



# **Faithful Stewards of the Mysteries of God**

Report of the General Secretary

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When at its gathering in 2004 General Conference brought into being the Connectional Table, it undertook a restructuring of our denomination's corporate life that harbors far-reaching implications for how United Methodists will interpret and live out their mission in the twenty-first century. And to the extent that the church's mission and ministry find expression through the work of the general agencies, the deliberations and actions of the Connectional Table will have a direct impact on the mission of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. This is unavoidable. After all, as the *Book of Discipline* makes clear, the Connectional Table is the venue where "ministry and money are brought to the same table to coordinate the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church."<sup>1</sup>

The Connectional Table represents a powerful opportunity for revitalizing the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church in the new century. However, ironically, it also harbors the real danger of contributing to the further fracturing of the United Methodist connection.

I submit that whether the Connectional Table will be blessing or bane depends vitally on the willingness of the church's leaders to subject this new confluence of "connection," "mission," "money," and "ministry" to deep-running theological scrutiny. The fact is, United Methodism's unfortu-

nate penchant for a distorted pragmatism that says, “If it works, let’s do it,” is a bane to our church. It permits us to move everything to the lowest common denominator and so squeezes out opportunities for serious theological reflection.

Given that one of the “essential functions” of the Connectional Table is “to review and evaluate the missional effectiveness of general program-related agencies,”<sup>2</sup> we should be under no illusion that the general agencies, including our own, have much—perhaps everything—at stake in the depth, transparency, and candor of this conversation.

If for some reason we fail or neglect to do this work now, we risk, in the words of Eph. 4:14, being “tossed to and fro and blown about” by all manner of false doctrine, both inside and outside the church—a posture United Methodists can ill afford in face of the burgeoning missional challenges and opportunities of our twenty-first-century world.

Consider the tearing at the connection of a galloping congregationalism whose logic installs the local church as *the* primary locus for and form of ministry in The United Methodist Church. This is by no means a pejorative statement meant to denigrate the local church. Rather, it points to the reductionist thinking in our church about what is the proper place of the local church in the total connection.

Thus, can noted United Methodist historian Russell Richey not be forgiven for his wry observation that “Wesley had spoken of the world as his parish; now Methodism indeed [has] made parish its world”?<sup>3</sup> And when the logic of congregationalism predominates in deliberations about money, mission, and ministry, is it any wonder that many churches view apportionments not as a sign of our connectional bond but as a “tax” imposed from without? Should we truly be surprised by the strong antipathy toward the general agencies in some quarters of the church, identifying the agencies not as a vital expression of the church’s global connection but instead as a piece of bureaucratic machinery that at best has outlived its usefulness and at worst has become an obstacle to the flourishing of the denomination? Should it shock us too much to learn that there are proposals afoot at the highest levels of the church that seek to reduce the reliance of general agencies on apportioned funds, make payment of apportionments to certain general church funds optional rather than

obligatory, and induce general agencies to initiate alternative funding streams? Even conceding, as we should, that the funding of the work of the general church needs serious, ongoing scrutiny, do such proposals not signal the *reductio ad absurdum* of United Methodism's slide into what Richey has warned is the "collapse of connectionalism into institutionalized congregationalism"?<sup>4</sup>

Our church finds itself in a moment of *kairos*, confronted with a searing question: *What is God calling The United Methodist Church to be and to do in this new day with the abundant resources—human, financial, and organizational—with which it has been gifted?*

I invite you to consider with me a few theological reflections on this trenchant question. Let me begin by putting before you the following two-pronged thesis:

1. Any theologically adequate approach to mission, ministry, and money must be grounded in a serious biblical and theological understanding and practice of stewardship.
2. Any theologically adequate *United Methodist* approach to mission, ministry, and money must construe the theology and practice of stewardship connectionally.<sup>5</sup>

Interpreted connectionally, I submit, stewardship provides United Methodists with the theological framework they need for understanding and living the divine mission in the world with integrity, generosity, and joy.

