

“Becoming the Church Once Again”  
Bishop’s Convocation on Health Care Access and Reform  
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### **Introduction: Familiar Scenarios Illustrate the Challenge**

We’ve no doubt all seen situations like this one: a divorced mother in her early thirties with three children comes to the church for help. The oldest child is about six and the youngest a toddler. The woman’s ex-husband is not paying child support. She is trying legal means to get the child support, but has been unsuccessful because she doesn’t know where her ex-husband is. She has recently lost her job because of complications after knee surgery to repair an injury. She has no health insurance. No health insurance, no child support, now no job. She’s training to take a new one. The knee injury was serious enough that she needs to find a job that does not involve so much walking (she had been a nurses’ aid). She’s trying to make ends meet, but it is so hard with no health insurance, with high medical bills, no job, no child support. When I meet her, her electricity is about to be disconnected by the city because she’s more than a month behind on her payment.

We have a fund at the church (as most churches do) to help people in her situation. The policies governing its use, although well-intended and thought out, produce an enormously frustrating dilemma. We can help a little with money. We can help her find other social service agencies, all who require that one fill out a form and get someone’s approval. Sometimes the hours of operation of some of these agencies are sometimes not conducive to people trying to work or who are training for a new job. She has to patch together assistance from several sources. It will take an effort and persistence of almost Herculean proportions for her to pay that utility bill.

Just to get that one bill paid, unless she gets a break she will have to visit three or four of these agencies in town. It will take hours of time, spread out over days. Most of us have the ability to sit down and write a check to pay that bill. It would take 2 minutes of our time to pay a bill, stick it in an envelope and put a stamp on it for mailing. Just to get one thing done, it takes a big chunk of her time. And how many of these “one things” does she have to face? The worst part of her situation is the mounting medical bills. She’s behind and she faces possible legal action from hospital and doctors. She may have her wages garnished.

I know it sounds like a sob story. I know we hear stories like this one all the time and we sometimes wonder how much is fabricated. I know that those of us in the helping ministry sometimes face (and fear) being given a line, taken advantage of. This story is true. Nothing is fabricated or exaggerated.

If we’re at all involved in our communities, we have faced similar disheartening situations. Were we to have the time, we could share them. They prompt certain questions:

- Question – with all the social services available, why is it so hard for a person to get a little help?
- Question – Americans are “can do” people. Why can’t we seem to fix the health care access problem?
- Question - who is responsible to make sure people have adequate access to adequate health care?
- Question – what is the church’s role in this picture?

### **Two Views of the Church**

The role of the church: a common, but still very important question. One answer comes from a book written by Ram Cnaan, formerly a professor in the School of Social Work at the

University of Pennsylvania. He studied more than 250 American congregations (mostly Christian) and around 50 Canadian ones. The results of his work can be found in his book entitled, *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York University Press, 2002).

He offers two very interesting conclusions:

(1) He argues that there is a close link between religious faith and volunteerism. People who are religiously active and, more specifically, active members of local congregations, are proportionately more generous with their time and finances than people who are not. (2) People who give their lives away in service to others, as a response to their religious faith, find that they benefited individually *and that their congregations benefited as well*. Cnaan writes,

Members find that involvement in a social ministry helps them to feel better about themselves and their fellow members. This, in turn, *fosters a sense of belonging to a collective*. Many clergy and lay leaders believe that the social ministry engenders a sense of purpose and commitment in the members involved.<sup>1</sup>

Cnaan's comment reminds me of one of the claims John Wesley made in his sermon entitled "On Visiting the Sick." Visiting the sick is a means of grace not only for the sick person, but for the visitor. As we minister to the sick God works in the visitor to grow that person toward full Christian maturity. Maybe that is what Cnaan sees in his research: God at work in the people offering the social service ministries to the poor.

