

Stay or Go?
*Deciding the Future of
The United Methodist Church*

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A Six-Part Series for MinistryMatters.com

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Preface

These articles were written over the past six months during what I consider the second most turbulent time in Methodist history, as United Methodists decide how to faithfully divide. (The most turbulent time, in my view, was the period following the Civil War when Methodists decided how to faithfully unite.) They are not intended to instruct Methodist churches and leaders *what* to decide from conviction. They are intended to coach Methodist churches and leaders *how* to decide with integrity.

The temptation in such turbulent times is to make reactionary decisions, influenced by emotions, egged on by hotheads, based on single issues, to gain political power. Such decisions are driven by resentment rather than hope. In order to be genuinely hopeful, decisions should be made strategically, shaped reasonably, guided by cool heads and warm hearts, cognizant of multiple issues, for missional influence.

The habitual behavior of the church was once top-down. Councils and conferences would make decisions, and their directions would filter down to local leaders and congregations, who might or might not agree, but who equated faithfulness with obedience. That habit is long gone. The habitual behavior of churches is now bottom-up. Regardless of hierarchical policies, local churches (members, adherents, clergy, and boards) will make their own discoveries and decisions and create their own compromises and conversations.

The era of global centralization is coming to an end. What does this mean for the church? It means that standardization and uniformity can no longer be imposed by a ruling body for every nation or culture. It means that regions must take authority and responsibility to shape the future of ministry in each national or cultural context. It means that policy-making is less important than relationship-building. And it means that partnerships between churches, or between churches and public sectors, cannot be based on complete theological or ideological agreement. They can only be based on good will, shared work, and mutual accountability to the marks of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, constancy and self-control.)

There are three assumptions underlying these articles. I call them the *Three Principles of Local Religion*. This is religion as it is lived out, not as it is theorized, systematized, dogmatized, or politicized. It is not religion forced into the structures of academic research or denominational policy, but religion as it is pursued locally, in community, by an infinite variety of “ordinary” citizens.

Principle #1: Cultural Diversity + Individual Mobility = Community Flexibility.

Global cultures are multiplying exponentially into more and more distinct lifestyle segments. In the secular world, this means different “markets.” In the religious world, this means different ministry expectations. Add to that the extraordinary mobility that allows individuals to travel and interact physically and digitally. The result is that

neighborhoods or communities (urban, suburban, rural, and remote) must become more flexible in their relationships for everyone to survive and thrive.

Principle #2: Different people seek God for different reasons, experience grace in different ways, and express their gratitude through different symbols.

One size shoe does not fit all feet. The world is a bubbling cauldron of spiritualities as individuals and groups are driven by unique circumstances to yearn for the real presence of God. Some are lonely and lost; others are shamed and angry; others are physically, relationally, or mentally broken; and still others are trapped and dying; and still others are isolated and abandoned. And God is there, as each has need for healing and hope, vindication and justice, companionship and guidance, liberation and new life. Each expresses gratitude through different images and songs, rituals and practices, tattoos and slogans. No need, blessing, or joy is better than another. They're just different.

Principle #3: My way may be different from your way, and all ways can become part of God's way, but only God knows how.

There are two ways to react to diversity: righteous indignation or profound humility. You can be threatened by it or awed by it. Everyday Religion does not deny that there are absolutes. It only insists that they be adaptable to circumstances. The "my way or the highway" mindset may be noble, but it is not peaceful. Authentic community is based on the principle that *I may think I know what is right, but I might be wrong.*

These days the church talks a lot about "authentic" community, and all too often falls short in the eyes of the public. This is because "authentic" community does not emerge from prideful confrontation, but from humble conversation. It is not resentful. It *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.* After all, *now we only know in part; later we will know fully; even as we are fully known.* As St. Paul reminds us, authentic community is not a community of children. It is a community of adults. Some leaders and boards on the extreme left and right are absolutely certain and radically committed to a course of action. They are willing to stake their careers, relationships, and assets to do it. Most leaders and boards, however, are somewhere in the middle. They may lean to the left or right, but they are tentative and cautious. They want to take their time, count the costs, and manage the risks.

These articles are primarily for those "in the middle" — or perhaps it is better to say "in a muddle" — to help them behave empathically, think strategically, and behave compassionately. But they may also be helpful to those who are absolutely certain and radically committed. The experience of extreme leaders in every denominational split is that they look back and wonder where the people went. This is why, in every church split, the sum of the fragments does not equal the size, credibility, resources, or influences of the whole.

Those in the conservative faction will discover that a Christ-centered, biblically sound theology does not preclude a liberal social agenda. Those in the liberal faction will discover that a Spirit-centered, biblically informed theology does not preclude a classically Christian faith. This is because the Christian movement has always been shaped by the experience of grace among ordinary people in local communities, rather than by institutional controllers in denominational committees or academic experts in theological colleges.

The Three Principles of Local Religion apply equally to liberals and conservatives. They are universal. We may at times be uncomfortable with them, but we cannot avoid them if we want to live at peace, work together, and allow God to be God.

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June 2019

How Churches Decide

Any decision by the General Conference about LGBTQIA recognition was going to be controversial and fracture the United Methodist Church (especially in the US and West European churches). It's no surprise that the decision was made with a narrow margin. It should also be no surprise that in our complex and culturally diverse world such decisions no longer result in acceptance and restored harmony. The Judicial Council may have more to say about changes to the Book of Discipline, but the real stress will be passed back to Conferences, congregations, campuses, and outreach agencies.

Stay or go? It's not just a decision for congregations (church plants, campus ministries, and outreach agencies), but also for individual member households, adherents and second-time visitors, clergy, and administrative boards. And it leaves Conference leaders in a quandary trying to anticipate future income, clergy deployment, and hot spots of controversy. I'll comment on each of these in future "Stay or Go" articles.

Experience from other countries and denominations reveals that what is *most decisive* for congregational decision-making is *not* the theological dogmas or ideological policies of the denomination but the *demographic and lifestyle mix* of the local or regional contexts. This is why, for example, churches rarely split over doctrine or moral transgressions anymore, but readily split over worship styles and renovations.

Lifestyle Segment Compatibility

All United Methodist conferences, districts, and churches can anticipate which congregations will stay, which ones will go, and which ones will be battle grounds in the next five years. Use the demographic search engine www.MissionInsite.com that is already available free to every United Methodist church in America.

First, create thematic maps that reveal the population densities of all lifestyle segments. These coded and colored maps the neighborhoods, counties, or zip codes where specific lifestyle segments live. This alone reveals where publics who tend to be culturally left, culturally right, or culturally middle live. Politicians use such maps to focus on neighborhoods that are likely to vote liberal, conservative, or status quo. Hospitals and non-profits use them for strategic planning and fund raising. Public School Districts use them to open and close classrooms and determine bus routes. You can use them, too.

Second, insist that every congregation, in every district, complete their People Plot. This means they upload their list of resident members and active adherents into the search engine. When this is overlaid on a thematic map, it reveals precisely where every church household lives and the lifestyle segment to which they probably belong. As you do this, you will also note that certain lifestyle segments often live near one another (evidence of compatibility) and which households are consistently separated by some street or geographic feature (evidence of incompatibility). Compatible lifestyle segments

attend the same schools, eat in the same restaurants, frequent the same entertainment spots, chat over the fence, and attend similar churches. In other words, they are empathic with one another. Incompatible lifestyle segments are not.

Third, draw a search area that encompasses member households of the church. You might even want to draw two. The first search area defines the *Reach* of the church (i.e. the largest geographical area to include 90+% of member households, and the second defines the *Depth* of a church (a smaller geographical area that concentrates the highest number of member households and reveals where the church has the most community impact).

Rural and small town churches, and mega- and multi-site churches are more concerned with *Reach*. This is because church growth follows paths of homogeneity. Churches reach further and further in order to connect with a specific lifestyle group and their kindred spirits. In the case of multi-site churches, they reach further to create centers of homogeneity among different groups, but ones based on the core values and beliefs of the lifestyle groups that dominate the decision-making board of the mother church.

Urban and urbanizing churches, along with church plants, campus ministries, and other outreach agencies are often more concerned with *Depth*. This is because mission impact follows paths of heterogeneity. Churches penetrate neighborhoods, cities, or campuses through relationships among diverse lifestyle groups who influence other lifestyle groups. Ministries are customized around the life circumstances and spiritual motivations of indigenous cultures.

Finally, print what is called a “ComparativeInsite Report” and focus particularly on page 5 where proportionate representation of lifestyle segments in the search area is compared to proportionate representation of member households of the church. The churches that are going to struggle hardest with the decision to stay or go as a result of the General Conference decision are usually the churches that *least* mirror the lifestyle diversity of their neighborhood or mission field. That is where there will be the greatest misunderstanding, the greatest temptation for stereotyping, and the greatest struggle to decide whether to stay or go.

Lifestyle comparisons are not just a measure of a church’s relative popularity. They reveal their *heart burst* for the community lifestyle groups that are most important to them. Regardless of what their mission statement says, or their rhetoric describes, the facts reveal the truth. Churches will align themselves around the lifestyle segments they cherish, rather than an ideological agenda imposed from outside. If they stay, they will stay for the people they love. If they go, they will go to the people they love. And when it comes to love, decisions are made with the heart rather than the mind. Whether or not you approve of them or agree with them, you never abandon them. It sounds simplistic, but birds of a feather flock together.

Consider lifestyle segments commonly associated with United Methodist churches. For example, congregations with high representation of C11 *Aging of Aquarius*, C13 *Silver*

Sophisticates, E19 *Full Pockets Empty Nests*, O51 *Digital Dependents*, G24 *Status Seeking Singles*, and others tend to be culturally left. They tend to live in culturally diverse urban centers or near universities, and their extended families and career relationships include LGBTQ relationships that are cherished. They are more likely to go than stay, especially if the church limits their leadership options, program preferences, or mission priorities in a way that discriminates against people they love.

