

Rethinking UCom
Address to General Commission on Communications
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February 26, 2009
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas

As we meet here we will give priority to thinking about the future of United Methodist Communications, and to some degree, the conversation that is starting within The United Methodist Church about its mission and ministry as a result of the Rethink Church campaign.

This is a strategic planning retreat. It's a time for us to do our highest level thinking about the future of the agency and the church we serve at the dawn of the 21st Century.

You know better than I that as the board of directors your role is to consider policy and strategy at the highest level. Some of you met in Boston last quadrennium and heard from a panel of leading thinkers, including Anthony Phillips, in media, advertising, communications and management, and with UCom staff developed a strategic plan that took form in many new directions. It resulted in the renovation of the denominational website, the move toward a more aggressive and opportunistic public media strategy, a risk-taking partnership to eradicate malaria, significantly greater use of research and a communications strategy that re-shaped the 2008 General Conference, among many others.

Once the Commission set the course, staff put together the vehicles to move the vision forward. You gave us a broad view and we developed the particular programs.

Board and staff responsibilities are interrelated but distinct, and I value that you bring to us not only visionary thinking but even more important, the base of support to carry it out creatively, innovatively and, at times, at some risk.

We function in a context that includes social, cultural and technological change. I believe it's important to start with this context, not to frame your thinking, but to invite you during this meeting to similarly reflect on your own observations and share them.

The General Conference set parameters for us through the identification of four focus areas for the mission of the church. We have organized UMCCom around these four and we are participating at a staff level in conversations with other agencies, the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table about the implementation of programs within them.

In addition to putting considerable effort into supporting all four, we are giving intense staff support to the Global Health Initiative as it conducts a capital campaign to raise \$75 million for global health.

Secondly, you have affirmed the Rethink Church theme for our public media, online presence and local church training. This idea is already generating creative, positive conversation. It's exciting conversation and it's occurring at every level of the church. It holds the potential to be a foundation for the church to reconsider its mission and ministry at the dawn of the 21st. Century. This is no small statement.

Third, we face significant shortfalls from budget guidance we received from the General Council on Finance and Administration before any of us knew we faced this global financial crisis. We will experience a revenue shortfall short of \$830,000 in 2009 and we anticipate a similar shortfall in each of the next three years.

In addition, we have lost \$2.9 million in earnings on long term investments, and the UMCCom Foundation has lost \$700,000 in investment income that it relies upon for operating capital. We rely on the Foundation for funds for innovative ministries that are not funded through the World Service Fund.

The Foundation has assiduously sought to avoid tapping into its invested corpus as it

seeks to build an endowment.

Finally, our capability to generate income, primarily through Tech Shop sales, declined as local congregations reduced purchases these past several months.

Unfortunately, as we all know, this is not a unique story. Some of you have foregone salary increases, cut your staff and experienced budget cuts. We are in this together, and I offer this information in order to be as transparent as possible and to advise you that the leadership team and I are in continuing conversation about contingencies.

In the midst of these dark clouds there is also good news. Some of you will recall that during the last quadrennium we discussed conserving resources where possible in order to absorb anticipated costs primarily related to capital expenditures to upgrade information technologies and software. We were successful in shepherding these resources and did not incur indebtedness as a result.

A second piece of good news is that we asked staff to manage funds judiciously in 2008 and they did. We reduced travel and asked staff to plan for discounted advance airfares. Staff agreed to share rooms where feasible, we slowed hiring and we are looking carefully at staffing needs. We utilized print on demand, and we chose to move more materials to the web for download rather than bulk printing. Because of these savings we believe we can absorb the 2009 deficit and continue with our plans for this year.

However, we must use this year to look at our plans for 2010, 2011 and beyond. We are discussing cooperative shared services with other general agencies in Nashville to identify and reduce redundancies.