Obviously, the primary motivation for helping others is not so that we can feel good about ourselves or our congregations. Nonetheless, that feeling good is an inherent and inevitable by-product of serving. And I believe it's that way because God made us that way. But it does raise the question, if God is really at work in this way; if we do actually feel good about our contributions and our congregations, why isn't this characteristic of volunteerism more wide-

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<sup>1</sup> Ram Cnaan, *The Invisible Caring Hand*, p. 246.

spread in the churches than it is. Even though Cnaan's book brings to light the tremendous good that churches do (most of which is really "off the books," so to speak), he also notes that less than a majority of churches in the United States regularly engage in such social service ministries. I'd like to reflect on **why this is the case** and I have an initial answer that I hope can stimulate some thought. It has to do with how we conceive of the church. With regard to the question of health care access, there are two basic ways. Cnaan's book implicitly describes the first one. It is of the church itself as a social service agency, a helping organization. The church is therefore one spot on the landscape of societal institutions that do good for other people. For all the good churches do, I think this view is limited and it's time to change it. The issue of health care access is too important for us to stay stuck with this impression.

Let's remember how this impression arose. Christianity has played an enormous role in the formation and shaping of our country. The 19<sup>th</sup> century in American religious history sometimes has been called the "century of Methodism." The church grew so rapidly and became so prominent and powerful that by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century 1 in 3 Protestants were members of the Methodist Church. In one State, the governor and a sizeable portion of the legislators were all Methodist. We grew accustomed to deep involvement in social concerns and we had a good deal of political clout and capital to do something. The advocacy for social reform, not limited to Methodism, was nonetheless undertaken with significant Methodist leadership. Recall, for example, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, home missions of various sorts, the Deaconess movement, orphanages and schools of all kinds and sizes.

As people migrated westward, churches became a normal part of the landscape all across the country. They helped to "civilize" the West. The long and the short of this story of the

United States is also the story of the church. With regard to social concerns, the church became one of the “major players” in both providing service and in policy advocacy.

Some of our advocacy was hugely successful. Christians worked to get the government at all levels to take more responsibility for the poor, the widow, the orphan. Ironically, in a way, this legacy now inhibits our vision for what the church really is. I dare say that the world has gotten a bit more complicated in the past hundred years. At least in this part of the world, we United Methodists sort of grew accustomed to seeing the world a certain way. We knew what to do. We knew how to get things done. We had lots of volunteers. Our churches were bigger and socially more prominent. *The church became a settled, cultural institution; a church that, with regard to the challenge we face today, is essentially identical with other helping agencies; a settled institutional church* that, to be sure, when its attentive to the material needs of people as the congregations in Cnaan’s book illustrate, makes a significant contribution to the lives of people in need. But the problem is this: this vision of the church – as one of a number of social service organizations like the Red Cross – is a **reductionist** vision. For all the good we do, we have become less than we are. And people are suffering.

In this reductionist view there is a hidden assumption about the way things are. And that is it: it’s just the way things are. There will always be poor people. Somebody has to be at the bottom of the totem pole. The American system is the best in the world, even though it’s not perfect. Our job as Christians is to help those “less fortunate.” And many congregations exert incredible amounts of effort to this end. But effort does not automatically equate to kind of transformative ministry associated with Jesus Christ.

To illustrate, let me sketch out what might be considered a kind of typical situation in a local congregation. Of course we could name all the usual activities: worship, Sunday School,

other kinds of educational and small group activities. There is pastoral care provided for the sick and elderly within the congregation, by the pastor and sometimes other staff people and volunteers. There are other activities that demand church members' time: community events like the ecumenical Thanksgiving service and maybe something around Memorial Day and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

These are pretty standard activities. Then we add to this picture (and I do mean "add," because often these activities are not thought of by congregants as core to their church) other elements which are undertaken more commonly through joint efforts of a group of churches: clothes horse, a food pantry, etc. We might find in some cases a parish nurse or a simple health care clinic. Probably, if we're honest, these social services are peopled by a relatively small percentage of volunteers from the church. Important? Yes, we're glad to do them. But they're sort of "on the top" additions. We worship, we study, we organize. We take care of our own. The leftovers we give to people who most of the time are outside the church needing our assistance.

I do not wish at all to gainsay these efforts. Every such act has its benefit. But at the end of the day, in this scenario we are just helping people and we're helping people in ways that many other non-religious service agencies can do. And like them our resources and our energy are often taxed beyond our limit. We get tired. We can't meet all the needs. There are always more demands that our resources can match. We know that people try to take advantage of us. We can't have that so we develop ways to guard against misuse. We communicate and form networks with other agencies. We do some, the Red Cross does some, the Salvation Army, another agency. The people we serve get passed around.