Meanwhile, congregations with high representation of C14 *Golf Carts and Gourmets*, E20 *No Place like Home*, J35 *Rural Escape*, D15 *Sports Utility Families* and others tend to be culturally right. They tend to live in more exurban, rural, and mid-market city contexts that embrace more homogeneous populations with fewer non-traditional households. They are more likely to stay than go in solidarity with the people they love. However, they will also resent any extremists who try to dictate behavior or limit their freedom.

And congregations with high representation of B09 *Babies and Bliss*, B07 *Generational Soup*, H28 *Everyday Moderates*, I33 *Balance and Harmony* and others tend to be culturally middle. They tend to go along with whatever consensus approves and the hierarchy says. They focus on tradition, and protect the harmonious core of the church.

They may stay or they may go, but the one thing that are not going to do is fight over it. If the denomination or clergy, or this faction or another, forces a fight, they will just leave.

The point is that lifestyle, not ideology, will be more influential when decisions are made. Ideology may be a factor (often due to particularly intimidating member households or pushy extremists). When the votes are in, however, members generally choose to be with the lifestyle segments with whom they are most empathic.

Lifestyle Segment Conflict

The challenge, of course, is that congregational culture is shaped by the top 50-60% of lifestyle representation, and for many churches that means 3-6 lifestyles influence the culture of a church. Everything is shaped around their tastes, opinions, preferences and priorities including what coffee is served, what sermons are praised, and which laity are elected to the board. What happens when the largest lifestyle segments shaping the culture of a church have a heart burst for different community groups? Church leaders can anticipate potential congregational battlegrounds because these are often churches at the leading edge of *urbanization* or the receiving end of *centralization*.

The churches at the leading edge of *urbanization* are closest to major transportation routes (e.g. Interstate highways), attracting commuting households, and transforming small towns. The churches on the receiving end of *centralization* are in expanding towns and small cities that are becoming hubs for health care, public education, and social service. In these *urbanizing* and *centralizing* environments, some members will go and some will stay and some will retreat to the sidelines to avoid conflict. The end result is

that whether they stay, go, or watch many will lose the critical mass to sustain an independent church with a full time minister, and the church presence and impact will be diminished.

The role of clergy can be decisive, but this really doesn't depend on their personal ideological perspective. They may be liberal or conservative, but their credibility depends on lifestyle empathy. The old adage that *churches follow their leaders* is not accurate. Churches follow the leaders *that they love*, and they listen to the leaders *who love them*. It doesn't matter how well you preach, where you went to seminary, or how effectively you can argue your liberal or conservative agenda. Only when clergy demonstrate real empathy for lifestyles who are both over- and under-represented in the church compared to the community, can they help warring lifestyle segments understand each other and the diversity around them.

In the stressful demographic process of *urbanization* and *centralization*, conflicts between lifestyle segments are not resolved by theological or ideological education. They are resolved when the "fruits of the spirit" (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, and self-control) are modeled by leaders, for this is the only glue that can bond all lifestyle segments together.

The bottom line is that congregations will resort to the "default" decision-making process to which they turn whenever they are in unresolvable quandaries. It doesn't matter what the bishop says, the policy dictates, or the demagogues preach. Churches will make up their minds to do whatever they want to bless the people they love.

Lifestyle Decision-making and the Pace of Change

Demographics and lifestyle research will also determine how quickly congregations make their decisions.

Lifestyle segments oriented to the cultural left tend to make decisions more *horizontally* than *vertically*. This is a metaphorical way of saying that they make decisions through constant internal and external dialogue. They talk to themselves and to friends in a shared quest for the best decision. This is one reason why social media is especially important to younger, mobile, urbanizing lifestyle segments with cross-cultural relationships. They are constantly learning. No decision is really final. There is a reason I renamed the cultural left among church people as the *Culturally Ambivalent* in my book [*Sideline Church*](#). Every decision, no matter how passionately made, is tentative.

Lifestyle segments oriented to the cultural right tend to make decisions more *vertically* than *horizontally*. In other words, they make decisions by consulting authorities, experts, ancestors, or precedents. This is one reason why printed curricula, telephone trees, and verbal announcements are especially important to older, residential, centralizing lifestyle segments with deep roots in homogeneous communities. They, too, are learning, but the conclusion is more important than the

process. Every decision is final (or at least should be). Set it aside and move on to the next question. This is why I renamed the cultural right among church people as the *Culturally Righteous*. They do the research, listen to the sermon, ask their grandparents, make up their mind, and act promptly.

What this means is that among the *Culturally Ambivalent*, decisions will take more time. It takes them longer to get organized because they must work through a tangle of opinions and reconcile a number of factions. It will not become immediately apparent to the United Methodist Conference leaders which churches will stay or go. But it will become clearer, and the process will accelerate, over the next five years. Bishops and District Superintendents have some time to interpret, nuance, customize, and persuade dissatisfied churches.

If the General Conference decision had gone the other way, the decisions to stay or go would have been more immediate. Lifestyle segments among the *Culturally Righteous* would have more quickly coalesced and organized, and settlements over property rights and personnel would have been made within a year. Church hierarchy would have had to scramble to persuade churches to stay.

Once a general conference votes, delegates often return home with a sense of fulfillment. Congregations are lulled into a false complacency. After all, the majority has spoken. The matter is settled. In fact, the cracks have only begun to open and will widen in the decade to come.

Heart to Heart

I have personally experienced one denominational split over sexual orientation as a new church development pastor and led reconciliation efforts as a national church staffer. I've observed three more as a consultant and helped church leaders figure out what to do as a coach. My observation is that the outcomes of any decision decided by a majority vote in a general conference disappointed both the conservative right and the liberal left, because congregational decisions to stay or go were rarely determined by ideological agreement anyway. They were determined by lifestyle compatibilities and the ability of church leaders to avoid stereotypes and empathize with the real cultural diversity of North America.

Ironically, the pseudo-victory of the "Traditional Plan" in the recent General Conference is a de-facto endorsement of the "One Church Plan." The one is theory, but the other will be reality. This has nothing to do with the position taken. It's because in taking the decision the conference rejected the leadership of its own Bishops. The bishops invested four years of prayer, listening, and study to discern "a way forward" because delegates in the last conference trusted the collective wisdom of their denomination shepherds. The vote in this conference was not just a vote of non-confidence for *some* Bishops, but a tacit rejection of the episcopacy itself. And this only empowers local churches to chart their own course and follow their own hearts.

Questions for Prayer and Discussion:

Resource: *ComparativeInsite Report* for a ten-mile radius around the church.

1. What are the top 50-60% of Lifestyles represented in the congregation? And what does this reveal about current preferences for leadership, hospitality and worship, and programs?
2. What are the top 50-60% of lifestyles represented in the surrounding community? And what does this reveal about priorities for future seeker sensitivity for lifestyle segments under- or non-represented in the church?
3. What kinds of adaptive changes in leadership, hospitality and worship, and programs will be most stressful for church members?

How Members Decide

We all know that the General Conference approval of the “Traditional Plan” is controversial and (not surprisingly) passed by a narrow margin. My [previous article](#) explored how *churches* decide, but the truth is that whether or not the church *organization* stays or goes, what will be more decisive for the community presence and future mission impact of The United Methodist Church is *how member households* decide.

The trend since the late 1960s has been that more and more lifestyle segments choose “flight” rather than “fight.” Some member households will stay within the church either to sustain a prophetic influence that might change future policy or to defend their ownership of the institution in which they have worshipped for years. Yet even among lifestyle segments of the cultural left (which in my book [Sideline Church](#) I call the *Culturally Ambivalent*) and the cultural right (or *Culturally Righteous*), impatience with church institutions is growing. They may fight... but not for long. Indeed, many lifestyle segments among the cultural middle (or *Culturally Passive*) may well agree with denominational policy or congregational majority opinion, but avoid conflict like the plague.

How will member households decide? What are the “deciding factors” that will be uppermost in their minds? Once again, I believe demographic and lifestyle research can help church leaders anticipate what they will do.

Empowered Personal Choice

Today individual church members feel more justified to make religious decisions for themselves than ever before. Among lifestyle segments that are more liberal, this might be described as the rise of “personal” religion and the growth of faith-based non-profits and parachurches; and among more conservative segments, it might be described as “personalized” religion.

Among United Methodists, this trend has been accelerated as a result of the last General Conference for two reasons. First, the tacit rejection of the episcopacy by delegates encourages individual members to chart their own spiritual course. They may choose to listen to other gurus or media personalities, or other countries and cultures, but the bottom line is that it is *their choice*. Traditional spiritual authority has eroded. Second, the “Bible-based” church envisioned by the General Conference is not really Methodist. Methodism has always discerned truth through the spiritual method of comparing tradition, reason, the contemporary movement of the Holy Spirit, *and* Scripture for mutual critique and consensus.

They may choose one interpretation of the Bible or another, but the bottom line is that it is their *personal* interpretation that matters most. Although Methodist members may *claim* to be “Bible-based”, they still make decisions based on the quadrilateral.

Therefore, it is even easier today than it was three weeks ago for United Methodist laity to walk away from the church with a good conscience. There is no guilt, less regret, and the confidence that they can always return to the church for the next family wedding or funeral because what matters is not allegiance to the denomination but personal ownership of the church facilities. Members are free to pick and choose which denominational policies to affirm or ignore. The individual's current lifestyle orientation is now the primary authority that shapes religious opinion. As individuals age, marry or divorce, relocate, choose second or third careers, become more educated, grow richer or poorer, and migrate from one lifestyle segment to another their religious opinion will change. And for people today, *that is as it should be*.

Individuals or Households?

The second insight lifestyle research provides is that, contrary to popular belief, we do *not* make decisions as individuals. We make decisions in the context of *relationships*. What we decide takes into consideration the thoughts and feelings, anxieties and aspirations of the people we love most, and an individual might well make an uncomfortable choice *for the sake* of those relationships. It is far more important for churches to track *households* rather than just *members*, because this is the core relational melange (or network) in which, and for which, decisions are made. Yet the network of relationships that we define as a "household" has dramatically changed in American cultural diversity. I think this is a key point that UMC global partners fail to see. Just as Americans project their own assumptions and misunderstand the households of Africa or Asia, so also they project and misunderstand the households of the west. "Colonialism" has an afterlife.

