



Church's future depends on developing leaders, bishop says

By Linda Green

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) – The lack of leadership in the United Methodist Church is the top issue facing the denomination in the 21st century, says a retired bishop.

Bishop Joseph Pennel of Franklin, Tenn., who retired from the active episcopacy in June, told the governing members of the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry that the church is at a critical point because of the absence of strong, spiritual leaders. "Leadership determines the path and pathos of an institution and organization," he said.

"Every congregation deserves spiritual leaders," he said. "We need leaders today who are concerned about more than institution maintenance. We need leaders who are more concerned about faith than maintaining the status quo. We need leaders today who are nailed to the historic faith, which brought the United Methodist Church into being."

The subject of leadership was woven throughout the Oct. 7-10 organizational meeting of the Board of Higher Education's governing members.

The board is the church's program agency for educational, institutional and ministerial leadership. Its mission is to lead the denomination in the recruitment, preparation, nurture, education and support of Christian leaders, both lay and clergy, for the mission of Christ in the world.

Jesus did not reject the past but was informed by it and lived out if it, Pennel told the board's directors. Christ understood the context in which he was to give leadership, the bishop said. Christian leaders must be like Jesus by being counterculture leaders and understanding that if they lead out of their convictions, others will reject them, he said.

The Rev. Jerome King del Pino, top staff executive of the board, emphasized the need for global leaders for a global church. "Amid the bewildering complexities of our 21st century world, what would it take to form and nurture leaders who have vision, the spiritual and theological grounding, and the intellectual and practical skills to lead the United Methodist Church in faithful ministry in the 21st century?" he asked.

The issue of leadership arises at a critical juncture for the denomination because the church "is experiencing, if not a crisis, (then a) deep ambivalence and confusion about the kind of leadership it needs in the years ahead," he said.

That confusion led the denomination's top legislative body, the 2004 General Conference, to establish a four-year study commission to discuss and define the church's understanding of lay, licensed and ordained ministry.



Joe Pennel



Al Bowles

The Board of Higher Education's governing members elected the Rev. Al Bowles of Chattanooga, Tenn., as vice president of the Division of Ordained Ministry.

Del Pino related the uncertainty about the nature of leadership in the church to seismic shifts in the global village – religiously, technologically, politically, socially and economically.

"The responsibilities of the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry in the areas of call, preparation, support and accountability for persons in ordained, diaconal and licensed ministry, and its oversight of campus ministry and institutions of higher education, are areas of passion for me," said Bishop Gregory Palmer, the newly elected president of the board. Palmer leads the church's Iowa Area.

"The church and the culture(s) have no greater need than well-prepared Christian leaders. The United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry is this church's agency at the critical nexus to assist the church in this area," he said.

Palmer challenged the board members to perform their duties well because "we cannot afford to be guilty of the sin of low expectation, with regard to developing leadership for a global church."

Del Pino described three leadership characteristics that the United Methodist Church needs as he laid out a "vision of global leaders for a global church."

The first characteristic of such a leader is that of being a guardian of the connection, he said. The leader does not abandon the ideal of a global church that is diverse in hues, languages, cultures and traditions. He said global leaders take seriously the

view of Methodism's founder, John Wesley, that the world was his parish, and because the church is changing faces, such leaders are not "prompt(ed) to trim their vision to the local, the familiar and the domestic."

A global leader also bears a renewed vision of the church, Del Pino said. The leader envisions a church that recovers its Methodist heritage without "self-interested denominational navel gazing or anxious preoccupation with its own survival." Leaders with renewed vision embrace the purpose for which the Methodist movement was founded, he said. "From the beginning, Methodism existed not for its own sake but for the sake of a larger catholicity."

He asked what would happen if United Methodists recovered the Methodist ethos of nurturing disciples "bent on living not for themselves but for the larger good of God's kingdom," and were not driven by a desire for institutional maintenance and management.

A third characteristic of a global leader for a global church is that of advocating for a learned leadership.

This leader, Del Pino said, calls for a renewal of the union of reason and vital piety, intellectual excellence and holiness of heart and life. "Global leaders for a global church uncompromisingly and unapologetically advocate for educated and educating leaders," he said. They strive for a "new public space, where issues that define our mission and ministry can be raised, debated and resolved beyond the categories, dichotomies, and labels that now hold the conversation captive."

Global leaders embrace Wesley's vision of providing education to everyone, especially the poor and underserved. Methodists, historically, have thought of education as a tool for individual empowerment and social improvement and providing education to all has been an issue of justice, he said. Global leaders for a global church "envision an education pipeline that stretches around the world, training leaders with the spiritual, moral and intellectual wherewithal to lead the church and the society in the midst of profound change."

In addition to Palmer's election as president, the board elected Bishop J. Lawrence McClesky, Charlotte, N.C., vice president of the Division of Higher Education; the Rev. Al Bowles, Chattanooga, Tenn., vice president of the Division of Ordained Ministry; and the Rev. Elaine Stanovsky, Seattle, secretary. ■

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