If the vision in the church, for providing social service to people who need it, stays at the level of "As Christians it's our duty to help people," there will never be enough vision, enough

resources, enough power to do anything more than what we're doing now. And the main reason we are gathering for this conference is because we recognize that so much more needs to be done; not just more in terms of quantity, but more in terms of targeted, effective change. As we prayed last night in our worship, every single person matters to God. There are lots of people falling through the cracks. If, as James says, pure and undefiled religion is meeting the needs of the orphans and widows in distress, then I believe we'll have to answer to God for how we deal with the problem of access to health care.

### **A Biblical Picture – Ephesians**

There's another vision, one that I believe is more biblical, more true to who we are as the church, that, if caught, will go a long way toward addressing the concern of this conference. The is so much more than a helping organization. We've been called together *as the church* – or at least a significant part of it in this State - to see if we can do something significant, if we can change things to make health care more readily available to a much larger percentage of people than are now receiving it. We are therefore talking about social change. However this State resolves the health care problem, if we solve it (or even get close) it will inevitably mean some significant changes in the way we all live.

But there is good precedent for thinking this way and we have a compelling vision in the scripture. This vision can stir our hearts and sustain our efforts until effective, beneficial change occurs. I'd like to use selected passages from the book of Ephesians to get a glimpse of this vision. It is a vision of the church. If we see it and accept it, the church can become again who it is.

The first passage: Ephesians 1:8b-10, ““With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as **a plan for the fullness of time**, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on the earth.”

The Greek phrase that is translated here (rather lamely, I think) as “a plan...” is the Greek word for our word “economy” – *oikonomian*. It derives from two Greek words: “*oikos*” meaning “household” and “*nomos*” mean law or governing principle. It is sometimes translated “administration.” These verses introduce God’s grand scheme of world redemption, the fulfillment of all human history wrapped up in Jesus Christ. In the “fullness of time,” Jesus has come. God’s administration, God’s plan, God’s economy for the complete salvation of the world has been enacted and fulfilled in the ministry, death, resurrection and expected return of Jesus Christ.

Lest we think this language of Paul or the Pauline writer is just pious hype, let’s move to what is truly an amazing and very visible result of God’s redemptive plan. In Ephesians 2:13-15 we read,

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandment and ordinances, that he might create in himself **one new humanity** in the place of two, thus making peace...

It’s very easy for us to “spiritualize” and individualize this language. We know that Ephesians 2 (remember, that’s where we find the “by grace you are saved through faith...not as a result of works” affirmation). By grace we are, as individuals, reconciled to God through Christ. We are restored by God’s grace to the family of God. This is all true, and nothing that I will say momentarily should be construed to disagree with the truth of this doctrine or lessen its impact.

But the focus of the writer's comments lie elsewhere. God is doing something portentous and we get to see the "mystery of God's will" unfold before our eyes. As God redeems the world through Christ, mortal enemies become part of the same family.

Many scholars think that in speaking in verse 14 of the "dividing wall of hostility among us" the writer has in mind the temple mount with its divisions. There was, on the temple mount, a "courtyard of the nations/gentiles" into which all peoples could go. It is likely that it is here that Jesus found all the money changers and the buyers and sellers. It is likely why he quotes from Isaiah 52, saying, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations."

So we have the courtyard of the Gentiles. But as we walk closer to the center of the temple mount, we discover a low wall that divides the courtyard of the nations from the courtyard of the People of God. Beyond this wall only Jews were allowed.

In Christ, Ephesians 2 is saying, that wall has been torn down. No longer do we have people divided by bitterness and hostility. Notice 2:15, we have "one new humanity." The very existence of the church signals to the world that reconciliation to God is happening. In the church we have a new humanity: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. Let us not miss the point because we are so familiar with the book. We are not just talking about two ethnic groups figuring out how to get along. We are talking about a new race of people called Christian, a transformed community. This new humanity is a visible, tangible demonstration of the power of God to transform our very being. It is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is why in chapter 3:20-21 the writer can say, "Now to him who *by the power at work within us* is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." Again,

not just a great benediction to end the worship service, but a ringing pronouncement of the fact of God's plan loosed in the world. The longed-for new creation is here.

Again bear with a bit of Greek for just a moment. Two points. First, the English phrase "at work within us" translates essentially one Greek word: *energoumenein* – a present middle participle. We don't have the middle voice in English. It generally takes a whole phrase to translate one Greek word – as in this verse. The middle voice refers to action happening to or within the subject or the speaker. Since it is a present participle, it indicates that the action is presently ongoing. God's activity, God's power, is, at this very moment, at work within us.

