe that we know as much as we do about courageous leadership because we have been watching some within our denomination practice it. Courageous leadership may, as argued here, be a product of understanding (knowing what to be afraid of) but it must also produce a practice of actual leadership. It must be actionable. It must produce changed outcomes. Knowing what to be afraid of needs to be aligned with priorities and behaviors that produce the change (unhampered by nostalgia, empathy, or division) that will give Wesleyan Christianity its voice in a diverse culture.

For the purpose of this monograph, I will point to four lessons learned by our best leaders.

1. COURAGEOUS LEADERS WRESTLE ASPIRATIONS DOWN TO OUTCOMES.

Religious people are aspirational. We resonate with visions of a Kingdom of God that is more than our shared experience of life as we know it. We easily think in terms of lions laying down with lambs, of justice rolling down from mountains, of the blind seeing and the lame leaping. We commonly speak of being "called", both clergy and lay, and are motivated by a better way of being, both individually and communally.

Aspirations motivate, they ride very close to the "why" that drives our action. But they do not direct. In fact, aspirations are often unactionable because they give great purpose without specific direction. The UMC "makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Our United Methodist mission statement is an aspiration that speaks of changed lives and changed communities that come about through an encounter with Jesus Christ. That aspiration by itself, however, offers little direction to what is needed to be a disciple or what kind of change is most important in a community. Aspirations speak of hope and intent, not of strategy.

In order to be actionable, aspirations need to be wrestled down to outcomes. An outcome, in the church, is the intentional difference that you believe God has called you to make in an upcoming, specific and limited time.²⁷ An outcome is a measurable or describable difference. It is a product of the purpose God has given, rather than a pursuit of one's own preference. It is the necessary next step toward the larger dream, the aspiration, and, therefore, is the targeted work for the next period of time, be it weeks, months, or years.

As noted, aspirations motivate. But, at their worst, aspirations without outcomes produce work avoidance. An aspiration can be so large (transforming the world, for example) that it cannot be accomplished as stated. Not being able to accomplish such grand transformations invites congregations and their leaders to just keep doing what they are doing, given that such grand transformations are so obviously beyond reach. Doing what we've always done is just an activity. Activities can use up energy and resources without making a difference. Activities keeps us busy, but may also provide a way to avoid the hard work of making a difference.

Quietly courageous leaders wrestle aspirations down to intentional, time-limited outcomes, and then measure the advanced toward making a difference. More than just being a good neighbor (an intent or aspiration), a clear outcome helps a congregation commit its attention and resources to reducing poverty, homelessness, or teenage alcohol use in its neighborhood over a period of three years (all intentional, measurable differences.) More than just being a place where people are affirmed for their participation (safe and easily accomplished without measure), a clear outcome helps a congregation to challenge its members to reduce incivility in their relationships with others or to be an active caregiver with others who are hurting (again, measurable changes.) More than just being a structure to manage an institution, a clear outcome helps an annual conference to begin specific experiments of ministry with millennial unchurched adults, intentionally encourage and help congregations that have lost their mission and purpose to close, or develop new modes for Methodism to thrive in demographics that can no longer easily support congregations.

Moving aspirations to outcomes is an act of courage because it involves making choices, setting priorities for specific differences, and directing resources. At a time when purpose is growing but resources are shrinking, this is the hard work of leadership – of becoming focused and intentional. Because all preferences are not able to be honored and because all ministry that does not aim at intentional missional differences can no longer be resourced, setting outcomes by leaders is not uniformly rewarded. **It is an act of courage that requires leading without regard for reward.**

2. COURAGEOUS LEADERS DISTURB THEIR SYSTEM IN PURPOSEFUL WAYS.

Change, in a non-linear world, is not the product of control, but of disturbances. The rate of change at both micro and macro levels is now so fast in our culture that leaders can no longer “lead” change. Older models of linear change once allowed leaders to assess the current state of their organization (A), project a future improved state of the organization (B), and then plan and direct the steps that would lead from A to B.