A "household" in the postmodern world of the United States is not what a "household" used be. Today there are more "non-traditional households" than "traditional households." This is especially true in *urbanizing* contexts, but increasingly true in mid-market city and small town *centralizing* contexts, and even rural *isolation* contexts. I don't want to belabor the point, but my readers need to do more than nod at generalizations. They need to see grit and grind of diversity.

In **urbanizing** contexts (where population density and diversity spreads outward along transportation corridors) we see (to name a few):

- Households with three or more financially-supporting generations (e.g. among B07 *Generational Soup*);
- Households supporting adult children (e.g. C14 *Boomers and Boomerangs*);
- Blended families with children and adults who are not their biological parents (e.g. K39 *Metro Fusion*);
- Cross-cultural, bi-racial, multi-lingual families (e.g. P56 *Mid-Scale Medley* or D18 *Suburban Attainment*);
- Divorced single or multiple marriage families (e.g. K40 *Bohemian Groove*, C12 *Golf Carts and Gourmets*);

- Singles and co-habiting couples (e.g. G25 *Urban Edge* or F22 *Fast Track Couples*);
- Poor singles and couples living in declining or dangerous neighborhoods (e.g. S70 *Tough Times*).

In **centralizing** contexts (where younger adults and seniors are migrating for employment, education, and health) we see (among others):

- Financially struggling single-parent households (e.g. M45 *Diapers and Debit Cards*);
- Lower income boomers leading quiet lives (e.g. L42 *Rooted Flower Power*);
- Struggling, disabled, or sporadically employed singles and couples (e.g. S68 *Small Town Shallow Pockets*);
- Small town seniors with deep community roots (e.g. Q64 *Town Elders*).

In **isolation** contexts (where populations decline, residents are aging, and boomers are retiring) we see (among others):

- Hardworking parents and children barely sustaining themselves (e.g. M44 *Red White and Bluegrass*);
- Seniors with low incomes in deteriorating homes where they have lived their entire lives (e.g. J35 *Rural Escape*);
- Independent mixed generations, working and praying hard (e.g. N00 *Pastoral Pride*).

This is what diversity really looks like in America, and I haven't even mentioned the Empty Nesters, broken families alienated from children or parents, same-gender couples (married or unmarried, public or private, with or without children), or generational differences among immigrant households from around the globe. Diversity is no longer about race or ethnicity, age or gender anymore. There are variations with race, ethnicity, age and gender which defy generalizations. When church members decide whether to stay or go, they are not just concerned with personal preferences, but with the impact their decision will have on the people they love. And the variety of persons they love will surprise you.

Kin or Kindred?

The third insight that lifestyle research provides is that a household today is no longer defined by blood relatives. The demographic search engine MissionInsite.com (available to every United Methodist Church in America) enables leaders to explore attitudes and life priorities. It often shocks church people to discover that many lifestyle segments today prefer to spend time with *friends* rather than *family*. When "member households" make religious decisions to stay or go, they are often more concerned about the impact on expanding layers of friendship, rather than on grandparents, parents, siblings, or even children. It's not good or bad. It just is.

For some lifestyle segments, a “household” is composed of “kin.” Friendships may fracture, but family relationships are sacred. The former is painful, but the latter is tragic. Parents and grandparents still want their children to feel at home when they return to the church of their childhood for weddings, baptisms, and special occasions. Children and grandchildren still want to cherish warm memories of the open-hearted church of their youth. At church, they may cheer sermons, sign petitions, and elect boards based on ideological principles. However, if the second son or daughter in the family comes out as gay or lesbian, or if a gay family member urgently wants to honor his or her grandparent, they are usually surprisingly tolerant. The grandparents are unconditionally welcoming, embrace the “eccentric” loved one, cry together at funerals and laugh together with cousins *in spite of their lifestyle disagreements*. The gay grandchild is unconditionally generous, embracing their “eccentric” family members, laughing, crying, and sharing holiday dinner. Our family might be odd, but it’s still family. If a church honors that unconditional generosity we stay; and if a church doesn’t we go. Family first! We stay or go for the sake of kin.

Yet for many other lifestyle segments today, a “household” is composed of “kindred spirits.” Families may fracture, but friendships are sacred. Friends want to support and defend each other, share confidences through good times and bad, and overlook differences and disagreements for the sake of enduring intimacy. Regardless of sexual orientation, true friends help one another fulfill their human potential, protect their civil rights, and generally pursue life, liberty and happiness. It doesn’t matter what ideology they endorse or behavioral habits they practice. Every circle of friendship is heterogeneous and every individual is odd. What matters is that Christians practice love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and other “fruits of the spirit.” If the church honors our unconditional friendships we will stay; and if it doesn’t we will leave. Friendship first! We stay or go for the sake of our kindred spirits.

Over the next few years, churches will see households deliberately, and often sacrificially, stay or go. Staunch Methodists, ninety-year-old patriarchs and matriarchs, and pillars of the church will weep and grieve, but they would rather leave a church that threatens familial affection than suffer the loss of a precious child. And if they stay, the church will be on probation and woe to any preacher who disrespects our kin!

Similarly, committed Methodists, confirmed teens and 30-year-old regular attenders, habitual volunteers, and key leaders of ministry programs may be sad and regretful, but they would rather leave a church that threatens their friendship network than remain idle when a friend is hurt. And if they stay, the church will be on probation and woe to any preacher who denigrates our friend.

Household Decisions about Religious Participation

MissionInsite enables leaders to isolate the top reasons why current church member households leave their churches. The most common reasons across the country are that clergy are not credible, church people are too judgmental, and church institutions

are too greedy. There is a mix of other reasons (unfriendly, unhelpful, boring, etc.), but what is notable is that the top reasons church members leave their church does *not* include disagreement with denominational dogmas or social policies. These are the *least* of their concerns.

Of course, these reasons for non-participation are made in response to surveys. Surveys are always misleading. We say these are the reasons for dropping out, but are they the *real* reasons? After all, this clergy leader may not be credible, but Methodists can always wait for a new pastoral appointment. Church people may be too judgmental, but we can always retreat to a small group where we are fully accepted. Church institutions may be constantly asking for money, but we can always designate our giving. So what is really going on?

Different lifestyle segments are motivated by different anxieties, and each quests for God with different expectations. This is why some lifestyle segments skip the traditional Sunday service but attend the Healing Service. It is why some lifestyle segments prefer educational worship that expounds scripture and explains doctrine, and other lifestyle segments prefer coaching worship that offers tips and tactics to live like a Christian in the daily grind. While most seek “inspirational” worship, what they find “inspirational” varies considerably. Inspiration for some is lyrical music, quiet meditation, and waiting for God; for others “inspiration” means rhythmic music, multi-sensory experiences, and urgent action. And of course, for a growing number of Americans of all generations, the expectation of worship is none of the above, but simply the intervention of a Higher Power to liberate you from addiction or whatever self-destructive habit or outside persecution entraps them.

So the real reason church members drop out is that they are not finding what they urgently seek, and they are not experiencing God in the way they need. They may say they don’t like the music, message, seating, refreshments, wedding policy, but (self-aware or not) they are lying. It’s deeper than that.

Anxieties that drive quests for God vary. Some lifestyle segments (especially 50-60 year old Baby Boomers) are driven by chronic depression and a feeling of being lost. They want to experience Jesus as a Teacher and Guide. Others are driven by estrangement and feelings of abandonment (especially seniors in declining population areas and transitioning neighborhoods) and seek Jesus as Friend and Comforter. Still others are driven by shame and anger (especially aspiring young adults) because of chronic abuse and frustration. They seek Jesus as a vindicator and justice bringer. Or they are driven by foreboding and feelings of entrapment and seek Jesus as a promise keeper and transformer.

Heart to Heart

In the end, the social policies of any denomination are less relevant than church leaders think. They matter intellectually, but they don't necessarily matter existentially. I've consulted with churches across the theological and ideological spectrum for over twenty years. I am in liberal churches that affirm LGBTQ sexual orientations, *but have remarkably few LGBTQ people in membership or worship!* They agree with the social policy, but drop out of the church. I am also in conservative churches that condemn LGBTQ sexual orientations, *but a remarkable number of LGBTQ people attend!* They disagree with the social policy, but stay with the church anyway. Moreover, I am in churches that were started and grow specifically with LGBTQ members, *but the fastest growing segment in church membership today are straight!*

The reality is that LGBTQ people are human beings like everyone else. The existential anxieties that drive their quests for God, and their hopes to experience Christ in relevant ways, are as diverse as anyone else. There is no specific lifestyle segment identified as "LGBTQ" because LGBTQ people are a part of all 71 lifestyle segments in America. The more we are sensitive to the deepest anxieties besetting the *human beings* around us, and the more open we are to celebrate the incarnation of God in all the various ways Biblical human beings experienced Jesus, the more likely our church members will stick with us through thick and thin.

Questions for Prayer and Discussion:

Resource: *ExecutiveInsite Report* for a 10-mile radius around the church.

1. Is your congregation in an urbanizing, centralizing, or isolation context? What is the potential demographic growth or decline projected for ten years ahead?
2. How will a decision to stay or go impact the extended family of members, and the networks of friends among families with preschool children, families with elementary or secondary school youth, college students and young adults starting careers, singles and young families, empty nesters and aging baby boomers, retirees and seniors?
3. Why do people in the community decide not to participate in your church? And why do some of your church members drop out?

How Adherents and Visitors Decide

In the last chapter, I focused on how church members decide. Short term, this may be more important for liberals and conservatives because members provide the financial and volunteer resources to sustain a church. Long term, however, it is probably more important to consider how a decision to stay or go will impact adherents and visitors. It is easy to track participation by adherents and first- or second-time visitors through the “People Plot” function of [MissionInsite](#).

When I coach church leaders for mission-driven mergers, I remind them that the critical mass required to sustain an independent mainstream congregation with a full-time ordained minister is a combination of about 125-150 resident members, 100-125 weekly attendance, 100-200 first- or second-time visitors to worship every year, with 60% of adult worshippers active in spiritual growth groups and one third of the members personally involved in a congregationally owned outreach ministry. This means most UMC churches today are already below critical mass, and reshuffling the members won’t solve that problem.