## I

The concept of *stewardship* and the notion of human beings as *stewards* have rich biblical and theological roots in Christianity and have even gained prominence in secular literature on management, the environment, and governance in recent years. Yet, for the church today, says Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, the greatest obstacle to retrieving this ancient symbol is "the deadening habit of restricting our use of this ancient office and symbol . . . to the sphere of *means*." That is, we practice stewardship *in order that* something else—the church's mission—may be enhanced. And so we give of our "time, talents, and treasures" to enable the church to pursue its mission.<sup>6</sup> I applaud the *Discipline's* use of stew-

ardship language in defining the purpose of the Connectional Table.<sup>7</sup> I also appreciate the appeal to “stewardship” in a recent “Summit on Stewardship” in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>8</sup> Yet in both instances, stewardship functions *instrumentally*, pressed in service of some *other* goal or value.

An instrumentalistic view of stewardship is reductionistic in at least two dangerous ways. First, it reduces the mission of God to the mission of the church. God is doing in the world what the church is doing. Need we be reminded of the atrocious confusion of “Christian” with “Western” in our history in North America? Second, it reduces stewardship to money, to “stewardship campaigns” and all manner of fundraising techniques.

Hear me carefully: I am by no means advocating that United Methodists abandon the need for a clearly articulated mission. Nor am I suggesting that stewardship be uncoupled from concerns with how the church ought to care for its financial resources. Rather, I am suggesting that by retrieving the rich biblical, theological, and Wesleyan roots of the concept of stewardship, The United Methodist Church will be able to craft the theological framework it needs for thinking faithfully about mission, money, and ministry in the twenty-first century.

In considering what such a theological framework might look like, let us begin with Hall’s penetrating question. I begin with a theological question, because United Methodists believe that the church’s work derives from a divine imperative. Thus, to know what God is up to requires that we approach this question with respect for the church’s need for theological astuteness.

Hall asks, “What if stewardship, instead of being just the *means* of our mission, were a vital dimension of its *end*—that is, an indispensable aspect of what Christian mission actually *is*?”<sup>9</sup> Put this way, the question immediately focuses our attention where it should be, namely, on *God’s* mission in the world. As theologian Miroslav Volf points out, “In its original theological sense, mission is *missio Dei*.”<sup>10</sup> The church’s mission is always *derivative*: our mission is first and always *com-mission*.<sup>11</sup>

So, then, what is God’s mission—the *missio Dei*? What is God up to in the world? In articulating the divine mission, Scripture often uses the powerful symbol of God’s *kingdom*, God’s *realm* or *reign*. The *missio Dei* is the realization of the reign of God in the world—a vision “impelled by some

emanation of God's own passion to realize the 'goodness' and *shalom* and promise of creation." God's reign is grounded in the unfathomable love of God for "this wayward and death-enticed planet"—propelled by the "divine determination to instill life into the world at the very point of its resort to the attractions and resolutions of death."<sup>12</sup> For this reason, God's love is crucified love, and divine grace is "costly grace" (Bonhoeffer).

The *missio Dei*, then, begins and ends in *gift*—God's unmerited and unconditional gift of new life to all creation. United Methodist theologian Douglas Meeks anchors this "hyperbolic logic of giving" in the nature of the trinitarian God: "God is the communion of perfect self-donation. The Trinity is the community of extravagant, overflowing, and self-diffusive goodness. The gratuity of God's giving is the mystery of God's being."<sup>13</sup>

We Christians, says the Apostle Paul, are called to be "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1, RSV)—the mystery of the profligate, prodigal, unending gift of the triune God's love for the world. We are, to use Meeks's phrase, called to be *imago trinitatis*—the image of the Trinity. The church's mission is to be stewards of the divine communion: "Utterly in need of Christ, yet united with him, our lives are to take on a similar trinitarian structure as givers of the goodness we have received from God."<sup>14</sup>

