

# Living the United Methodist Way - Turning the World Upside Down

Report by Jeff Wright

## The **Workshops** I attended

- Visioning Leadership for the Annual Conference
- Congregational Transformation
- Learning the United Methodist Way
- Good Nutrition + Exercise + Lots of Rest = Effective Learning
- Networking Group for Christian Education, Nurture, Discipleship and Small Group Ministries

## The **Interest Group** I attended: Congregational Revitalization

A quick note about the Interest Group Lunch sessions to get it out of the way. This was not helpful in the least. It was more of a round-robin discussion of best practices from all over the room. Not much leadership from the moderator. I actually left early and started into another one with much the same result. So I cannot offer any productive thoughts on it.

**My Background:** Since I am Chair of the Conference Nurture Team, I attended workshops that would fit into that arena.

## **My General Thoughts:**

I thought our first plenary session set the tone for the whole experience. I think the challenge was laid before us that we cannot stay the way we are and expect to grow the Kingdom of God. The question was asked, "Are we nimble? Are we nimble enough to respond to the Holy Spirit?" In many ways this session was like a pep rally. The speakers, especially, Jay Williams, challenged us to not be content with the way it has always been. We can't do that and live into God's vision for us. I really liked the question, Have we as a Church lost our memory? And I really like the follow-up point that when you lose your memory, you can lose your identity.

If we want to live in the United Methodist way, we are going to have to recapture the vision and leadership of Wesley. We have what we need in theology, perhaps the best out there to do what God is calling us to do, but we need to increase our vision and communicate this vision. One other point I remember is that our churches need to fall in love with our communities again.

Through the other three plenary sessions, I was reminded of the Wesleyan emphasis on the poor and health issues of his day and how we need to be concerned about those situations ourselves. An idea I have had for a while now was reinforced in my mind. We have become the church that Wesley sought to change. We have become the church of Wesley's day not the church Wesley envisioned. We tend to be more concerned about ourselves and not overly concerned with social, economic, and health issues like Wesley was; or for that matter, like Jesus was.

The second plenary session was good, but I had two emotional reactions. I thought the different speakers were not given sufficient time to present their points and were rushed except for the last speaker who took what he wanted. I also felt that some of the situations presented would be hard to link back to Holston or that for some reason, I wasn't enthralled by them. Perhaps I am politely trying to say, they were more bragging than edifying for me. I thought the fourth session was informative but again thought the majority of the time was given to the wrong speaker.

## **Thoughts on the Workshops:**

## Visioning Leadership for the Annual Conference

I agree with Gaye King who said this workshop was not what I expected. I enjoyed it, but it wasn't as practically based as I had hoped it would be. It was an inspirational session, but as Gaye said, the tag-team approach didn't mesh as well. Vance Ross was overpowering while Susan Ruach was more laid back. Vance dominated and almost started preaching a couple of times. One lasting point for me was that leaders must be called and gifted and the gifts are not based on chronology. They must be cloaked by the Holy Spirit. And the purpose of the Annual Conference is to put leaders in local churches and to put leaders in local communities, outside themselves.

I think it was Vance who said we must have a sense of knowing what and why to do it and then we can construct a way to get there. To do this, we need super vision as in the supernatural vision the Holy Spirit gives us. And that our aim is to connect people with God and each other. One last point was that we need to expect a result.

## Congregational Transformation

This workshop was also led by Vance Ross with Sandy Jackson as the co-leader. Again, Vance dominated and I thought Sandy seemed a bit intimidated by his presentation style. He started off using the example of the early church which was a "glorious mess filled with the Spirit." He said the wonders and signs were the evidence of God's presence. He talked about how the early church came to be using the description from the book of Acts. He had two quotes I really liked when talking about the differences in our church today and the early church. In talking about Pentecost event he said, "rush of a mighty wind? It's so quiet in our churches you could hear a cotton ball fall and land." He also said, "The domestication of the church exists and keeps us quiet." He asked, "What does it sound like when we gather?" and "What does it look like when we gather?"

In talking about what are the signs of transformation, he asked "How do people know we are there?" and "Would they miss us if we were gone?" That is an old line I have heard him use in other workshops before, but it is a good evaluative question for us to ask. He said vitality comes from a shared value. He also said, "God empowers all churches to be vibrant." Then he offered some pathways to vitality.

### 1. Focus on who we are as a congregation – our own story

Ask questions such as Who are we? What strengths do we have? What resources do we have? He also said that cookie cutter attempts will not work everywhere. So, you need to focus on who you are not what everyone else is.

### 2. Think holistically as the Body of Christ.

We are not business minded and spiritual concerns are just as important.

### 3. Balance inward and outward focus.

### 4. Pursue lifelong learning

### 5. Measure and evaluate impact

### 6. Establish accountability standards.

What are the levels of commitment we have?

What do we expect of our leaders?

What do we expect of people when they come?