At the very time critical mass is going up, church shopping is going down. There was a time when church participation was a cultural habit and most households searched for a “good church” whenever they relocated or got mad at the current pastor. Today, church shopping has all but ceased except for some first-wave baby boomers and their elders.

For most people going to church is now countercultural. If they visit a church, there is a compelling reason beyond planning a convenient baptism or wedding. There is some spiritual urgency to connect with God or material urgency to tap church resources, but they may find it embarrassing to tell their friends or report it on church surveys. This is what they seek:

Grace and Hope

Contrary to popular churchy wisdom, most visitors and adherents are not looking primarily for friendship; they can get that many other places with fewer institutional obligations. They risk ridicule to come because they are hoping to experience God’s grace, a grace that matches their particular yearning and gives them courage and confidence to carry on living. A visitor may be lost, lonely, broken, addicted, desperate, desolate, or ashamed (even though they say they are just looking for a friendly church). Each one is hoping to experience Jesus the Christ as rescuer, companion, healer, liberator, promise keeper, guide, or priest appropriate to their need, but if they don’t get it they’re gone.

Balance and Harmony

Although it may be disappointing to crusading clergy and radical factions, most visitors and adherents are not looking primarily for ideological purity or theological certainties. They are seeking a community in which balance and harmony, not crisis and conflict, are the norms. They do not require agreement, but they insist on respect. They long for a healthy blend of justice and generosity, faithfulness and freedom, which is the heart of the Gospel and the intention of the original immigrants who shaped America.

Role Models and Spiritual Guides

In contrast to the old Christendom days, post-Christendom visitors are not seeking professionals. If they were to reduce their list of expectations to the barest essentials, great preaching, sophisticated theology, excellent psychotherapy, etc. are not in the top ten. They are looking for leaders who can demonstrate in daily living what faith is all about and who can guide others to do likewise. If their neighbor were to ask them what being Christian really means, they want to point to a lay elder of the church and say *just follow that person around for twenty-four hours, observe what they do and listen to what they say, and you will know.*

In a time of conflict, adherents and visitors are often not that interested in the final decision; they pay attention to how the argument was conducted. If it is conducted in a spirit of respect for the integrity of all parties and empathy for the lives of all participants, and reveals a moral choice to treat people *as people* and not merely as generalizations, abstractions, objects, or enemies, then their overall respect for church leaders and members rises and they will stay. They know that they, too, will have disagreements with the church in time, and are reassured that when that happens they will be treated well. If the argument is conducted disrespectfully and bitterly, and people are not treated as human beings, then they will leave.

The manner in which visitors and adherents evaluate a clash of opinions is shaped by the habits and expectations of the lifestyle segment in which they currently participate. This is why you often see geographical or community patterns in the non-participation of the public. UMC churches on both sides will likely see that they are suddenly less attractive in some neighborhoods than others. And this is why the pattern *in every denominational split, in any country, over the past ten years* is a net loss in overall church attendance and community influence.

I described how church leaders define the *reach* and *depth* of their church by using People Plot to locate both distance and density of member households. You can just as easily track adherents and first- or second-time visitors.

Many churches are too preoccupied with the *reach* of the church when they should be paying attention to the *depth* of the church. They empathize more with the lifestyle segments traveling in from a distance than with the lifestyle segments around the block.

For example, downtown “tall steeple” church memberships are often dominated by commuters who drive as much as thirty minutes into the city to get to the church of their nostalgic past. The lifestyle segments within walking or public transportation distance to the church, however, are grossly under-represented. That church will die. Every year members age, and every pot hole and traffic light that increases their commuting time will discourage regular participation. The future lies with the immediate neighborhood, and the only real visioning issue is whether the commuters have a bigger [heartburst](#) for the neighbors than for their nostalgia.

Or for example, small town or rural churches may include a high proportion of Q64 *Town Elders* and J35 *Rural Escape* member households, but the demographic process of centralization is increasing the population of M45 *Diapers and Debit Cards* (struggling single parents and mixed families) and S68 *Small Town Shallow Pockets* who are moving into town from more isolated areas to access education, social services, and health care. If churches are not (or will not) become empathic with these lifestyle segments, then their churches may perish as worshipping communities, although their properties might continue to be used for faith-based social services. Many other churches are too preoccupied with the *depth* of their church, when they should be paying attention to the *reach* of their church. They empathize more with long-time residents in town, ignoring the growth of new urban and suburban lifestyle segments in the surrounding region.

For example, small town and mid-market cities along interstate highways and/or at the edge of advancing subdivisions and relocating industries are experiencing enormous cultural change. Meanwhile, their churches are trying to sustain a social status quo that is rapidly disappearing. In 1950, the lifestyle segments in the region included stable, stay-at-home N46 *True Grit Americans*, I30 *Stockcars and State Parks*, and M44 *Red White and Bluegrass* families. In 2020, these are being displaced by incoming E21 *Unspoiled Splendor* boomers leaving the big city but bringing big city expectations into the country, F22 *Fast Track Couples* seeking affordable housing for upwardly mobile careers, or B07 *Generational Soup* multi-generational and multi-cultural households. If these people go to church (and most will not), they have two choices: they either drive to beltway mega-churches or demand change from small town/city established churches.

The point is that it is not 1950 or even 1965 anymore. Americans are not stable, but mobile (physically, relationally, economically, politically, and socially). When everyone was relatively stable, church decisions on ideological or dogmatic principles mattered. When everyone is mobile, what matters is not the decision itself but *how* decisions are made. In a mobile world everyone knows they will disagree with somebody, somewhere, some time. They need assurance that when that inevitably happens they can participate in a just and generous conversation to find a compromise, and not find themselves suddenly denigrated or excluded.

Once church adherents and visitors have lost respect and/or fled from congregations that behave badly (regardless of final decisions about ideological or dogmatic policies),

they frequently never return. *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.* And if fooled thrice, shame on all institutions that allow or even encourage the deception that they are really friendly or welcoming. The basic religious attitude of many millennials is becoming common among all generations: *spiritual truth is buried beneath an avalanche of lifestyle hypocrisy.* This does not mean they are atheists. It means that the search for meaning and purpose has turned inward.

The ideological conflicts that obsess many churches are one more reason that “personal religion” is exploding beyond (and within) liberal and evangelical churches. People are not just tired of judgment, they are tired of judgmental *habits*. Liberals become spiritual wanderers choosing their own paths or blazing new trails. These paths may veer from rationalism to shamanism in the blink of an eye. Conservatives become boundary keepers of broad, rather nebulous affirmations that can be personalized in any way. Jesus may well be one’s personal savior, but the emphasis has shifted from salvation to satisfaction.

It is true that some churches will experience growth because of a particular ideological decision or denominational policy. Yet this growth is fueled by a different kind of visitor or adherent. These are not “seekers,” but “true believers.” They are driven by a single sectarian issue. These visitors tend to be more interested in advocacy and conformity than discipleship and growth. Visitors never really become members. They prefer to be adherents. They can exit all the more easily.

The reality, however, is that this growth is temporary. Even these congregations will eventually plateau and once again decline despite the reality (or at least the appearance) of ideological agreement. Churches undergo strange transformations. Liberal churches become outreach centers and conservative churches become para-churches. In short, they are not *churches* anymore in any traditional sense.

Heart to Heart

In the last chapter, I mentioned that I have personally experienced one denominational split over sexual orientation and wedding policy as a church planter and observed three more as a consultant. I have also worked with very liberal and very conservative churches in the aftermath. The most striking outcome is that *both* sides lost public credibility and never got it back. The adherents and visitors were not only fewer, but *different*. Worship felt more and more like a political rally; small groups devolved into processes of indoctrination in which wheat was separated from chaff. Church became a place that reasonable, healthy, moderate, and open-hearted people tended to avoid. Seekers peered suspiciously at religious people and asked: *Why should I believe you?* (I wrote about this in my book with that very title at the invitation of The Board of Discipleship struggling to make sense of diminishing clergy credibility thirteen years ago). Adherents and seekers make the obvious choice: It’s better to go to the coffee shop on Sunday morning where spiritual conversations really happen.

Questions for Prayer and Discussion:

Resource: *ReligiousInsite Report* for a 10-mile radius around the church.

1. Why do visitors *really* come to church the first time? Why do visitors come back a second time?
2. Does your church have a reputation in the community for hope and harmony? How do you know that for sure?
3. How many volunteers of the church are perceived in the wider community as role models for Christian living, and potential mentors guiding seekers through the ambiguities of life?

How Clergy Decide

One of the common patterns in a denominational split is that it eventually gets *personal*, and that this almost always takes clergy by *surprise*. Initially the debate over “the issue” (whatever that theological, ethical, or liturgical issue happens to be) is heated and abstract. It is “out there,” about “those people,” and “their ideas.” Churches do workshops on “the issue,” members are opinionated over “the issue,” boards debate it, and church councils vote on it. However, one day clergy awaken to the “cold facts” about implications for their calling, careers, family, and friendships.

This awakening is often accompanied by feelings of increasing powerlessness. Decisions are being made in back rooms where you have little influence, by in-groups who are part of exclusive networks involving people you don’t know and may not respect. What they decide may well change your life. Meanwhile arguments and estrangements are erupting in your marriage, family, friendships, networks, and pastoral relationships. “The issue” is no longer about what will happen to the denomination, but what will happen to *you*. No wonder clergy retirements have accelerated exponentially this year!

I have suggested in previous articles that churches, church members, and visitors and adherents will all make their decisions to stay or go based on networks of relationships, compatible lifestyle behaviors, and their quests for balance, authenticity, and hope. In the heat of the moment it may seem that there is a simple solution for wholeness, a litmus test for righteousness, or a prescription for optimism... but in the course of daily living most spiritual people realize that no single theological, ethical, or liturgical principle is the ultimate key to the mystery faith or God’s purpose in life.