All this should be familiar to United Methodists. After all, stewardship was at the heart of the Wesleyan revival and, for Wesley, fundamental to a Methodist way of being Christian. As Bishop Kenneth Carder points out, for Wesley, stewardship is believers' "way of being in the world" as beloved children of a gifting God"; and he warns, "It is a way of life and not mere rhetoric for motivating charitable contributions."<sup>15</sup> For Wesleyans, being a steward of God's gracious love for all creation means sharing in God's desire that all people have what they need to live life abundantly as children of God. Not surprisingly, the "steward" was a key office in early Methodism.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, far from separating stewardship from matters financial, for Wesley, *stewardship had everything to do with economy*. Indeed, claims Meeks, "economy is for Wesley at the heart of Christian discipleship and the substance of the way of salvation."<sup>17</sup> However, the economy Meeks is talking about is the economy of God's reign. Now, United Methodists may not often speak in these terms in worship and preaching. But speaking in

these terms cuts to the chase in what United Methodists mean by being stewards of God's creation.

Unlike the economy of the market society, which is an economy of debt and scarcity, God's economy is one of *abundance* grounded in the extravagance of divine grace. Wesley believed, observes Carder, that "because all creation has its origin and destiny in God, there is always enough when the resources are appropriately shared. When treated as an expression of grace, gifts multiply and are as inexhaustible as the grace of God who is their source."<sup>18</sup> Says Meeks, "To be the *homo economicus* in God's economy of grace means that we are shaped by God's giving"<sup>19</sup> rather than by the market's logic of debt and scarcity.

Understood in this expansive way, stewardship means building gifted and giving communities united in relationships of mutuality and responsibility. It is within this larger context of communal life grounded in the extravagance of God's gift of love that our responsibility to share of the abundance of our material and financial resources must be understood and practiced.

## II

How would such a view of stewardship allow United Methodists to understand and practice their mission? What are the implications for how the Connectional Table oversees "the stewardship of the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church . . ."?<sup>20</sup> Indeed, how would this expansive view of stewardship contribute to the healing of our fractured connection? Last, but not least, what are the implications of stewardship so conceived for the way general agencies understand and live out their specific callings within the scope of the church's mission as a whole?

I conclude with just a few brief reflections on these questions. As I mentioned earlier, for me, United Methodists best understand and live out an expansive vision of stewardship by doing so connectionally. In his most recent book, Russell Richey names connectionalism (along with itinerancy, discipline, and catholicity) as one of the "marks" of Methodism—a "hallmark" or "trait" that distinguishes a uniquely Methodist way of understanding and living the Christian mission.<sup>21</sup> Only when interpreted connectionally can United Methodists truly appreciate the distinctive

power, promise, and awesome responsibility of our calling as “stewards of the mysteries of God.”

In what follows, I connect stewardship with three characteristics of connectionalism, as outlined in Dr. Richey’s excellent book.

## **Stewardship Lived Connectionally Reaffirms our Global Covenant.**

From the beginning, starting with the class meeting, Methodists have understood their connection as a covenantal commitment. This covenant is our way of affirming our unity in “the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), both within Methodism and within the Christian family—and, indeed, within the whole household of God’s created order. In this way, United Methodists affirm their commitment to be stewards of God’s gift of redemption to all creation.

One implication of this holistic vision of stewardship understood connectionally is that it allows United Methodists to affirm, celebrate, and support *all* the ministries and missional structures needed to fulfill its mission globally—including the work of the general agencies. Our commitment to imagine a covenant as expansive and as generous as the divine mission itself means we refuse to be seduced by myopic congregationalism or denominational pronouncements driven by an economy of scarcity, even greed. Instead, convinced that faithfulness to the *missio Dei* requires embodiment in ministries and structures at *every* level of our connection—local, conference, jurisdictional, and general church—we share our resources—human, financial, institutional—generously and abundantly.

It is an “impossible possibility” (Niebuhr) for the church to be the church without appropriately reasoned structures that are accountable and effective. The notion that The United Methodist Church could be the same church that it has demonstrated itself to be through the recent tsunami disaster and through 9/11 and other challenges to the human predicament without our structures is downright foolish.