Educational theorist Michael Fullan offers a more helpful model in his work that explores not how to lead change, but how to lead in an environment of change. He notes that in a complex society, “complexity means change, but specifically it means rapidly occurring, unpredictable, nonlinear change.”²⁸ The only way an organization can thrive in such an environment is to be a learning organization – to be willing to constantly adapt by reflecting on its own experience and its understanding of the rapidly changing context in which it does its work. The role of the leader is to help the organization makes sense of its purpose, given its fast-changing circumstances that continually produce unforeseen consequences, and then to provoke it to change. Information and experience need to be continually transformed into actionable knowledge. Such change within an organization cannot be directed. It can, however, be prompted by leaders willing to ask questions which require learning – questions which “disturb” the system in a purposeful direction.²⁹

Asking disturbing questions that prompt purposeful change is in line with the notion of adaptive change introduced by Ron Heifetz in 1994.³⁰ Leaders need to be able to identify the adaptive (learning) challenge that faces their organization. The adaptive challenge is described as the gap between aspiration and reality – between what we say about ourselves and what we actually do. Congregation

say that they are warm and welcoming, but what they actually do is visit with one another as known friends at the close of worship and ignored the visitor standing nearby. Seminaries say that they prepare clergy to lead congregations, but what seminary graduates are more prepared to do is manage the life of the congregation as it already is rather than lead it into new and more effective ways of mission and ministry. Annual conferences say that they make vital congregations, but they spend more resources and time on problem solving and management of ineffectiveness.

Quietly courageous leaders look for adaptive gaps and ask disturbing questions. They ask why congregations don't grow if they have a stream of visitors. They ask why committees and commissions request annual budget allotments if there is no outcome produced beyond minutes of meetings. They ask why younger, ethnic and female clergy don't thrive in the denomination that wants to be diverse and inclusive. They asked why dollars are directed to subsidize weakness and unwillingness when the focus on the future is about vitality. By asking questions leaders direct attention, inquiry and learning – and influence the direction of change. The leader "provokes" the system to learn how to change by asking unwanted questions.

Disturbing the system in this way is an act of courageous leadership because it also provokes a reaction aimed at the leader who has exceeded the authority others would give by making the system uncomfortable. "When using authoritative provocation as part of a strategy," writes Heifetz, "one must be prepared for an irruption of distress in response to the provocation and to consider early on the next step. One has to take the heat in stride, seeing it as part of the process of engaging people in the issue."³¹

One of the critical lessons learned about quietly courageous leadership is that leaders do not need to have answers and solutions to the anxieties and fears that others feel. It is actually an act of courage for the leader to stand with people in the mix of their work and to say, "I don't know," yet continue to ask difficult questions. In fact, one of the barriers to the church adapting to a changed and rapidly changing missional environment are leaders who come with answers in hand and who want to direct how others should proceed. Leaders with answers and directions are quickly rewarded, at least initially. Such rewards assuage the anxiety that the leader himself or herself feels about situations of complexity where new ways must be learned. However, **true courage is managing one's own anxiety while standing with others in their work and quietly asking uncomfortable questions that provoke awareness and learning that makes others want to lean into change.**

3. COURAGEOUS LEADERS KEEP THEIR EYE ON THE MISSION FIELD.

Empathy invites leaders to focus on pain and weakness. Proximity invites leaders to assign importance to those closest at hand. Neither pain nor proximity are the appropriate clients of courageous leaders.

In a consultation with another mainline denomination, I helped leaders explore their denominational certification process that led to ordination. Like many denominational certification paths, this one required oversight of candidates by committees made up of ordained clergy. In our work, we got to the question of which of the candidates the committees spent the most time and the most resources on – and the answer was with the least promising: the timid people, the struggling people, the damaged people. When pushed, it became clear that the committees were scheduling more interviews with

these unsatisfactory candidates, requiring additional training, paying for therapy, assigning additional mentors and generally directing the bulk of attention and resources to these candidates because (1) these candidates were disappointed and in pain over not progressing directly to ordination, and (2) because these pained people were physically in the room being interviewed by a committee of clergy moved more by their pastoral hearts than by the purpose of their task. The "client" of the work of a certification committee is not the proximate candidate seated immediately in front of them. The "client" of their work is the mission field that, at that moment of working with the candidate, is out of sight but which needs ordained leaders strong enough and courageous enough to lead congregations in missional ways. Yet, these committees consistently misdirected their attention to these candidates struggling to rise to even the lowest threshold of leadership needed by the church. They were misdirected by the orientation of their pastoral hearts with empathy and by the immediate proximity of the hurting candidates.

It is quite easy, and highly rewarding, for leaders to address pain and proximity. The appreciation is both immediate and near at hand. But the client of the purpose of the congregation is beyond, and often out of sight, of the most needy or most demanding of the current members. The client of the purpose of an annual conference is not the most needy of its congregations or the least capable of lay or ordained leaders who keep asking for others to solve their problems. The client is the mission field – that newly reconfigured cultural context of people and communities that are now sensitized to be diverse and individualistic but who nonetheless search for a meaning and purpose of life for which Wesleyan Methodism can offer both hope and shape.