Clergy can learn from the visitors, adherents, seekers, and other ordinary people yearning for God. They have the good sense to know what they need and move on if they don’t find it. Clergy, however, are apt to fixate on a single idea as a test of their integrity. Too often clergy cling to what they think is certain and linger too long trying to prove it to themselves or others. Clergy are like the proverbial frog in a kettle that is gradually getting hotter and hotter, only now there are two kettles... both simmering. They either stay in the kettle of their comfort zones or leap into another kettle that is equally hot, imagining that it will get cooler.

In a sense, this is what separates Christendom clergy and post-Christendom spiritual leaders. Christendom clergy tend to assume that what their denomination decides really matters for the future of the Realm of God. Post-Christendom spiritual leaders recognize that the Realm of God and denominations are often slow to catch up with Christ. I find that many clergy feel ambivalent about a denominational split but don’t really know why. And they fear that, should their ambivalence be revealed, they would be ostracized.

In a crisis (genuine or fabricated), Christendom clergy almost always end up absolutists (which is sometimes called “righteous”), authoritarian (which is sometimes called “prophetic”), and obedient (which is sometimes called “faithful”). Today, however, many

clergy intuit that there is something wrong about that. They see, behind the rhetoric and self-justifications, a trend that is at odds with their original calling.

Post-Christendom spiritual leaders, on the other hand, always end up relativists, pragmatists, and iconoclasts. They are relativists, because they know that God's wisdom makes foolish the wisdom of this world. They are pragmatists, because relationships are complicated and what is best for me may not be best for everyone. They are iconoclasts because no authority, faction, or institution can usurp the place of God.

The last thing a spiritual leader should do is base their decision to stay or go on whether they agree with a particular denominational policy or dogma. That will neither ease their conscience nor enhance their credibility. Instead, spiritual leaders (at least in the Methodist tradition) will base their decision to stay or go on three things:

- *Choose whichever path most fully embraces the Wesleyan method for discerning truth.* This method is the mutual critique of scripture, reason, history, and the contemporary movement of the Holy Spirit. No single part of this method is superior to the others, just as no single part can ignore the others. Yes, there is anxiety because this method allows for considerable ambiguity about truth; but this is as it should be because God's wisdom is bigger and broader than human knowledge.
- *Choose whichever path most intentionally supports the spiritual life.* Spiritual life is a flow of experience that starts with radical humility, continues through conversations with God and community, and results in compassion for creation and all the people in it. Genuine love leads you back to radical humility and you start over again the next day. If the path you choose encourages arrogance, confrontation, and judgment, then it's not a spiritual life but a highway to hell.
- *Choose whichever path most directly places you among the peculiar public among whom God wants you to be.* God's call is never a call to do something; it is always a call to be *with* somebody. That "somebody" is the lifestyle segment or segments for which God gives you a [heartburst](#), an urgent, passionate desire to love them. A true calling is as much about eros as it is about agape. If your will is in accord with God's purpose, then God's calling is experienced as your heart's desire.

For many clergy, therefore, the decision over denominational allegiance (stay or go) reveals far deeper questions. Who are your real pilgrim companions? How can you best walk daily with Christ? And with which lifestyle segments do you experience the most empathy?

Post-Christendom spiritual leaders are clergy who are becoming human again. In my book [Spiritual Leadership](#), I described eight distinct kinds of spiritual leader in America today. Different lifestyle segments gravitate toward distinct kinds of spiritual leadership

because that leader *a)* models the kind of courage they need to face the unique challenges they endure and *b)* helps them become who God created them to be.

Just as lifestyle segments are drawn to certain kinds of leaders, so also leaders are drawn to certain kinds of lifestyle segments. Following the dictates of a denomination or pursuing the requirements of a career ladder no longer satisfy. Their decisions are not only based on the “gravitational pull” to live and lead among a particular public, but also in the need to be nurtured by a public that values the kind of courage he or she requires to be faithful to God.

Christendom clergy served congregations that were more “workplace” than “community.” Postmodern spiritual leaders yearn for a *meaningful* experience of belonging and not an artificial or institutional one. They participate in community by “fit” rather than “function.” Do not confuse “lifestyle compatibility” with “personal comfort.” This is not a choice to be where life is easy, but to be where life is fulfilling. They make decisions based on a desire to be among the people for whom they feel their hearts bursting with affection.

It is not surprising, then, that clergy feel increasing urgency to know the lifestyle segment(s) to which they belong. They are like exiles trying to get home. This question is more urgent than wondering what your DISC profile or personality type might be or clarifying your degree of agreement with institutional agendas. And it is certainly more urgent than clarifying your position on dogmatic or ideological principles.

One way is to remember the place where you lived in which you experienced the greatest personal joy and social relevance. (Do not include residence in university or seminary). Once you remember that geographical location, look it up on [MissionInsite](#) and see what lifestyle segments live around that spot, and now you have clues about the lifestyle segment(s) in which you belong. A cultural context akin to that is where you probably ought to be, not just for personal joy but also for ministry relevance.

Just as the words of Scripture become the living Word of God, so also the behaviors of lifestyle segments become a living tableau of God’s grace. You find yourself no longer “in ministry” but rather “in love.” All the ideological policies and dogmatic pronouncements of church institutions are small and insignificant compared to the real presence of Christ that binds the lover and the beloved. And the glory of this moment of revelation is that you and the lifestyle segment you contemplate trade places. Your decision to stay or go is not just sharing ministry, but also receiving ministry.

I can already hear both conservative and liberal voices demanding that a decision about “the issue” is a moral imperative, and that the decision of clergy to stay or go must be made as a matter of principle rather than relationships. *You must decide who will be excluded from the church: liberals or conservatives.* Which side are you on? The moral imperative, however, is not that you must decide who is right, but that you must treat people as human beings rather than as objects or things. You do not *have* to

decide anything. A spiritual leader can be — and I would argue should be — relativistic, pragmatic, and iconoclastic. The flip side of the moral imperative is the divine one. You are not required to be certain about principles. You are only required to surrender to God's purposes and be humble, respectful, and compassionate. Spiritual leadership is not about telling people what to think, but about modeling for persons the courage to be. For some, the decision to stay or go becomes more pragmatic than apocalyptic. Which choice will help you help you discern truth, live a spiritual life, and bless the people for whom your heart bursts? Many clergy discover what visitors and adherents have known all along: that an institutional "position" on homosexuality matters far less than the ideologues think. People will *always* disagree about *something*. Ambiguity will never go away this side of heaven.

For some, this is the real moment of truth — a great awakening or a nervous breakdown all in one. There is a third option beyond "stay" or "go," and that is the discovery that you are already "gone." Some clergy realize that theologically, intellectually, emotionally, and relationally *they have already left the denomination*. They may still be physically in the church in either conservative or liberal forms, but their heart just isn't in it anymore. They are called out of the box, so to speak, into a Realm of God that is bigger than even Wesley imagined.

This moment of truth is often experienced by caregivers, enablers, and CEO's when they realize that God does not actually call them to visit anyone, facilitate groups, or build anything. It starts with a shift from church growth toward spiritual growth, and it soon takes you beyond making disciples to mentoring pilgrims, beyond church buildings to public spaces, and even beyond ordination to pilgrim journeys.

Heart to Heart

Normal human beings make decisions in conversation with their loved ones, seek the companionship of people who genuinely share bonds of love and accountability, and live among people with whom they feel most compatible. But clergy are routinely asked (and feel personally obligated) to make decisions on their own that are best for the institution they serve, and live among people with whom they are *not* particularly compatible. Ministry for many clergy is a kind of medieval "hairshirt" designed to keep you permanently uncomfortable, based on the principle that if you don't feel lonely you can't be very holy.

Many clergy wrestling with the decision to stay or go feel guilty that they worry too much about the implications of their personal decisions for marriage, family, networks, and friendships. Christendom has persuaded them that such personal considerations are "sidetracks" from their true vocation, as if God is in the habit of testing the faithfulness of clergy by their readiness to ignore or abandon their families. Clergy are apt to make decision to stay or go by isolating themselves in the closet or retreating to the woods where they can agonize about martyrdom.

There may be times when a Garden of Gethsemane is required to make a bold decision, but this is not one of them. Instead, clergy should make the decision to stay or go at the dining room table in honest and equal conversation with spouse, children or close friends. They are primary. They are the relational center around which all other relationships circle. Choosing to stay or go in order to be among the peculiar people for whom your heart bursts is a joint decision made with the people you love most.

Most clergy don't question their calling, but they do question their careers. Now is the time to return to that original moment when the finger of God pointed at you, recapture the feeling of reckless joy and perfect trust, and reassess the tactics you have been using to follow Christ.

Questions for Prayer and Discussion:

Resource: *Spiritual Leadership Inventory* from the appendix of *Spiritual Leadership* by Tom Bandy (Abingdon Press)

1. What kind of spiritual leader do you think you are? What kind of spiritual leader do your closest friends and family perceive you to be? What kind of spiritual leader do you think God is calling you to become?
2. When, where, and with whom have you felt most relevant and productive in ministry (both before and after ordination)?
3. What choice will best place among colleagues who share your interpretation of Wesleyan spiritual practices, feed your spiritual life, and place you among the lifestyle groups among whom you feel most fulfilled?

How Boards Decide

As the United Methodist Church fractures, leaders are making decisions for themselves and/or their congregations. Stay or go? This process may unfold more slowly than some might have predicted. The General Conference chose by a slender margin to ignore the advice of the Bishops and opt for a more conservative and less flexible way forward (i.e. “traditional”). Those American lifestyle segments that are more liberal and culturally adaptive tend to “think laterally” rather than “vertically” and take more time to consult with mission partners, discuss options, and customize their reactions.

The process of disaffiliation approved by the United Methodist Judicial Council sounds simple. All it requires is a 2/3 majority of official congregational members, a negotiated agreement with Conference Trustees to distribute the assets, and the majority approval of the Annual Conference. Unfortunately, this process is more complicated than it seems, and requires strong leadership from a board.

