

## A time for quiet courage

With a new U.S. president who didn't win the popular vote and who acts in ways that many Christians see as immoral, we're in the midst of more turmoil and conflict than many of us have ever known. And the church is full of conflict, too. It's in all church denominations to some extent, but in the United Methodist Church, it is especially apparent right now because the UMC's new Commission on A Way Forward is starting its work. Its assignment is to examine and consider possible revision of UMC policy concerning human sexuality and to explore options for promoting the unity of the church.

**Be strong  
and of good  
courage.  
—Deut. 31:6**

One of the two resources that the Commission's moderators have sent to its members to read in preparation for their first meeting is an article published by the Texas Methodist Foundation, written by Gil Rendle, a vice-president of the TMF. The article was originally written for use by active UMC bishops in an ongoing gathering that the TMF has hosted. It is so thought-provoking, however, that I believe every church member in every denomination would find it helpful. You can find it on the TMF website, at [https://www.tmf-fdn.org/assets/uploads/docs/Rendle\\_Courage\\_monograph.pdf](https://www.tmf-fdn.org/assets/uploads/docs/Rendle_Courage_monograph.pdf).

## The response of the discerning mind



Gil Rendle observes that in this disturbing time church members tend to hope for leaders who are "characters larger than life, with winning arguments and satisfying answers." He sees the need instead for leaders who show the quiet and quieting courage of steadfastness to purpose. That is not a passive response, Rendle emphasizes, but it is "less the response of the stirred heart than of the discerning mind." Unfortunately, it isn't the natural response in an anxious time and isn't the response usually made by anxious people.



## Where are we in the life cycle?

In the article I quote here, church consultant Gil Rendle describes what has typically been seen as the life cycle of church congregations and denominations.

- Birth: creating the organization.
- Visioning: agreeing on the "why" of its existence—its purpose or mission.
- Structuring: agreeing on how the group will function.
- Ministry: actually living out its mission
- Nostalgia: remembering how good it used to be.
- Polarity: division and decline, with disagreements about whose fault the current lack of strength is.
- Death, if the decline is not interrupted.



## We can interrupt the cycle

There is a way to interrupt the cycle when the time of familiar ministry is over, Rendle assures us. It requires asking questions about these topics.



- Identity: who are we now?
- Purpose: what does God ask of us now?
- Context: how will we now sing God's song in a land that has become foreign around us?

In it, mainline churches' members have steadily gotten older and haven't been replaced by younger generations in numbers large enough to keep the churches as young as their communities. Many churches own property that is underused and poorly maintained, and they must live off of the giving of a smaller and smaller number of people who are getting older and older. Also, to support a full-time ordained person as pastor, a local church must now have an average worship attendance of 150, yet the current U.S. average is 75. It's a wilderness compared to what many of us have previously known.

**How could we  
sing the Lord's  
song in a  
foreign land?  
—Psalms 137:4**

In Gil Rendle's view, after asking the necessary questions and searching for their real answers, we must be willing to walk into this wilderness that is not yet understood and that is uncomfortable and inhospitable compared to how we have lived in the past. And for doing that, we need quiet, steadfast, courageous leadership,



It's also not the way in which many church members typically approach church decisions, it seems to me. Many tend to focus much more on the heart than on the mind — on feeling instead of thinking. They want the church to do what is comfortable and enjoyable for them, rather than what is more likely to accomplish its God-given purposes. So Rendle's advice is important for us right now.

## Knowing what to be afraid of

The kind of courage we need especially right now, in Gil Rendle's view, is knowing what to be afraid of, and that kind of knowing takes a lot of work. Our leaders, he sees, need to be more afraid of easy answers that do not lead to change, than to be afraid of displeasing someone who comes with easy answers or wants attention.



However, our leaders are often strongly tempted to be afraid of the wrong thing. Rendle attributes this especially to the fact that pastors' positions are dependent on the very people they must lead. The relationship between the pastor and the people to be led is thus fraught with tension. If pastors risk displeasing them, the pastors risk losing their support systems, even their incomes. This arrangement keeps clergy under church members' control to a



large extent. A pastor's performance gets measured by how satisfied members are with their own congregational experience, not by whether the real purpose of the church is being accomplished.

This happens when supervisory clergy use members' wishes rather than the church's purpose as their criteria for appointing pastors. If all bishops and district superintendents showed the kind of courage Rendle describes, pastors wouldn't be in the kind of jeopardy they're now in if they risk going against members' wishes and thus risking decline in attendance and financial support. So for Rendle's advice to work, members, pastors, and higher-ups will all have to become courageous enough to promote purpose instead of nostalgia and comfort.