## **Stewardship Lived Connectionally Commits Us to an “Ethic of Equity and Proportionality.”**

An immediate implication of our commitment to a global connectional covenant is that United Methodists take seriously their obligations and



responsibilities for sustaining and nurturing each part of the connection *for the sake of faithful functioning of the whole*. Thus, as Richey points out, for United Methodists, stewardship as a mutual sharing of obligations and gifts expresses an ethic of equity and proportionality.<sup>22</sup>

For Richey, the payment of apportionments is an important way in which United Methodists live out this ethic. Apportionments, says Richey, “have been among the ways to gather from all participants, put energies into common endeavor, recognize diversity of gifts, and find channels to resource the whole. Apportionments constitute a kind of collective stewardship” — one way “to achieve the financial dimension”<sup>23</sup> of our global connection.

Could it be that a holistic vision of stewardship, grounded in our mutual covenant, may prompt United Methodists to view apportionments not as a drain on the congregation’s resources for “real ministry” but rather as a way of ensuring that each ministry in the connection receives equitable support proportionate to its need? Could it be that an ethic of equity and proportionality would renew our commitment to live from God’s economy of abundance rather than the world’s economy of scarcity? Could it be that a vision of stewardship lived out in an ethic of equity and proportionality would recover our historic commitment to justice, particularly for the world’s poor? As Bishop Carder points out, fundamental to a Wesleyan perspective on stewardship is “God’s identification with the poor as special recipients and means of God’s grace.”<sup>24</sup> Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and their aftermath have ripped the veil off the scandal of racism and poverty that still afflict this country, not to mention the millions of poor around the world. How can The United Methodist Church bring the abundance of its resources to bear in ministry with the poor?

Demographic changes are precipitating a tectonic shift in the way our denomination understands itself. In the nineteenth century, United Methodists boasted that they had a church in virtually every county. This may still be the case. However, now there seems to be a trend to focus our energies on the *richest* counties in the nation, asking: How can we provide for church growth that is entrepreneurial in spirit and intent?

We have largely abdicated our commitment to urban areas. And where that commitment remains, it is subjected to the canons of income and expense. Where does this leave the Wesleyan option for the poor?

How can United Methodists empower the general agencies to participate in this mission with their strategic position and unique capabilities? Conversely, how would the general agencies, and the Connectional Table, need to rethink their obligations as stewards of the connectional covenant were ministry with the poor to become constitutive of their mission and labor in the world? This is a question the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry *must* address, since we are talking about what it takes to fashion leaders to live in such a world.

### **Stewardship Lived Connectionally Means United Methodists are “Forming and Reforming.”**

From early days, Methodists have “lived in and off the Spirit.” This has inspired us to “go with the Spirit, to experiment, to try new things, to change.” Therefore, connectionalism at its best has always been “*malleable, evolving, elastic, and vulnerable*.” In short, connectionalism is forever “forming and reforming.” After all, it is just this Spirit-led experimentalism that has led to the formation of boards and agencies in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>25</sup>

Such a spirit of openness, vulnerability, and expectation—perhaps even adventure!—fits well with the holistic vision of stewardship I have been outlining here; for it reminds us that the *missio Dei* to which we have been called as stewards always and forever transcends any particular historical incarnation of it. The unfathomable mystery of God’s cruciform love for the world can never be fully contained in any structure, ecclesiastical or otherwise.

Thus are we challenged—from local church to general agency—to renew our commitment to a spirit of openness, vulnerability, and humility, lest we should fall captive to “a stewardship of ecclesiastical self-preservation.”<sup>26</sup> It prompts me to ask: “How do the general agencies—and, with them, the Connectional Table—remain elastic, malleable, and nimble in their self-understanding, structures, and practice in order to respond to God’s mission with generosity, abundance, and joy? How does the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry embody this reforming spirit?”

It pleases me greatly that this board has sought to embody this Wesleyan commitment to ongoing reform. Consider only two examples.

- (1) The continued rethinking, refinement, and adjustment of our vision, mission, and ministry through an intentional strategic-planning process in response to emerging missional challenges and opportunities. And this week this process takes an important turn, when directors will participate in determining the strategic issues facing this agency in the years ahead.
- (2) The ongoing effort to find a form of board governance that empowers directors to be stewards of the vision and resources of this agency in ways that will immeasurably broaden and deepen our global connection.