- Many of the most active church participants are adherents, not members, and they expect to have a voice. The board should advocate their moral right to speak, even if legally they cannot vote. It might be argued that adherents have nothing to lose, having made no commitment to membership. The reality is that the church has a great deal to lose if they are excluded and leave, because they are often the most committed to discipleship.
- Church trustees are generally not elected to office because of their spiritual maturity. Of course, there are exceptions, but usually trustees are elected because they have membership seniority and/or special expertise. The assets of a church, however, include sacred space, significant symbols, and designated mission and education funds. The board has a spiritual duty to honor visible signs of faith and the religious motivations of donors and use the assets for mission impact rather than institutional survival.
- Annual Conferences, like all bureaucracies, are vulnerable to strident voices who might be minorities in a local congregation but claim to speak for “thousands” of anonymous members. They can easily sidetrack or delay the request of the 2/3 majority. The board has an organizational responsibility to protect and support the integrity of a congregational decision.

Board members do not speak for themselves, nor do they represent any particular committee or faction. They provide spiritual guidance to the entire congregation (not just members), guarantee free and equal debate (not just parliamentary procedure), and oversee the integrity of decision making (not just enforce grudging acceptance).

Boards are naturally slower to make decisions, regardless of being liberal or conservative. They usually wait to test the reactions of members, observe the impact on visitors, and listen to the views of their pastors. They also take more time to make up

their minds because most UMC boards are too large; include committee representatives who think tactically rather than visionary leaders who think strategically; and operate in an atmosphere of relatively low trust and accountability for daily spiritual life. Board members are not on the “same page,” and often have not read the entire “book” of church participation, community diversity, and program relevance.

Historically, this has created significant stress among some visionary board members who are more impatient for change. These board members tend to resign out of impatience rather than waste time persuading other board members to follow a particular course of action. This only contributes to the cycle of tactical, rather than strategic thinking that encourages inertia. This is why smaller boards make faster decisions. They are comprised of visionary and strategic leaders; who have always had routines of accountability for mission attitudes, leadership integrity, professional skills, and practical teamwork; and who are in touch with the full range of lifestyle diversity in their memberships and communities.

Boards must face one reality before they even discuss what to do: Some people will leave. Among them, some of their best friends will leave. There is no way that the board can maintain the status quo, keep everyone happy, and preserve universal harmony. Frequently their temptation is not to decide what strategy is most faithful, but rather *which people* they prefer to keep and lose. You must not succumb to that temptation! Boards cannot plan the future through a hidden system of patronage. Nor can they plan the future deciding which members are more “useful” to institutional survival and which are not. Boards cannot pretend to be gods; they can only aspire to being sound strategic planners.

Boards must also recognize that good strategic planners avoid making two crucial mistakes:

The first mistake is to base decisions on surveys gathering individual member preferences. Surveys never provide a truly balanced insight into congregational opinion, partly because human beings tend to claim viewpoints that are pleasing to others rather than be personally honest, and partly because especially difficult decisions are never clear cut and surveys leave little room for real life ambiguity. Moreover, surveys tend to reinforce the public perception of membership privilege and missional hypocrisy, and only add doubt and confusion to an already chaotic situation.

The second mistake is to base decisions on so-called “Town Meetings.” Town Meetings never create consensus, and always encourage division. Theoretically it offers every member a voice, but in fact only the most strident voices dominate the meeting to manipulate emotions. Introverts, moderates, and relatively powerless people will not have a say and very often don’t attend. Town meetings usually end with a “secret ballot” that feeds suspicion and a “straw vote” that exacerbates division and solves nothing.

The best strategy is to deploy pairs of board members to meet with small groups in a variety of settings within and beyond the church building. Small groups can intentionally reflect the lifestyle diversity of a congregation and encourage even the most timid people to speak their hearts. This takes time. It is more difficult to collate feedback, but that is precisely the point. Boards need to immerse themselves in the complexity of the problem and variety of viewpoints, rather than rely on stereotypes, generalizations, and untested assumptions inspired by personal biases.

Making Hard Decisions

There are five essential elements to make any hard decision with integrity. This is especially true when making a recommendation to a congregation whether to stay with a denomination, join a different one, or go it alone. There is enormous pressure from passionate conservatives and liberals to decide *immediately*. Wise boards understand that there is urgency, but they also understand that the strength of their recommendation depends more on the integrity of the process of decision-making than the decision itself. Some will like it and some not, and in the end the congregation may disregard your recommendation, but you will deserve respect. Even if you don't get respect from all church factions, board members can still hold their heads high knowing they have fulfilled their responsibilities as faithfully and sensitively as possible.

Trust

Trust is sustained through intentional, visible, and universal accountability for all members, volunteers, and staff to basic core values and convictions. Core values are anchored in the *fruits of the Spirit*: love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, steadfastness, and self-control. Core convictions are anchored in gratitude for God's grace and confidence in Christ's presence every day, everywhere, in every situation, across the entire lifestyle diversity of the public. Accountability extends not just to the prepared speeches and choreographed actions in a worship service or meeting, but also to the unrehearsed words and spontaneous deeds exhibited in daily behavior. Trust is broken when fine words and public gestures are contradicted by cruel comments and private denigration.

Leaders lead. If the board members really trust each other, then the members follow. If the board behaves immaturely, the members will do likewise. Board members must trust each other, so to speak, with their reputations and their wallets. They must be able to rely on each other to consistently, spontaneously, and daringly behave in the spirit of Christ. They must be role models for the entire congregation, demonstrating how mature Christians interact with each other in meetings, in worship, and in daily life.

Comparative Diversity

The second essential element needed to make hard decisions with integrity is a clear and objective understanding of the similarities and differences between the lifestyle segments that shape the culture of the church and the culture of the community. In 25 years of consulting experience, I have yet to see a congregation (urban, suburban,

rural, or remote) in which church participation truly mirrors the lifestyle diversity of the community (age, gender, race, ethnicity, income, or attitude).

The rule of thumb is that the top 50-60% of lifestyle segment representation generally shape the culture of any given community or church. In the community, that critical mass shapes the emergency, health, and social services, and the retail shopping, restaurants, and entertainment options. In the church, that critical mass shapes the staff, pastoral care priorities, and programs, and the education, hospitality, and worship design. For most churches, the board can focus on comparing lifestyle needs and ministry expectations for 3-6 segments in the membership to 6-12 segments in the community. (Use the MissionInsite *ComparativeInsite Report* and the lifestyle portraits described in *MissionImpact*.)

This is the only way the board can overcome opinionating and personal bias and get objective insight into what people are really thinking, hoping, and expecting about God, grace, and the church. Moreover, a clear understanding of proportionate and disproportionate representation between church and community will help the board distinguish between *privilege* and *mission*. Much of what church insiders consider “mission” is in fact self-serving “privilege,” and much of the stress church insiders experience in ministry is that adaptive programs are about “mission” rather than “privilege.”

The combination of trust and lifestyle sensitivity allows the board to experience a “Come to Jesus” moment. It is time for prayer that is painfully honest and earnestly faithful. Is the decision to stay or go driven by a desire to reward membership privileges? Or is it driven by the desire to impact the community? If the decision is driven by the former, the church will likely become more ingrown, older and smaller. If the decision is driven by the latter, the church will likely become more outgoing, younger and larger.

Outcomes

It is very difficult to make decisions to stay or go (or any strategic decision for that matter) if the board is not clear about what they expect the church to accomplish in its ministry context. If they are unclear about what the *church* should accomplish, they cannot anticipate how any particular denominational allegiance might help the congregation thrive.

Outcomes are not mission statements. Most congregational mission or vision statements are so nebulous or generalized as to be worthless in a crisis. They can be interpreted by any faction to justify almost any action. Measurable outcomes are precious and practical goals that, once achieved, will cause the entire life of the church to be healthy, all the programs of the church to be successful, and entire community (in all its diversity) to be truly blessed. The board must define outcomes that measure spiritual growth, volunteer development, participation of both majority and minority publics, transformed lives, and positive impact on their community and the world. They can now decide what denominational or network partners can best help them fulfill their goals.

Costs

When churches are trying to decide whether to stay or go, it is up to the board to anticipate the cost of change. The lifestyle segments over-represented in church participation will inevitably experience stress if ministries change to bless people in the community who are under-represented in the church, just as lifestyle segments under-estimated in the church will experience stress if ministries do *not* change to bless a much larger representation in the community. Effective boards measure the true costs of any decision in the following seven ways... and in this order.

1. Attitude Costs: Changes in perspective toward groups, tactics, or assumptions;
2. Tradition Costs: Changes in religious practices or historic behavioral patterns;
3. Leadership Costs: Changes in staff and volunteer training and deployment;
4. Organization Costs: Changes in structure, corporate status, or accountability;
5. Property Costs: Changes in location, property, and facility;
6. Technology Costs: Changes in internal and external communication
7. Financial Costs: Changes in budget, fund raising strategy, or priorities.

The church deserves to know the real costs involved in any decision to stay or go. If a church is willing to pay the price of changing attitude and tradition, then then it will be less stressful to change leadership and organization. If a church is willing to pay the price in the first six cost centers, the financial cost will almost never be a problem. Indeed, financial support will likely go up rather than down because people give more generously to non-profits they genuinely respect and that measurably improve the community.

Stress Management

Only now can the board anticipate the stress of change and develop a plan to address it. It is irresponsible to make controversial decisions without a plan to deal with the after-shocks. Church leaders manage the stress of change in four ways.

- Stress resulting from changing attitudes or traditions is addressed through strategies for adult spiritual growth. Churches create more options for worship, small groups, and education.
- Stress resulting from changing leadership or organization is addressed through accountability. Churches create grievance policies, training and evaluation practices, and upgrade nominations processes to ensure that future boards are made of spiritual leaders rather than factional representatives.
- Stress resulting from changing property or technology are addressed through strategies that increase lifestyle sensitivity amid the diversity of church and community. Churches discover the different ways people seek information, learn to do new things, and experience the Holy in different ways.
- Stress resulting from changing finances is addressed through coaching members to make lifestyle changes. Churches help members not just give money to an operating budget, but coach them to shape an overall Christian family financial plan to manage their lives.