As we look to the future, we must continue to move more deeply into digital media, a move that we began some years ago. But the change called for today is even more substantial. As I watched the Inauguration recently I spoke with my daughter on Skype video and left her a video mail message on Tokbox. I exchanged email messages with

friends in British Columbia, Oklahoma and Tennessee. I followed United Methodist News Service reporting from Washington, D.C. on umc.org, Twitter and Facebook. I did this while jumping from web page to web page, blog to blog and following coverage on cable television.

I am far from unique in this use of new media. I know some of you did the same. The penetration of digital media into our lives is altering how we get and use information and puts upon this Commission a new responsibility. That responsibility is to give our highest level of thought to revising our work in the midst of such pervasive media and available information.

United Methodist Communications has established itself as an organization that innovates and takes risks. I believe the general church needs this, and UMCCom must continue to fulfill this role because the church is not by nature nor structure comfortable with innovation and risk. There are good reasons for this, and some not-so-good. Innovation and risk are disruptive and uncertain. We all desire stability and predictability. Structure and culture at the general church sometimes, but not always, serve as impediments to meaningful partnership. But we cannot afford to allow these impediments to hold us back.

The time is at hand for a discussion in many places across the church about how we carry out ministry through the general agencies, annual conferences and local churches. It's clear that the general church structure faces change. It's unclear the extent and shape of the change. We need not take on responsibility for reorganizing the whole church. That would be more than a little presumptuous. But we can begin to identify the strategic and policy questions that relate to communication and we will engage in the larger organizational discussion as it unfolds in the future.

Past Commissions have given us the base from which to take calculated risks and the results are positive, in my opinion. We have succeeded in ways that we could not have anticipated.

It seems quite reasonable to me that UMCom plays the roles of catalyst, innovator and risk-taker.

- We are mandated to serve the whole church.
- We are a multi-dimensional agency with programmatic as well as administrative responsibilities.
- We are called to assist the church to develop its public image as well as to relate to internal audiences. We have significant responsibility for managing a whole church communications strategy as we demonstrated at the 2008 General Conference.
- We bridge audiences, internal and external.
- We project the church into the public conversation about significant issues based upon the teachings in the Social Principles and other sources including, of course, scripture.

We carry out this task through advertising, news, public information, marketing and research. The capacities of this agency are assets the church would sorely miss if they were to go away. Fortunately, The United Methodist Church has been more understanding and supportive of communications than some others. For this, we must express deep gratitude. The United Methodist Church is perceived globally more positively as a result.

In contrast, the history of mainline denominations is to downgrade and de-fund communications in times of financial stress. It is essential for us to remember that communication is not a back office, technical support function. It is not incidental or secondary to something more important, nor is it the whole ministry. A communications function must be proactive, strategic and comprehensive. It must support leading-edge engagement with the vision and mission of the church.

The task of communicating is about enhancing community, exploring meaningful, inclusive conversation and enabling all the voices with a stake in the community

dialogue to be heard. It's about assessing and interpreting context and speaking within it. That's secular language consistent with the scriptural behavior Jesus asked of his disciples in Matthew 25 to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned.

I regard communication as a core theological task. It is contextualizing the Good News of God's story for our time. It's keeping the Good News new, to borrow a phrase from Rev. Lyssette Perez of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference.

When I claim communication as a theological activity, I don't mean theology as an academic discipline conducted with surgical precision by highly educated specialists. There is a place for this discourse, but I would not locate it in the conversation that swirls in public media.

No, the type of discourse I refer to is more akin to Job where the conversation is about how the hard edges of life cut the soft flesh of our humanity. Where we experience pain and fear and the aches born of our vulnerability that leave us with questions about life's meaning and purpose, about ourselves and God.

This discourse gives voice to the imponderables. It's about God's love for us and our place in the Creation. The hard knocks, skepticism and breakdown of community that mark our age slice through middle class sensibilities, academic aloofness and the deluded notion that life is defined more by financial position than by our relationships to each other and God. This presents us with an existential, theological challenge. How do we speak of a loving, redemptive God when conditions are frightening, painful and hard to bear? How do we invite people into a loving, nurturing community when the society itself is alienating, isolating and divisive? What are we to say to those who have been put off, put out and hurt by the very words we that regard as the language of faith, and yet they yearn for connection, meaning and hope?

