

## **For the Sake of a New World, We See a New Church: A Call to Action**

*Look! I'm doing a new thing: now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness. Isaiah 43:19, CEB*

We see a new church. It is a renewed church that is clear about its mission and confident about its future, a church that is always reaching out, inviting, alive, agile, and resilient. We see a church that is hope-filled, passionate, nimble, called of God, and courageous. It is a church that is passionately committed to the doctrine, mission and vision of the Wesleyan movement. This church takes risks to reach new people for Jesus Christ, and it searches continuously for creative ways to help each person grow in grace, love, and holiness.

While this church is not yet here, we see a thousand signs of its emerging. We see it in radical hospitality, where spiritually hungry people everywhere are offered a saving relationship with Christ. We see it as the hearts of people are warmed by the awakening of renewed spiritual presence. We see it in passionate worship, where new generations sense the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We see it in small groups embodying intentional faith formation. We see it in pastors who find ways to reach young people and in annual conference leaders who dare to try different ways to serve congregations. We see it in general agencies learning new ways to network our Connection. We see it in the Council of Bishops opening itself to evaluation and establishing episcopal learning groups. We see it in risk-taking mission and justice. We see it in the efforts to end deaths from malaria, to start new faith communities, to participate in ministry with the poor, and to develop new leaders. We see it in extravagant generosity, as people share their resources in response to disasters.

Especially in Africa and Asia, we find multiple examples of Wesleyan evangelism, discipleship, and witness for social justice. In the U. S. and Europe, however, we recognize that our church's strength and vitality have diminished over the last several decades. Both Europe and America face cultural trends that are very difficult. We confess that at times we have lost our way, substituting maintenance for mission, bureaucracy for vision, and passivity for passion.

Paragraph 120 of The Book of Discipline is clear: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs." We also know that local churches are a significant arena for community and world transformation. And paragraph 33 of our Constitution is equally clear: "The annual conference is the basic body in the Church." The annual conference is the most important vehicle for creating and sustaining vital congregations.

We have studied our church and used independent consultants to give us information we needed about our church in the U.S. Our operational assessment identified a growing lack of trust among the parts of our Connection. It told us we have significant deficiencies and will have future difficulties because of our current pattern of economic contributions. It recommended more defined leadership roles, streamlined connectional structures, and better management systems. Our congregational vitality study used our own data to identify vital congregations and what drives them.

The Council of Bishops and Connectional Table both endorsed this core challenge: **“To redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”**

We can see a new church, and to get from here to there the Connectional Table and Council of Bishops urge the People of The United Methodist Church to make several strategic commitments:

- Engage in a return to our spiritual roots to reclaim the soul of our churches through intentional commitment to practice the means of grace.
- Give the highest priority to 10 years of energetic and sustained effort to increase and sustain the number of highly vital congregations.
- Invest in raising the standards of performance and results of leadership at all places in the UM Connection and employ key metrics as important contributing tools for cultivating continuous learning and improvement.
- Redirect our investments of talent, time and money in ways that demonstrate an emphatic emphasis on building blocks for vital congregations, including:
  - At least \$5 million from the 2013–16 General Administration or World Service Funds for use in theological education in the Central Conferences.
  - At least \$5 million from the 2013–16 General Administration or World Service Funds for use in developing lay leadership under 35 years old.
  - Up to \$50 million from the 2013–16 General Administration or World Service Funds for use in recruiting and theologically training UM clergy under age 35 and for use in creating “new places for new people” across the UM mission field.
- Streamline and realign the governance and staff structures of program and administration agencies in order to increase focus on support of Annual Conferences in increasing and sustaining the number of vital congregations and provide for more integrated, efficient, nimble, and responsive operations.
- Reform the Council of Bishops

The most important changes will not result from legislative action but require different actions and patterns of leadership by bishops, clergy, and laity in their conferences. These changes must be grounded deeply in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting. These changes have already begun, and the Call to Action is already starting to be employed in many congregations and conferences. Among the non-legislative actions that are required are the following:

- The Council of Bishops reorder its work and internal processes to:

- Make the work of supporting resident bishops in fostering congregational vitality the central agenda for the Council.
  - Support Jurisdictional and Central Conference Committees on Episcopacy in adopting stronger and more transparent measures (metrics) and procedures for the accountability of bishops.
  - Work with appropriate general church offices, seminary leadership, and Boards of Ordained Ministry to strengthen support for our seminaries, addressing curriculum requirements and clarifying expectations.
- Annual Conferences strive to improve their recruitment and support of the most fruitful and effective young clergy.
  - Bishops and Cabinets strengthen their clergy recruitment, formation and appointment processes to improve vitality.

But some steps require legislation at General Conference. Therefore, the Council of Bishops affirms and approves the direction recommended by the Connectional Table and the Interim Operations Team. We urge the General Conference to take the following actions:

- Give Annual Conferences freedom to organize their structures for greater fruitfulness.
- Permit the mid-quadrrennium reallocation of money from the general church funds for a sum up to \$60 million for purposes related to the challenge of creating and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations.
- Provide for the Council of Bishops to elect a non-residential bishop as President of the Council to help reform the Council and focus its energies on the core challenges.
- Create a UMC Center for Connectional Mission & Ministry under one board of directors to combine the functions of the Connectional Table and nine general agencies: GBCS, GBGM, GBHEM, GBOD, GCAH, GCFA, GCORR, GCSRW, and UMCOM. They will be organized into offices of shared services (functions such as GCFA, UMCOM, and GCAH) and offices of congregational vitality, leadership excellence, missional engagement, and justice and reconciliation. This will help us align resources for greater effectiveness and efficiency.
- Move the functions of GCCUIC to an office of the Council of Bishops, clarifying what have been overlapping responsibilities and improving our ecumenical efforts.
- Set aside UMW and UMM as self-funding official UM membership-based organizations.
- Provide a support system for collecting consistent information for all annual conferences about their financial practices and recommend to resident bishops and others strategies for reducing costs and increasing effectiveness.

We see a new church. It is a church that is clear about its mission and confident about its future, a church that is always reaching out, inviting, alive, agile, and resilient. We ask all United Methodists to join us as together we work to do the “new thing” God intends for our church and discover the path God is making for our future.

For more complete information about the work of A Call to Action, go to [UMCCallToAction.org](https://umccalltoaction.org) and [UMVitalCongregations.org](https://umvitalcongregations.org)