These are the essential elements to make any hard decision. These five elements must be done *before* making any recommendation about policy or strategy to the congregation. If you do not do this, you may well lose the respect of members, adherents and visitors, clergy and staff, and the general public. Indeed, you may well lose self-respect. If you do this, you can be proud of yourselves regardless of relative popularity. Conservatives or liberals may disagree with the church, but they will still respect the church.

Heart to Heart

Both national and local church factions want boards to believe that their primary role is to decide whether to agree or disagree with a particular ideological perspective. They try to persuade boards that they should spend all their time trying to master complex ethical issues, make political decisions about power sharing (inclusivity or exclusivity), and lobby for particular causes. Since even the Apostles weren't able to do that regarding a wide variety of issues troubling the earliest church (just read the *Acts of the Apostles* and the epistles of Paul and others) it is hard to imagine the average church board can do that regarding the variety of issues troubling the church today.

Board leadership is very pragmatic. You are not appointed to be theologians or ethicists, professors or activists. You are appointed to keep the church aligned to its foundational mission purpose, accountable to the spirit of Christ, effective and sacrificial in achieving its local and regional goals, calm in the face of change, and compassionate toward the least of Christ's brothers and sisters. Stay, go, or find a third alternative, but let your choices be informed, faithful, and driven by God's mission.

Questions for Prayer and Discussion:

Resource: *Strategic Thinking* by Tom Bandy (Abingdon Press).

1. How deep is the trust level among board or council members, and how intentional is your mutual accountability for personal and leadership alignment to mission, modeling core values of the church, and mentoring emerging leaders in bedrock beliefs?
2. What are the measurable outcomes with which you define congregational success at the end of the year... and how do you verify those results?
3. What will be the real cost for the congregation, in all seven cost centers, over whatever decision you make to stay or go?

How District Superintendents Guide

When a denomination fractures into two or more pieces, there is vigorous competition to sway churches or staff to stay or go over the next two years. Leaders from one “team” will actively try to recruit more “players” to their “side.” This places a District Superintendent in unfamiliar territory.

District Superintendents have traditionally been administrators, personnel managers, program advocates, and policy makers. In recent years, they have been asked to re-tool as Regional Strategic Planners. In fact they have become interventionists, conflict mediators, educators, and counselors who often struggle to find time for strategic thinking about the larger regional mission. They often feel torn between the needs of pastors, rapid changes in the mission field, and expectations to support denominational priorities. How they feel and address this stress depends on how God has “wired” them as spiritual leaders. (I identify eight distinct kinds of spiritual leadership identities in my book *Spiritual Leadership*.)

Many District Superintendents are “wired” to be enablers/facilitators (or as I call them, “Constant Caregivers and Visitors”) and they may feel the greatest stress in a denominational split. Their pastoral success has often been based on their personal attention to details and individuals, and the degree to which they are liked. Empathy is their strength, but this makes it all the harder to differentiate self from struggling congregations, angry church members, and upset clergy. The metaphor of “church family” is very strong for them spiritually and emotionally, and they can be overwhelmed by grief and paralyzed to give direction. The “way forward” in a denominational schism is not therapy.

Other District Superintendents are “wired” to be CEOs and Disciplers (or as I call them, “Constant Builders” and “Faith Tutors”). Their pastoral success has often been based on seeker sensitivity, membership growth, and volunteer empowerment. Effectiveness is their strength, and they are more likely to be upset by diminishing resources, destabilized programs, and theological or ideological fog. The metaphor of “God’s Kingdom” (or “Realm”) is very strong, and they lament the loss of social credibility, community impact, and spiritual maturity. The “way forward,” however, is not to bear down, demand more, add layers of accountability, or enforce zero tolerance policies; nor is it to preach better, teach more, or attend more meetings.

There are other postmodern forms of spiritual leadership. Some District Superintendents are “wired” to be gurus, visionaries, mentors, and pilgrims (“Life Coaches,” “Relentless Futurists,” “Greek Interpreters,” or “Determined Travelers”). Their strength is their cross-cultural experience and lifestyle sensitivity, and they are more likely to question their role in the institution altogether. They have been uneasy with their job to begin with, and they sense that God is moving in an altogether new way that makes traditional church institutions increasingly obsolete. These corporate managers are apt to become future religious entrepreneurs. In a sense, for them there is no “way forward,” but only a “way sideways.”

The ways in which District Superintendents feel and address the stress of a schism are certainly parallel to that of clergy (see my previous article on *How Clergy Decide*). However, denominational loyalty is usually even stronger for them. This can make their burden of responsibility and vulnerability to burnout greater.

Regional Sales and Account Retention Manager

As the denomination fractures, District Superintendents of all kinds are being forced by personal inclinations, changing circumstances, and hierarchical necessity into a new and uncomfortable role. For some, the combination of unfamiliarity and burnout could add to the risk of resentment, anger (both repressed and expressed), and depression. On the other hand, for others the opportunity to focus mission and deepen unity could bring exhilaration and new optimism for renewal.

One side of this role is to become a “Regional Sales Manager” for the corporation since they oversee church plants, fresh expressions of outreach, and innovative forms of ministry. They have to retrain all the “sales representatives” to conform to corporate policy and still attract more customers. The other side of this role is to become “Account Retention Managers” since they oversee existing church franchises across their territory. They have to persuade the pastors and boards who feel the greatest ownership for the institution to stay with the company or join another. It is a corporate role that is very uncomfortable for spiritual leaders. However, if *you* don’t try to persuade churches to *stay or go*, other people will — so there really isn’t any choice. No one likes to apply business terminology to the church, but today there are limited resources to support a denomination. Volunteers and money are limited, and any organization that holds property, manages programs, and pays professionals must be aggressive to ensure economic security, leadership recruitment, and mission success.

Forgive me for using marketing language to describe the new role of a D.S. However, fractured denominations are like competing automobile dealerships. The owners are full of brotherly or sisterly love at the Rotary meeting but aggressively compete to sell their brands, and the Sales Representatives are prepared to explain to any would-be seeker the advantages of their vehicles over anybody else’s.

District Superintendents can learn some important lessons from retail corporations. This is what a good Regional Sales Manager or Account Retention Manager does.

Believe in your product

This can be tricky because Sales Representatives know the flaws of their vehicles (or denominations) very well. Unlike car dealers, however, District Superintendents like to be scrupulously honest and avoid any hint of hypocrisy.

The truth is that you should *not* believe in any denomination. You can readily admit there are many institutional flaws. You *do believe* that the Methodist tradition is a worthy and useful way for individuals and societies to be transformed by God to model and

reflect the values and teachings of Christ. More than this, you believe that this tradition is most effective when *unity of purpose* is combined with *adaptable practices* that are *culturally sensitive*. This is the “method” in “Methodism.” This is what it means to have open hearts, open minds, and open doors.

It may be that other versions of Methodism can do the same thing, but in these days of ideological polarization that may be easier said than done. The current United Methodist version has always tried to walk a middle way, provide multiple options, and unite people around a larger vision of the Realm of God even if they disagree about how that Realm should look in our broken world. Separatists must *earn* that credibility. They have to convince others that exclusion is really inclusion, and that is not an easy task. “Publics” may be swayed by emotional appeals and big promises, but “persons” are more cautious and ask more questions.

Sales Managers (or District Superintendents) may acknowledge the faults of their company (or denomination), but they are never embarrassed about their organization. They stress that their organization is always learning, evaluating and improving; and that they are always training, evaluating, and holding their leaders accountable to the highest standards of integrity and performance.

Empathize with your customer

When you visit a car dealership, you always see a Sales Manager standing in the window observing you. They are not idlers; they are noting every detail of your appearance and behavior. By the time you enter the building, they already know your lifestyle profile and can anticipate your questions and needs.

The same is true for the D.S.. You *observe* a mission field before you ever *talk* to a church. You compare proportionate lifestyle segment representation between memberships and communities (using MissionInsite). You learn their questions and needs. You understand their expectations of clergy leadership, hospitality and worship, small and large groups, Christian education, property and facility and symbols, and learning methodologies. You anticipate the cost of adaptive change and prepare to explain the mission rationale.

The purpose of a Charge Conference is changing. Think of what happens when the Sales Manager finally sits down with the customer. The conversation is based on what he or she has observed about the customer and discovered about contextual driving conditions, and not on what products the car company wants to “upsell” to consumers. And the goal is not to reach an agreement about ideal automobiles, the future of automobiles, or the philosophy of driving. The goal is to customize a car for local driving conditions.

The current trend, prompted by fewer districts with more churches, is to combine churches into a single Charge Conference. I think this is a mistake. Every church is unique, every community is different. We often confuse empathy with agreement.

Empathy is a matter of the heart, not the head. Empathy means that you feel their pain and share their anxieties. You see and share the Holy Spirit moving in and among peculiar people, in particular contexts, in mysterious ways. Churches are more likely to stay or go with the denomination that treats them as uniquely valuable rather than generically the same.

Build a relationship

I bought a new used Jeep last April, and by the time I picked it up I had a new friend. And this was not a phony friend. It was a genuine friend. He was a young guy in jeans who admired my boots and was nervously expecting a new baby into the family. There was a fixed price on the jeep and he knew he would sell it tomorrow if I didn't want it, so most of our time we talked about parenting, dual-career households, and hopes for the future.

In the same way, the D.S. needs to build a *genuine* friendship. They sincerely want to listen to the church's story and are ready to risk sharing their own story. Mentoring relationships are replacing "pep talks" in the corporation, and they are replacing guest preaching in churches. District Superintendents should probably *decline* invitations to preach whenever possible and instead seek opportunities to talk informally with church leaders. Preaching may be valuable in many ways, but here it is a sidetrack. The D.S. should spend less time addressing a crowd and more time mentoring pastors and board members as individuals or as a small group. This is the best way to open their minds to new or different ideas.

Any successful retailer will tell you that making the sale is the easy part — retaining the account is that hard part. The goal of a Sales Manager is to establish a trust that not only sells a car, but motivates the buyer to return for servicing and come back for their next car. The successful dealer is not a company trying to be your friend, but a friend trying to become your company. I think the same attitude applies to the new role District Superintendent. It is less important to "sell" institutional policies and plans and more important to bless a pilgrim on whatever journey God has in store for them.