Like an aspiration which can be both on target with purpose but also unfocused and non-actionable, so too the "mission field" can be equally correct as a focus but also too grand and undefined to allow easy engagement. The quietly courageous leader needs to bring definition and clarity to the mission field. **A significant lesson learned so far is that courageous leaders provide definition to the mission field so that the "who" that is to be offered change through an encounter with Christ, or an encounter with the people of Christ, is clear and limited enough to actually encourage engagement and invite measurement of change.** This then brings us to a corollary learning about courageous leadership that has to do with aligning resources with purpose and a defined mission field.

4. COURAGEOUS LEADERS ALLOCATE RESOURCES TO PURPOSE.

The allocation of resources is the critical test of courageous leadership. As noted, the United Methodist Church is now working with limited resources of time, attention, dollars, and people to address a new bifurcated, hollowed out, multi-generational and multi-ethnic mission field. Leaders are working within an inherited institution that, quite reasonably is feeling the pain of the attrition of resources and the need to change. The request made of leaders from within the established church will be to alleviate pain and solve problems, but the need from beyond will be to shape new practices to help our purpose thrive in a changed landscape.

In a prior TMF monograph, I use the evolutionary theory of punctuated equilibrium to argue that the church is now living in an ecology with two dominant "species" of spiritual people.³² There are

those people who will do their spiritual seeking by quite naturally affiliating with religious organizations. There are now as well, a growing percentage of people in the American population who are spiritual but remain intentionally unaffiliated from religious organizations like congregations and denominations. The metaphor of "species" allows one to see that these two subsets of spiritual communities, the affiliated and the unaffiliated, can coexist in the same "ecology."

When a new species is introduced into an ecology, the earlier species is not necessarily, and certainly not immediately eliminated. The earlier aberrant time of consolidation and cohesion in the first half of the 20th century produced a population of joiners who filled our established congregations. They felt pressured to affiliate. While that earlier large cultural flow of members has been stemmed as we moved into the second half of the 20th century, the attraction of spiritual seeking within congregations, nonetheless, remains for some. The growing trend of disaffiliated seekers has not fully dislocated the established species of affiliators. "University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox has found that church attendance has declined twice as fast among Americans with no more than a high school diploma as among those with a college degree in recent decades. University of Nebraska sociologist Philip Schwadel, examining data from the General Social Survey, found that with each individual year of education, the likelihood of attending religious services increased by 15 percent."³³ So, generational evidence suggests trends moving people away from organized religion. Educational evidence suggests a trailing trend still inclining people toward organized religion. Economic and immigration evidence suggest trends of other subgroupings of less dominant and more niche "species" of spiritual folk. The ecology of the spirit, like any healthy ecology, is complex, interdependent, and constantly shifting in its search for optimal balance. As Nancy Ammerman notes in her thoughtful study that reaches much deeper than current "none and done" media sound bites, "Understanding every day religion requires a more open stance but without throwing out the institutions and the orthodoxies. Just as institutional religion is not the whole story, so attention to spirituality without institutions skews the picture."³⁴ The reality of the mission field now facing our decision-makers demands attention well beyond the earlier generation of joiners and is complex beyond the capacity of mere problem-solving to address.

Quietly courageous leaders need to remain steady in this bewildering mix and continue to missionally allocate already stretched resources for the purpose of the church. In largest part that means resourcing congregations which are finding ways to thrive in this culture and which can continue to attract those people who want to affiliate with an institution as a means of living a spiritual life. The potential of the institutional church must be stewarded toward the future. The implication of such courageous leadership is that resources also need to be intentionally redirected away from those congregations that cannot thrive in this new ecology. It means redirecting resources away from programs and projects of ministry that may be both good and right within the full context of the Christian faith, but are not now the necessary priorities for this missional moment of the denominational church.

Stewarding the potential of the established, institutional church is the greatest part of the work of our current leaders. In my earlier monograph I made the distinction between the work of improvement and change.

