

**SERMON – “THE WORLDWIDE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH”
APRIL 20, 2008**

TEXT: I Peter 2: 4-12, Matthew 28: 16-20

This morning I'm offering part 2 of my reflections on United Methodism. Last week I spoke of our beginnings under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley: the early organization into societies and class meetings to be guided by three general rules:

Test time: What are they? Do no Harm, Do Good, Stay in Love with God
(attend to those practices that lead to spiritual growth)

Well the organization has become a little more complex! When Methodism became established in colonial and then independent America, it was expanding rapidly, as the territories were expanding. The first General Conference happened in December, 1784 in Baltimore – for those recalling our American History, this is very parallel to the nation's Constitutional Convention.

It was remarkable – as the church was established it followed the democratic principles that were so vividly alive in those early days. John Wesley had held a tight reign in England, but when Methodism grew independently in this country, it began with representation. All the leaders gathered and voted on the form of organization and what would be their core guiding principles. The General Rules stood. They organized for the future expansion – They opted for an Episcopal System with ordained clergy and a “General Superintendent” or Bishop – Francis Asbury was ordained one day and consecrated as “General Superintendent” the next. Asbury was incredible. It is said that he rode over 10,000 miles establishing Methodist societies and class meetings.

This is our heritage today: as the church expanded, it was organized into geographic areas called “Annual Conferences” – that's a confusing term because it refers both to the geographic area (we are the NYAC) and the annual 3-4 day meeting held in June. Each annual conference is presided over by a bishop who has been elected by peers. The annual conferences were then divided into districts- ours has six districts- each overseen by a district superintendent. We are in Long Island East District. As the church expanded beyond the United States, “central conferences were added” – these are currently in Europe, Africa and the Philippines. The whole church

then is overseen by General Conference – a Quadrennial meeting held with clergy and lay representatives from all of the annual and central conferences. That is what I am attending this coming week in Fort Worth, TX. The result of this conference is found in these two books – The Book of Discipline and the Book of Resolutions plus a program with a Quadrennial Budget that will determine our apportionment to the general church (which by the way is about \$.04 of every dollar raised by the local church)

This morning, I want to give you a preview about some of the things that will be discussed and decided at this year's General Conference. I encourage you to go to our umc.org website and click on General Conference for updates and also watch the media. I hope that you will keep the GC in prayer. I will not be there as a voting delegate but as an observer and perhaps do a bit of lobbying for positions to be taken. My official capacity as observer is as a member of The Connectional Table which is a general committee of the church – we essentially are a central coordinating committee where representatives of our Annual Conferences, the Bishops, General Agencies and Commissions, and ethnic caucuses meet to plan the program and work with GCFA to set the budget.

Back to General Conference – there are 1000 delegates – 500 clergy and 500 lay persons who have been elected by their annual or central conferences representing 11.5 million U. Methodists. These are the decision makers. Our bishops and heads of general agencies have no vote – they are directed by this representative body. They, along with The Connectional Table have brought some proposals to be decided on, but they are not the final decision makers. Your representatives are!

The wonderful part of these 10 days is to see diversity in all its glory – a convention center filled with thousands (delegates and observers) – when the first hymn is sung you feel the power of the worldwide church reverberating throughout the halls and transforming that cold secular place into a holy place. Throughout the conference, there are magnificent creative worship services with wonderful guest choirs from churches around the world. It is a colorful church with persons who come from over a hundred ethnicities- from small south pacific Islanders to Northern Europeans, from Koreans to Native Americans, from West, East and Southern Africa, from Texas to Maine and Hawaii to Montauk.

The grueling part is days that often start by 7 am and don't end until sometime between 9 and 11 pm. In the first week legislative committees go through the thousands of petitions that have been sent in to be considered. In the second week, the whole body considers the decisions of the legislative committees plus anything brought to the floor. However, to keep us all fueled for the work, it has been a wonderful hospitable tradition for several General Conferences for the host conference to bake homemade cookies by the tens of thousands for our breaks in the afternoon!

A quick glance at some important concerns coming to this General Conference.

Something that I have been very involved in is a proposal that comes from The Connectional Table, The Council of Bishops, and the General Agencies: we propose that a major part of the work of the entire church revolve around four clear emphases. Those focal points are:

Quality Church Leadership Development – both clergy and lay leadership
Starting New Congregations and Revitalizing struggling congregations
Global Health Concerns
Working to Eradicate Profound Poverty

To accomplish significant gains in these four areas, the General Agencies have designed ways to coordinate their efforts with each other in a new way – in the past, they have often worked very independently from each other and in some ways have been in competition for the limited funds of the church.

The Worldwide Diversity of the church is mostly its blessing, but diversity means that there can also be many areas of polarity of positions and thought. We are a tremendously diverse community not only in terms of our ethnicity but more in terms of our theology, our understanding of the church in mission, positions on social concerns and political actions, and our understanding of personal and public morality. It is no secret that the United Methodist Church, along with all mainline denominations, has been deeply divided in our understanding of homosexuality and sexual identity; our ministry to and with persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. This has been a painful battle for me. I have yearned for the church to open and affirming of all persons regardless of their sexual orientation or identity. I have cried with men and women who have been

clearly called in their hearts to ministry and can not respond to that call. I have been deeply saddened by not being able to bless the committed long term relationships of members of my congregation.

Conclusionk