Stay positive

The temptation in any schism is to sell your product by denigrating the competition. Unfortunately, this strategy has been increasingly common since the 1980s as the ecumenical movement lost momentum. Churches deflected attention from their own vague intentions by loudly proclaiming: *We aren't like them!* Fifty years later, recruitment or "evangelism" has come to imply participation in hate rather than participation in peace. The ranks of the "Nones" are growing exponentially, and the top reason for not participating in — and/or dropping out from — the church is that churches are too judgmental. *This accusation is consistently made toward both conservative AND liberal churches.* Frankly, the public is fed up with self-righteous religious people ranting about the speck in another's eye while ignoring the log in their own.

Learn from retail. Whether you are selling a product or retaining an account, concentrate on the *value* of what you have rather than *flaws* in your competitor's product. Consumers may buy a car because it is currently the best of a bad bunch, but they only remain loyal to the brand if it is consistently the best every year. Seekers may *join* a denomination because of its sales pitch, but they will only *stay* with a denomination if it adds value to their lives. Loyalty is not earned through promises, but through deliverables.

When denominations split, both sides discover to their dismay that they continue to split again and again. Once a covenant is broken, it is easier to break the next one and the one after that. There is a reason that many researchers suggest there are as many as 33,000 Christian denominations in America alone. The definition of "church" and "denomination" may vary, but however one tallies the score, that's a whole lot of disaffection.

So stay positive. Focus on the value you offer, rather than ridiculing the deficiencies of your competitors. Your membership may drop, but the members you have will be steadfastly loyal. Ironically, what is *often* true in the corporate world is *always* true in the Realm of God: Churches do not thrive when they participate in hate; churches thrive when they participate in peace.

Heart to Heart

Sometimes District Superintendents need to expand the vocabulary of churches. Specifically, it may help churches decide to stay or go if they understand the differences between "cults," "sects," and "churches." A *cult* is a spiritual community that agrees with the leader about everything. A *sect* is a spiritual community that agrees with each other about everything. But a *church* is a spiritual community that tries to live like Christ in spite of everything.

The D.S. as Regional Sales Manager does not need to inspire churches with grandiose visions of saving the world or adding 1,000 new members every month. They just need to inspire the church to be more effective in their neighborhood and more creative in their congregation. When churches are deciding whether to stay or go, they are less likely to join the denomination that promises the moon or guarantees certainty. They want to be part of a denomination that helps them walk deeper and further with Christ day by day, neighbor with neighbor, in a complicated world.

Questions for Prayer and Discussion:

Resource: *Strategic Thinking* by Tom Bandy (Abingdon Press).

1. What choice to stay or go do you think will best fulfill the Methodist vision for open hearts, open minds, and open hands?
2. With which congregations and/or clergy of the district do you empathize the most or the least? And why?
3. What is your plan to build strong, trusting relationships with congregations and/or clergy in your district in the stressful times that lie ahead?
4. What is your personal inclination as you consider your own calling and career? And what price are you willing to pay to follow your heart?

An Afterword for Moving Forward

What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts. (James 3:17-18, CEB)

It seems to me that there are really two questions facing churches, members, clergy, boards, and denominational leaders today. The first is easier: *What is the future of The United Methodist Church?* The second is harder: *What is the future of the Methodist movement?*

What is the future of The United Methodist Church?

Despite the complexity of details sorting out institutional organization, this is actually the easier question to answer. After all, there are precedents.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church emerged in the 1980s because ([according to the EPC website](#)) *"leaders had become increasingly distressed by theological liberalism and institutional resistance to change in their denominations."* Their goal was to form a denomination that emphasized scripture and historic reformed confessions and re-energized American Presbyterian evangelical fervor. Many congregations split from the PCUSA and PCUS to join. This migration weakened those denominations, but also helped focus their unique missions.

The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) emerged in America in the 1990s. It distanced itself from both the British Anglicans and American Episcopalians over the ordination of gay men and celebration of same-sex marriages (among other liberalizing trends). Their vision, [according to their website](#), is to be *"bible-based, spiritually dynamic, united, disciplined, self-supporting, committed to pragmatic evangelism, social welfare and a Church that epitomizes the genuine love of Christ."* After entering a covenant with other conservative Anglican groups, the denomination originally from Nigeria mostly consists of theologically conservative American Anglicans. They are said to be the fastest growing church in the Anglican Communion. This migration weakened the more liberal Anglican and Episcopal denominations, but also helped focus their missions.

The *Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ* (LCMC) also emerged in the 90s. Their theology and position on homosexuality is similar to the LCMS, but like the ELCA they support the ordination of women. My experience is that they are also critical of the practice of sharing Lutheran and Episcopal priests. Notably, the LCMC describes itself as a "movement" rather than a "denomination." While their movement is accountable to scripture and historic Lutheran confessions, [they affirm](#) that *"one size doesn't fit all when it comes to ministry because different communities often have different needs, backgrounds and cultures. Rather than micromanaging what they do, we give our members the freedom to be creative in how they do ministry, working together to*

transform the lives of others and fulfill the Great Commission that Jesus set forth in Matthew 28." The "movement" has attracted congregations from the other Lutheran denominations seeking a middle way, which has weakened them but also focused their unique missions.

The fracture in the United Church of Canada in the 80s and 90s was provoked by the policy that homosexuality should be no barrier to ordination, support for same-sex marriage and other liberal policies, and a trend toward "progressive" theology. The "[Song of Faith](#)" is perhaps the best insight into this diverse multicultural denomination: *"God is Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description.... Nothing exists that does not find its source in God."* In this case, disillusioned congregations and members did not form a new denomination but merged with existing Presbyterian, Baptist and other traditions or remained independent. Few have thrived, and the liberal UCC has also declined and become more congregational. However, each side is probably more focused in mission.

In each of these precedents, conservative churches (leaders and/or members) departed to recover what they considered to be a more "traditional" church. In the United Methodist split, it is the liberals who are considering departure to form a new expression of church loyal to Wesleyan principles. That may change at the next General Conference, but some split is inevitable. I think there are at least two unique features to this split that break from precedents.

First, the UMC split involves the fracturing of a rather monolithic and well-organized global church. Other precedents impacted less integrated communions, ecumenical relationships and mission partnerships, but still tended to be confined to national or regional interests. In this case, division is more clearly tied to cultural differences between America and Europe with the eastern and southern hemispheres and Pacific Rim. I think this means that the coming split may potentially undermine shared resources and damage global mission more than in the other cases. It may cause significant realignment among international Christian and non-profit partnerships and lessen the mediating influence between global Catholics and Evangelicals.

Second, the UMC split reflects even more dramatically the cultural clashes that divide Americans regionally and demographically. Regional differences shaped by economics, immigration, education, and other factors are causing division in other public sectors as well. Moreover, lifestyle diversity in 2020 is infinitely more complicated than lifestyle diversity was even in the 80s and 90s. The forces of urbanization, centralization, and isolation are far more advanced and potentially harmful to entire communities — not just religious organizations. This may well make this split organizationally messier, and the brunt of the pain may be felt by underpaid clergy and many rural and urban congregations that are already below critical mass and barely sustainable.

The future of the United Methodist institution may be tactically complicated, but no doubt it will be sorted out. The second question facing leaders is much harder to answer.

What is the future of the Methodist movement?

I encourage denominational leaders, clergy, boards, members, adherents, and the many spiritual seekers in America to see this split in global United Methodism as a symptom of a larger cultural shift and global crisis. There are two principal elements. The first is growing alienation from current ecumenical institutions that results in weakening respect for traditional authorities and the rise of populist movements. The second is growing polarization of opinion that results in ideological “acid tests” of credibility and the multiplication of factions. This is happening across all sectors, and, in perspective, the church is a relatively minor player in seismic cultural change.

Some would call this the “Balkanization” of politics and religion, and there is much to learn from the tribal wars surrounding Sarajevo. I commend to your reading a recent article by George Packer entitled [*Elegy for the American Century: A Report on the Decay of Pax Americana*](#) in the May 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*. The Balkan wars were precipitated by the politicization of religion and the dogmatization of politics.

In the Balkans, centuries of ethnic migrations and religious wars reshaped indigenous cultures and divided regions, towns, and neighborhoods. Ethnic nationalism and religious bigotry were temporarily set aside to confront shared enemies, but were readily reignited by demagogues when peace seemed within grasp. It only took a spark of nationalist sentiment.

In America, decades of mobility and urbanization combined with an explosion in digital communication amid undercurrents of religious and racial intolerance have favored the success of a few at the expense of the many. As the opportunity gap widened, demagogues readily reignited old feuds. It only took a spark of ideological disagreement over sexuality.

In the Balkans, conflict was often described as “ethnic cleansing” as different factions tried to enforce cultural homogeneity where it hadn’t existed for years. In America today, conflict seems to be a kind of “ideological cleansing” as rival factions try to enforce behavioral uniformity where it hadn’t been necessary in previous decades. Religious organizations in the Balkans seemed powerless to stop the animosity. But religious organizations in America still have significant power to calm the rhetoric, build relationships, protect cultural heterogeneity, and tolerate behavioral diversity.

The deeper issue of this denominational split, therefore, is how it will impact American culture. What will happen to the unique sacramental theology, social conscience, quadrilateral methodology, and “reasonable religion” of John Wesley? The future of the Methodist movement will not be determined by *what we choose*, but by *how we behave*.

What was missing in the Balkans was an organized role model for peacemaking. There were individuals working for peace, but only a concerted effort could bridge the ethnic, ideological, and religious chasms. The result was what James described as “worldly wisdom” in the New Testament: the hate and strife of ethnic cleansing. What seems to

be missing in the clash of American micro-cultures is similar, and might result in the same result: the hate and strife of ideological purity.

Methodists can become collective role models for “divine wisdom.” They can resolve their differences and conduct their institutional splits in ways that are *peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine*. They can disarm the ideologues and calm the debate. They can demonstrate how *those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts*. Disagree if you wish. Divide if you must. But the Christian model of peacemaking is even more important today than it was in the 80s and 90s. Perhaps Methodists, even in the midst of disagreement, can show America how peace works.