

From the General Secretary

by Thomas Kemper



Amanda Chng is commissioned as a Global Mission Fellow by, from left: Thomas Kemper, Bishop Woodie White, and the Rev. Judy Y. Chung. Chng, from Singapore, has been assigned to Frankfurt, Germany. PHOTO BY MIKE DUBOSE, UMNS

On Being Connected

“Connection” is one of the oldest terms and concepts in Methodism. It came into usage in the mid-1700s as John Wesley and a group of like-minded Anglicans, primarily laity but some clergy, began the process of building a network of preaching points, local classes and societies, and then conferences with the objective of “spreading scriptural holiness.” Wesley called it “the connexion.” The name stuck.

I, like many millions of others, was born into the Methodist connection and was shaped by its global reach. My father was a pastor for the Evangelical United Brethren side of our denomination. I was fascinated by what we now call the worldwide nature of Methodism—even though Methodists were a tiny minority in predominantly Lutheran and Roman Catholic Germany.

My congregation in the small town of Detmold formed my extended local family. As the pastor’s son, I received considerable attention from the parishioners. However the Wesleyan “optimism of grace” defined my home and church and surrounded me as I engaged in national and international United Methodist ministry and mission activity—part of the connection rooted in a sense of personal and social holiness flowing from the grace of God.

My father was theologically and politically conservative, but through his experience as a soldier during World War II, he became an ardent antiwar advocate. He taught me, as our United Methodist *Book of Discipline* says, that war is incompatible with Christian teaching. His influence led me to become a conscientious objector—rejecting military service in favor of alternative humanitarian or social service, which is a legal option in Germany.

My alternative service was arranged through the German Methodist Mission in England, where I made new, life-enriching connections that expanded not only my experience but my vision. I learned firsthand about the worldwide reach of Methodism by living in an international Methodist student hostel

in London and experiencing the deep social justice work of the British Methodist Church.

While in England in 1976, I participated as a youth delegate in the World Methodist Conference in Dublin, Ireland. I shared a room with Derek Kotze, a white youth secretary from the Methodist Church in Southern Africa. His black counterpart in the youth department was denied an exit visit from South Africa because of a now-famous student revolt against the Apartheid education system. Every night, Derek kneeled in prayer, and every morning he rushed to the newsstand for fresh information about friends and church youth members involved in the struggle. Derek’s spiritual depth and social consciousness inspired me to connect with antiapartheid work in Germany.

A sense of connection prevailed with us in the eight years that my wife, Barbara, and I served as missionaries in Brazil. We were blessed by connections with the Brazilian Methodist community and sustained by prayers and support from Germany. I discovered the value of being connected to the wider Christian family—indeed, the broader human family. In Brazil, we participated in a communal reading of the Bible from the perspective of the poor, a practice I experienced in partnership with Roman Catholic nuns steeped in liberation theology. The objective is to read from life to the Bible and from the Bible to life. Such encounters with and connections to Scripture transform individuals and communities and, I believe, could transform the world.

A strong sense of connection is essential for effective Christian mission and witness. Connected in God’s grace and in our faith in Christ, we dare as United Methodists to reach for the hem of God’s coat as God moves through the world.

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