In the “land of the affiliated,” the work of making disciples is a work of improvement – seeking to make the current denominational and congregational systems more effective at doing what they already know how to do. Improvement, by definition, implies taking something known and making it better. In the “land of the unaffiliated,” to make disciples leaders must address the work of creation. Because it is unknown, and because it is not based on what is, leaders must work to create something that is not yet.³⁵

The bulk of the work of the institutional church remains in the realm of **improving** the capacity of established congregations to engage those people who still remain attracted to organized religion. They have not disappeared. At the same time, we need to recognize that this hard work of improvement will serve a small and increasingly constrained portion of the new American population. Some part of the attention and resources of the institutional church must be put to the work of **creation** – of learning how to address and engage people of the spirit without requiring institutional models and attachments. We have few, if any, economic models to underwrite this work which makes it even higher risk in a time of limited resources. By its very nature, the institutional church is not gifted at this work. Our current capacity for real experiments of non-institutional ministry with people is low. Current attempts are quite easily limited or subverted by our own institutional assumptions and regulations. Nonetheless, courageous leaders in our annual conference and in our most vital churches must begin to spend some increasing portion of our resources in non-institutional ways to underwrite an emerging Wesleyan Methodism that may or may not have a familiar institutional form. Such efforts of creating will help us learn how to invite an engagement of a much wider circle of people thirsty for a message of grace and a way of discipleship.

Again, the allocation of resources is the critical test of courageous leadership. **The pull is in multiple directions: the bulk of resources must be directed toward strengthening, either potential or already, effective congregations and leaders; increased attention must be given to redirect resources away from ineffective and non-priority congregations and programs, and; some resources must be committed to less-institutional or non-institutional experiments of Wesleyan community that cannot sustain themselves but which hold the possibility of bridging the growing chasm between the institutional church and the quest for movements of Christian faith.** Quiet, courageous leadership will be measured by the capacity of leaders to develop and resource strategies to address these multiple directions of the movement of the Spirit.

EPILOGUE

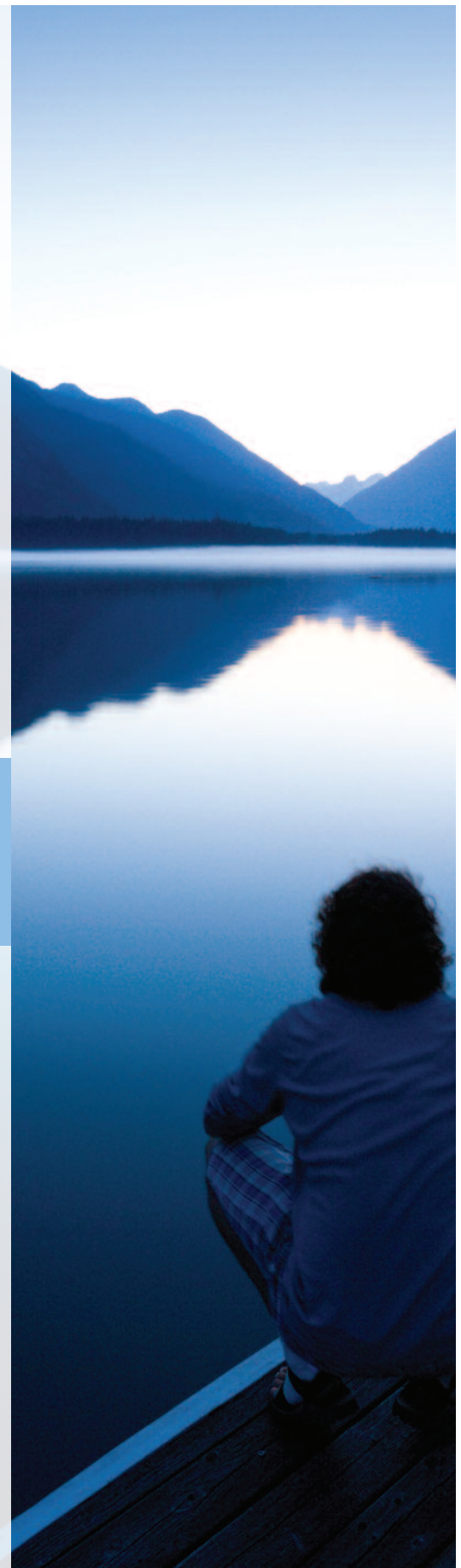
Why courage? With so much to be said, with so many opinions on what leaders are to do, why focus on courage? Poet Maya Angelou is famously to have said, **“COURAGE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL VIRTUES BECAUSE WITHOUT COURAGE, YOU CANNOT PRACTICE ANY OF THE OTHER VIRTUES CONSISTENTLY.”** The argument offered in this monograph is that we need to create and nurture a culture of courage among our leaders because without courage we will fear the wrong things, the lesser things, and we will shrink back from the necessary costs of faithfulness. Without courage leaders can easily shrink back to manage what is instead of creating what needs to be.