Second, and this is a most important point, the Greek participle *energoumenein* means not only activity, but ***effect, product, fruit***. According to Ephesians 3:20-21, then, God is powerfully accomplishing God's creative and redemptive purposes in and through this community of believers, this new humanity.

What am I trying to say? I am trying to say that passages such as these in Ephesians indicate that God's transforming power is not limited to just individual change, important as such change is. I am saying that these and other such passages show that the activity of God in the world to transform it through the grace of Christ is a very public and widespread activity. It does not happen just in the little corners of individual religious experience. God has let loose on the world to change it and we as the band of Jesus' followers have that very power of God working in our communities!

In making these reflections on what Ephesians envisions, I have touched upon a major theme in the work of a number of theologians, but possibly one of the most representative is Jürgen Moltmann. In his book, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, this (as Moltmann names it) eschatological view of the church actually determines the nature of the church. In the resurrec-

tion of Christ, we have the first fruits of the new creation. We have “proof” of God’s power to overcome the world’s last enemy. The future has invaded the present. The church is imbued with this eschatological Spirit of the risen Christ. In the church we are the participants of the new creation.

Therefore, we Christians participate; we belong to something so much more wonderful and significant than just another helping organization offering services in our communities. If God can form a redeemed new humanity, if God can, through the blood of Christ, take mortal enemies and make them the same family, the same body (Ephesians 4), God can do anything! Surely God’s people, acting in the power and with the wisdom of God, can make a big dent in the health care access problem.

This same idea – God working in us to *effect* or produce God’s redemptive purposes - is deeply part of our United Methodist story. It is not only present but prominent in the ministry of John Wesley and the early Methodists. One of Wesley’s favorite texts on which to preach was Philippians 2:12-13, the basis for his sermon, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation.” Of this sermon, Albert Outler wrote, “This must be considered a landmark sermon, for it stands as the late Wesley’s most complete and careful exposition of the mystery of divine-human interaction...”<sup>2</sup> Outler thus concludes, “In any dozen of his sermons most crucial for an accurate assay of Wesley’s theology, this one would certainly deserve inclusion.”<sup>3</sup>

Wesley’s thesis in this sermon? It is twofold: (1) God is at work *in us*, therefore we *can* work. (2) God is at work in us, therefore we *must* work. It is, as Wesley was fond of saying, a command of God turned into a promise by the powerful activity of the Holy Spirit. It is both in-

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1986), 3:199.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*

dividual and communal. It is why Wesley had the audacity to believe that God had providentially called the Methodists into existence to reform the nation and spread scriptural holiness.

## **Conclusions**

The church is more than it has become. We are more than just another social institution dotting the American landscape. We are the people of God, empowered by God's Spirit to demonstrate in our own corporate life the very Gospel of God and to work, as God's ambassadors, to reclaim the lost, the hurting, the dying. This is not merely the pious rhetoric expected from a Methodist preacher. It is the truth. It is our mandate. So, we remember:

1. Everybody matters to God (Genesis, imago dei).
2. God is determined to reclaim lost people.
3. Christ's ministry, death and resurrection is the sign of the eschaton, the breaking into the present of the future kingdom of God. What is in that kingdom?
4. The church is empowered to do the works that Jesus did. Empowered and led by the Holy Spirit? What if we really believed and took to heart this truth?
5. Health care is a basic human necessity, along with food, clothing, shelter, and love. God will hold us accountable for the way we relate to and with the poor. Remember James 1:27, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. Even before we move to public policy, we must admit that the church collectively has vastly more resources that we can use to address the health care crisis. We should do all we can to effect public policy, but we should not overlook the tremendous wealth of money and talent we have within the church to make a significant difference, a much bigger difference than we are now making. I am asking us to see that in order for us to make signifi-

cant progress on the injustice of the lack of adequate access to health care, the church needs to become once again the church: the new humanity of Christ in which the power of God is demonstrated to the world.

If everyone matters to God, then every single solitary person in your community right now, whose medical and health needs are not being met, who does not know the love of God, who is alienated from the community, who is lost, lonely and alone – that person matters. And if we're going to do our jobs as Christians and as clergy, we're going to find a way to change our focus, shift our activities and do something.