Could it be that the Connectional Table marks a new adventure in God's "forming and reforming" of the United Methodist connection? If so, how would a holistic vision of stewardship shape the mission and ministry of the Table and thus the work of the agencies through it? How would a spirit of openness and vulnerability to God's effusive, ever-surprising love for the world—particularly for the poor—impact the way the Connectional Table interprets how, where, and when to deploy the abundant human, financial, and institutional resources committed to its care? How would an ethic of equity and proportionality impact the way general agencies interpret and share their *common resources* and honor their *mutual obligations* for the sake of a larger vision? How does this ethic guard against exchanging the promise of an economy of abundance for the fleshpots of an economy of scarcity? Finally, how does the Connectional Table remain vigilant against the ever-present danger of reducing a holistic vision of stewardship to money?

### III

In conclusion, it remains only to ask: Where in the United Methodist connection should this conversation about stewardship reside? The obvious answer, of course, is "everywhere"—throughout the connection. While this is manifestly true, I do submit that the general agencies, under the guidance of the Connectional Table, have a particular obligation to lead the church in this conversation. After all, the *Book of Discipline* obligates the Connectional Table with the task of serving "as a steward of the [church's] vision and resources for mission and ministry. . . ." <sup>27</sup> And, indeed, as the agency mandated to serve as "advocate for the intellectual life of the Church," <sup>28</sup> I submit that the General Board of Higher Education

and Ministry has a seminal role to play in provoking and nurturing this conversation, endeavoring to ensure that the dialogue is never truncated or self-serving or merely becomes a replication of our own desires and wishes instead of a serious struggling with God's will for the world.

I repeat: The United Methodist Church finds itself in a moment of *kairos*—an occasion pregnant with peril and possibility in the face of the challenges and opportunities of the new century. Pray with me that our beloved church, and particularly we who live out our ministry through its general agencies, will exhibit an openness, vulnerability, and humility so tuned to the extravagant, ever-new effusions of the divine love for the world that, at the eschatological banquet, we would be called faithful stewards of the mysteries of God.

## Notes

1. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶ 901.
2. *Ibid.*, ¶ 905.4.
3. Russell E. Richey, "Are the Local Church and Denominational Bureaucracy 'Twins'?" in *Questions for the Twenty-first Century Church*, ed. Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, and Dennis M. Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 240.
4. *Ibid.*
5. See Russell E. Richey, *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).
6. Douglas John Hall, "Stewardship as a Missional Discipline," *Journal for Preachers* 22/1 (Advent 1998): 19.
7. *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 904.
8. See *Summit eBulletin 1* (4 November 2004), United Methodist Summit on Christian Stewardship II, held August 23–25, 2005, San Antonio, Texas.
9. Hall, "Stewardship as a Missional Discipline," 20.
10. Quoted in Hall, 22.
11. *Ibid.*, 22.
12. *Ibid.*
13. M. Douglas Meeks, "Being Human in the Market Society," *Quarterly Review* 21/3 (Fall 2001): 262.
14. *Ibid.*, 262.
15. Kenneth Carder, "A Wesleyan Perspective on Christian Stewardship," 2-3. Paper presented to the United Methodist Summit on Stewardship, February 4–6, 2005, Atlanta, Georgia.
16. Richey, *Marks of Methodism*, 30.
17. Quoted in Carder, "A Wesleyan Perspective on Christian Stewardship," 2.

18. Ibid.
19. Meeks, "Being Human in the Market Society," 263.
20. *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 904.
21. Richey, *Marks of Methodism*, 1.
22. Ibid., 30.
23. Ibid.
24. Carder, "A Wesleyan Perspective on Christian Stewardship," 3.
25. Richey, *Marks of Methodism*, 25.
26. Hall, "Stewardship as a Missional Discipline," 26.
27. *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 904.
28. Ibid., ¶ 1405.1.

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