We began with the notion that courage is knowing what to be afraid of. If we are not afraid of the church becoming moribund in a radically changed mission field, we will succumb to lesser fears of disappointing colleagues or of failing to cure institutional ills. Courage is needed to face larger fears because larger fears require bolder actions with deeper costs that put one’s leadership on the line. It takes courage to know what to fear, and to face it.

COURAGE IS NEEDED TO FACE LARGER FEARS BECAUSE LARGER FEARS REQUIRE BOLDER ACTIONS...

It remains a curiosity that the deeper costs of leadership must so commonly be consciously chosen and can be so easily sidestepped. When what is needed to deeply change an institution is not what is asked for by the people, leaders can easily tire themselves addressing the anxiety about them without actually making things different.

Drawing on the work of Lord John Fletcher Moulton, John Silber writes of the **three domains in which each of us lives.**³⁶ The **first is the domain of law** which is that area of our lives where we do what we do because it is required of us. To not obey this domain is to incur the cost of the sanctions of law, be it civil law or the discipline of church law. This domain manages the tensions and boundaries within communities. **The second domain in which we live is the domain of free choice.** It is here that we do what we do because we are free to choose and no one can require us to proceed or to stop. The costs in this domain are smaller, defined primarily by our own



pleasure or disappointments in the choices we make. It is **the third domain where deeper costs lie, the domain of “obedience to the unenforceable.”** There are some areas of our lives where we must do what we do only because it is the right thing to do, not because it is asked of us and not because we are free to do otherwise. It is here that costs can be deepest because commonly we, or others about us, would prefer not to enter this domain. All three of the synoptic gospels tell their version of the story of the rich ruler who went to Jesus asking what was required to obtain eternal life. Jesus first responded from the domain of law and pointed to the commandments, which the ruler quickly claimed that he followed. The path of following the law not only escapes sanctions, but is rewarded in the appearance of righteousness. But then Jesus turned to the domain of obedience to the unenforceable and spoke to the ruler of selling all that he had and giving the money to the poor – not required by law, but necessary in this man’s life. The cost was too high and the ruler lacked the courage to enter this domain. He turned away.

Maya Angelou is right. Without courage, what is needed from leaders will not consistently be provided because the costs can be great. **Not distracted by nostalgia, empathy or divisions, leaders are now asked for the courage to shape outcomes for real change and to direct resources in ways to move us closer toward the purpose of the church, even at the cost of the institution of the church.**



*“Be Strong and of
Good Courage”*

A CALL TO QUIET COURAGE IN AN ANXIOUS TIME

BY GIL RENDLE
TMF SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT

RESOURCE QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO HELP PROMPT COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION:

- Which particular challenges and assumptions (nostalgia, empathy or division, for example) most tempt us, in our church, to shrink back from courageous, purposeful leadership?
- In what ways are the resources (people, dollars, time, attention, prayer) in our church appropriately, or inappropriately, aligned with our purpose and our intended outcomes?
- Where is my own personal courage most challenged as a leader in the church?
- What, specifically, would “leading without regard for reward” require from me and the leaders of our church? How will I get the support I need to practice such leadership?
- How can I invite others into purposeful, missional conversation around difficult topics? Where do I need to provide encouragement to others so that they might be courageous? Where do I need to provide cover or support for those already stepping out in courageous leadership?

THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER ABOUT INVITING CONVERSATION ABOUT COURAGE IN THE CHURCH:

- Some convictions we hold at TMF:
 - We believe that conversation (authentic dialogue in which we carefully practice both speaking and listening) is the currency for change in the church.
 - Commonly, the people who most need to engage in authentic dialogue do not have frequent opportunities to talk about the most important things.
 - If you “get the right feet, under the right table, talking about the right question” the Spirit of God will provide the next steps and opportunities.
- Conversations are most effective when:
 - There are between 4 and 10 people (enough to make the conversation rich but not too many to restrict the “air time” for each person to talk).
 - People are clear about the topic, the purpose, and the intended outcome of the conversation before the conversation begins.
 - Someone takes responsibility to be the facilitator of the conversation, making sure that all have a chance to participate, that the conversation does not go off topic, and that all feel safe to share.
 - Someone takes responsibility, 1 to 3 weeks later, to check in with participants and ask what difference in thought or behavior was prompted for them by the conversation.
 - Leaders are open to one conversation leading to another, as needed and appropriate.

ENDNOTES

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- ²⁰Holifield, 2007.
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- ²²M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.)
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- ²⁸Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) p.v.
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- ³⁰Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1994.)
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