



## REFLECTIONS OF A RESEARCHER

**O**ver the course of 14 years of work in the Research Office of the General Board of Global Ministries, a number of observations on the state of The United Methodist Church and on the culture in the US have emerged. The most obvious such observation is an undeniable trend, which should be apparent to all who even take a casual glance at denominational statistics. Membership has been declining for every one of those 14 years, not to mention every year before that back to the time of the merger in the late 60s.

One related trend has been somewhat startling to this researcher. Until the recent financial downturn and resulting hit on church giving, the decline was largely met with apathy on the part of church leadership. In part, this was due to relative stability in worship attendance. In what amounts to a highly significant trend change in its own right, however, attendance took a marked downturn in the last decade. Another key to the apathy is that offerings held up for the most part until 2008, so we were able to soldier on up to that time without feeling too much pain.

Of course, some were observing the statistical trends and were drawing straight trend lines on a membership graph and locating the year the last United Methodist would turn out the lights. There are too many factors at work for this simple straight-line trending to hold up over the long term. One important factor, which may accelerate this, however, has been articulated by Dr. Lovett Weems as the death tsunami. While oft quoted and not as often understood, this simply means that the impact of our aging membership will be felt and will be significant, unless we do much better at adding new members. Dr. Weems has also been widely quoted as noting that we need “more people, more diverse people, and more young people.”

One positive trend within the denomination over the recent decade and a half has been the emergence of an emphasis on congregational development. This has included the addition of conference staff people tasked with this responsibility, many of them full time. Furthermore, the knowledge level surrounding best practices and the missional need to start new churches and bring new vitality to existing churches has grown enormously. Many conferences are experiencing a culture shift where these concepts are now part of their ethos. While this is a hopeful step, it has not been able to stem the tide.

Of course, all this has not been taking place in a vacuum. Cultural, societal, and demographic changes have been under foot as well. The Research Office has been closely associated with demographic data. While mostly working with small areas around churches, some macro trends have been obvious enough. One is the well-known change in the racial/ethnic makeup of the general population. Immigration and birth patterns are causing an increase in the population composition among non-whites (and Hispanic whites). Within this larger trend, Hispanic/Latinos have become the largest racial/ethnic group and show the greatest growth rates. Some estimates are that white, non-Hispanics will be in the minority nationwide in a few decades. This is already true in many locations. While The UMC is well aware of this and attempting to address it, we are still hugely underrepresented in these constituencies. The good news is that some racial ethnic membership groups, such as Koreans and Hispanics, are growing.

One of the big trends over recent decades has been the growth of the church in the global south, including Africa. This has surely impacted The United Methodist Church, as conferences in Africa and the

---

Philippines have grown significantly. Much of this has been in existing annual conferences, but recently, the cutting edge of United Methodism is seen in the Mission Initiatives of the General Board of Global Ministries. New churches are being started in frontier countries such as in some Communist areas in Southeast Asia.

This past decade and a half has been remarkable in the number of large-scale events shaping the United States. We saw the devastation of Katrina, the recent blast of Sandy, and the hottest summer on record, while we saw two huge tsunamis hit the globe. We saw 9/11 and its associated spike in church attendance, only to see interest in church quickly fizzle when it became apparent another strike was not imminent. We saw a dot.com bubble deflate into a crash that coincided with 9/11. We then saw the real estate bubble and crash of 2008. We have been in prolonged economic morass since. The drastic measures which the government continues to resort to in order to prop up the economy suggests we will not really come out of this soon. It is this economic setback that has finally caused The UMC to take note of the decline. This contributed to such measures as the Call to Action and a new focus on congregational vitality. While other emphases have emerged and passed in years past, this one seemed to have more passion behind it. Time will tell the impact.

Another interesting development is the increasing secularization in the US. Although this was anticipated years ago as a follow up to the European situation, religion in America had become known as the American Exception. Now when religious preference surveys are taken, however, one of the fastest-growing categories is "none of the above." Of course, some have argued that people are as religious as always, but are finding other expressions outside of church as we have known it. Some site the so-called emerging church as an example of one such venue. The destiny of this expression remains to be seen. One phenomenon that is apparent is that many atheists are becoming

more militant, with some even writing vitriolic anti-god/religion books. The separation-of-church-and-state folks seem to be pushing harder as well. This cultural shift stiffens the challenge of making disciples.

Of course, much more could be noted. In summary, however, the church's response to all of this is key. There are many very bright United Methodists, some of them in leadership positions. As such, there have been some keen observers of the above trends and others, as well as some clever suggested responses. In most cases these have been new programs or studies or methodologies or emphases, with a dose of reorganization thrown in here and there. Yet, others have commented that we have been seeking a technical solution to a spiritual problem. While all will not agree upon the accuracy of this assessment, it should be considered. After all, among the many approaches to define The United Methodist Church, we are a church and therefore have a primary spiritual dimension. Since few have taken this component seriously, not much has been offered on how to deal with such a problem. Of all the observations of this researcher over the last decade and a half, this is the most crucial.

**Copyright © 2013**  
**General Board of Global Ministries**

**Published by:**

The Office of Research  
General Board of Global Ministries  
The United Methodist Church  
475 Riverside Drive, Room 300  
New York, NY 10115

**Tel:** 212-870-3840 **Fax:** 212-870-3876

**Email:** [research@umcmmission.org](mailto:research@umcmmission.org)

**Website:** [umcmmission.org/newsletters](http://umcmmission.org/newsletters)

**Subscriptions:** FREE via email, or \$14.00 yearly via US Mail

**John H. Southwick, Editor**