Establish covenants among leaders and pastors.

Outline expectations and provide training.

He called attention to Loren Meade's book from 1996 Five Challenges for the Once and Future Church.

1. To transfer ownership of the church.

2. To find new structures to carry out our faith.

3. To discover passionate spirituality.

4. To feed the world's need for community.
5. To become Apostolic people.

He said, "Followers of Jesus will attend to these:"

- The Great Commitment
- The Great Commission
- The Great Commandment
- The Great Requirement
- The Great Redemption

Finally, he talked about how in transforming congregations, we are making disciples not members and to make disciples we have to be disciples ourselves. We can't share what we don't have and we can't teach what we don't know or do ourselves.

### Learning the United Methodist Way

The leaders for this workshop were MaryJane Pierce Norton and Carol Krau. Basically, they talked about how the United Methodist Way includes "Engagement with the Poor and Marginalized and how this has been a part of our history given the example of Wesley; about what all Wesley did such as: provided education; opened free health clinics; started sewing cooperatives; provided a lending agency; and visited the imprisoned. "This was a movement of the poor, by the poor, for the poor." We also talked about the difference in Works of Piety and Works of Mercy.

This workshop was not what I expected but it was interesting. By the title, I was again looking for practical information and what we discussed were things I already knew. Perhaps the point was to not only refresh our memories, but to get us to re-introduce these concepts to our people. I did pick up three pieces of good information in our table discussions.

1. The Memphis Conference has introduced a Lay Resource Program where they put a Lay Person in each district to help churches in Connectional Ministries. The Lay Resource Person is to target 10 churches in the district and help them identify strengths and weaknesses and put together resources that will help them and to also establish networking relationships.
2. The Virginia Conference has a very good Checklist on Poverty that each church has to fill out and report on at Charge Conference.
3. The Great Rivers Conference has produced two excellent DVDs one on the Means of Grace and one on How to set up a church for ministry.

### Good Nutrition + Exercise + Lots of Rest = Effective Learning

The leaders for this workshop were MaryJane Pierce Norton and Carol Krau. I didn't take a lot of notes in this one. Basically we talked about how people learn, even about health and our brain. We talked about the UMC Understanding of Health:

1. A dynamic state of well-being of the individual and society.
2. Holistic wellness, which is physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political, and social.
3. Being in harmony with each other, with the natural environment, and with God.

One interesting point was how much Wesley was concerned about people's health. We can go to [www.gbpm.umc.org/work/health](http://www.gbpm.umc.org/work/health) and learn more about this. Another good point was that relationships

nurture our brains and that we do better when we are in relationships and that nature and nurture cannot be separated. We also talked about how we should have nurture available for everyone in the life span.

### Networking Group for Christian Education, Nurture, Discipleship and Small Group Ministries

This was our networking group the last morning we were there and again MaryJane Pierce Norton led this workshop. She started off by asking what we needed from the workshop. I put down to see how other Conferences structure Nurture Ministries and how they approach it. To that end, I really didn't pick up a lot of helpful information. The discussion was pitched back and forth mostly between a couple of people. I did better talking to my table group and found out that some structure it like Holston does but others do it in different ways that do not break it down to specific age-level ministries. The discussion got off on how to do committee meetings and how we need to have a balance of planning and administration. If you put planning first, you will never get to administration. We talked briefly about the L3 model of Loving, Learning, and Leading. Another topic was that in the Christian Faith, we are responsible for three things: Information, Formation, and Transformation and that too often we want to move from Information to Transformation automatically without doing Formation and the result is there is no lasting transformation.

### Overall Impressions

My overall impression of the trip was that we received good information, experienced great fellowship, and were challenged mentally and spiritually as well as physically. I am thankful for the opportunity to have participated in this and think I came away with some good ideas but I also came away with some satisfaction that some of the things we are doing or attempting to do in Holston are good. With that in mind I want to try to provide a brief look at the questions Anne asked us to look at and how they relate to my field of interest.

1. Specifically what will happen in our Conference during the next quadrennium regarding
  - a. Developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world,
  - b. Creating new places for new people by starting new congregations and renewing existing ones,
  - c. Engaging in ministry with the poor, and
  - d. Stamping out killer diseases by improving health globally?
2. Who or which team is the key leader for each initiative?
3. What will be accomplished in 2009?

In looking at those questions from my perspective in working with the Nurture Team, our point of interest is in the first emphasis. I have been excited about the work I have been doing in developing Leadership Holston along with Anne and others. I came away from the Training with a new certainty we are on the right track. Several times when something was being discussed, I would think to myself and even turn to Anne and say that is what we are doing with Leadership Holston. In several of the workshops and in our combined Annual Conference session, I got to share briefly about how we are addressing this issue and got very good feedback and even have people from two conferences who want me to send them information on the program. So with that in mind, I look forward to the start of Leadership Holston this August.