Our silence in the public conversation has many ramifications one of which is that we do

not offer a hurting world the Wesleyan understanding of God's grace. In my last address to you I referred to a Barna survey of 16 to 29-year-olds that found that only 16% have a "good impression" of Christian faith. Eighty seven percent say it's too judgmental and 85% say it's hypocritical. The survey also reveals an extraordinarily negative response to the word "evangelical." 49% of this age group view it negatively. Only three percent have a favorable view. Even the word "Christian" was perceived negatively, according to David Kinnaman, who headed the research for Barna,

One young person told him, "Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, anti-choice, angry, violent, empire builders; they want to convert everyone and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe. (*UnChristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*, David Kinnaman, p. 26)

In contrast, we also referred to a Gallup Poll that found Methodists were viewed more positively than ten other well-known and mainstream religious denominations.

This lays a challenge before us. The communications challenge is to translate our biblical understanding, Wesleyan teachings, the values of the Social Principles and contemporary insights of theology into language that speaks to individuals, informs the public conversation and contributes to public policy deliberations. Addressing care for the environment, peacemaking, human rights, employment and education are the concrete expressions of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

This requires communication to encourage disciples who have faith *in* Jesus and also practice the faith *of* Jesus, a faith that transforms individual lives as it also speaks to principalities and powers about justice, mercy and compassion.

At UMCCom we constantly think about how we communicate with people inside and outside the church who have different levels of understanding about the range of

theological perspectives that exist in the church.

Fortunately, the new media create a conversation, a participatory experience in which we are all producers and creators as well as receivers and users of information. The flow is no longer one way, it's distributed and interactive and it requires us to consider how the communications agency of the church encourages and facilitates that conversation.

We will also continue to press forward to bring unifying messages to the church globally. One program proposal we are working on is messages of forgiveness and reconciliation in an area of conflict. In partnership with the annual conference in Ivory Coast, the Texas Annual Conference and others, we are considering how radio can be a tool for uniting a divided community. We are developing a radio station that will cover Côte d'Ivoire.

But technology is only a delivery vehicle for content. What is exciting is the desire for program segments on forgiveness and reconciliation leading to a call-in program to discuss how to bring this country, only recently torn apart by civil war, back together. This series of programs could culminate in a national day of welcoming and hospitality in local United Methodist congregations.

When it informs and influences individuals and community in this way, communication is a theological activity.

Boiled down to the simplest language and thought, the challenge we face as we meet here is to ask how we contribute to the life of the church in a way that is relevant and adds value. What is it that UMCom offers the church that is best carried out by this general agency of the church? What makes UMCom relevant to the church in the 21st. Century?

I believe there are answers to these fundamental questions. First, we have created a

unifying *image* of the church and unifying *messages* that have established the identity of the church worldwide. We are the people of The United Methodist Church. Together we can open hearts. open minds. open doors. Before this effort started the church was virtually invisible, even with church buildings in every county in the U.S. Awareness has increased by 40% in some tests. We've gotten front page and national network television coverage.

This is our Disciplinary mandate. No other agency is explicitly charged with unifying images and messages in quite the same way as UMCom. It's an on-going task. Awareness does not come with a deed that grants permanent ownership of this territory called identity. It must be reinforced and worked at continuously.

That is both a task of the *craft* of communicating, and an expression of the *art* of communicating.

In my view the craft is technique. The art is theology. I understand our challenge to be this: We wed communications technique to theological interpretation. And we are challenged to understand the role of this agency at a higher level and to develop the layers of skills necessary to continue to take up the challenge of communicating in this age of new media and message overload.

When we do it well, we will celebrate the drama of our form of religious journalism. Much of what we will be about these next three days is to confront this challenge and rethink United Methodist Communications.

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