Church members are partly responsible for that, of course. "Whenever we are unsure or feel threatened," Rendle observes, "we turn to our leaders not to encourage them to continue their purposeful path but to ask them to relieve our distress, and return us to comfort,



even if the regaining of comfort includes a return to slavery."

## Three challenges

Gil Rendle sees three main challenges to the kind of quiet courage he thinks is needed.

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness... "if only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt..."  
—Exodus 16:2

◆ **Nostalgia.** Congregations want to be strong again and live at the center of their culture, as they were when the mainline church was the established church in a self-professed Christian nation. This desire makes us willing only to work harder at what we already know how to do, not to be willing to work differently in order to meet the needs of the present and the future.



To combat this desire, says Rendle, leaders' first task is to give members an honest description of current reality. Much of the church's reality, some of which I've described here on page 1, is unsustainable.

◆ **Unchecked empathy.** Empathy is a value we've learned as Christians, and in many ways it's an admirable one. It's the capacity to understand and feel what another person is experiencing. It makes us sensitive to weakness and suffering. But we tend to be sensitive to those mainly when they happen within our own group. Despite having repeatedly heard the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Widow's Mite, observes Gil Rendle, we're often reluctant to use our resources to relieve the suffering of people we don't know personally. We also tend to be over-sensitive to the discomfort of those in our own group.



This unchecked empathy, in Rendle's view, can lead to paralysis. It leads to choosing comfort and relationship over purpose, and to forgoing mission in order to avoid seeming callous or feeling guilty about not relieving pain. We don't want to face the fact that all church members' agendas can no longer be satisfied, all preferences can't be honored, all traditions can't be continued, and all expectations can't be met. Given the realities we now face, priorities must be set and resources must be directed in the most strategic way. This means leaders must make courageous decisions, which will feel painful to some church mem-



bers. This situation in turn engages empathy and the desire to relieve the pain, even if the pain is coming from needed change.



Misdirected, unchecked empathy, finds Gil Rendle, also leads to favoring weakness over strength. Courage, by contrast, requires resourcing and supporting our most productive people, instead of subsidizing dying congregations who aren't willing to change, and providing more education for clergy who aren't interested in learning new ways.

◆ **Internal division.** We too often define community as agreement, sees Rendle. This worked well, he finds, in times of great cultural consensus and cohesion, but this isn't that kind of time. In this current culture of individualism and diversity, Rendle believes, we will not find agreement within the church, especially on those parts of life in which



we define appropriate behavior by Scripture, because we understand Scripture in different

ways. He cites the work of researchers who find that differences between positions about right and wrong can't simply be negotiated away. If we negotiate, whatever conclusion is reached is not either side's position and is seen as wrong by both sides. Thus if the intended outcome from the new UMC commission is agreement over issues of human sexuality, there may be little hope of success.

"Mature, healthy communities," in Gil Rendle's view, "engage in honest discourse over differences and willingly live with the discomfort of the tension produced." The real work of courageous leaders is therefore not agreement or unity but connection. It is knowing clearly what holds us together that makes our discomfort with each other worthwhile. It is having a shared purpose.



I wonder, however, whether we can focus on the church's purpose without also focusing on our disagreements. Purpose statements are rarely specific. Exactly what does "making disciples" amount to, for example?



Our assumptions of what it means depend mainly on our views of the Bible. If we focus only on selected Bible verses and interpret them literally, as many Christians do, then we're likely to believe, for example, that the church's purpose includes convincing everyone in the world that Jesus was uniquely divine and was physically born of a virgin, and that only belief in these features can keep us from going to a fiery hell when we die.

Yet if we recognize that these qualities were attributed to many gods and also secular leaders in early centuries, and that they weren't claimed as literally true and weren't unique to Christianity, we're not likely to see the church's purpose as promoting these beliefs. Hearing them questioned is very disturbing to many churchgoers, of course, but in my view, leaders urgently need to question such beliefs openly and nudge members to question them, if they want to promote the way of Jesus today. But Rendle ignores this kind of questioning.



Also, he says many large churches succeed by including varied views. Their members don't all agree, even about controversial subjects, but they can all be together within the same congregation. But in such a congregation, don't worship services have to be too bland or content-less to have any meaning, or else express positions that many members consider wrong? Does having several services, each with different content, like some that use all-masculine words and others that don't, or some that address controversial social-justice issues and others that stick to comforting words and recite

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I'm a lifelong lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself, from personal funds. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics that I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.



traditional doctrines, solve this problem? I doubt it. Besides, the UMC has more small congregations than large ones, and in these, providing a large enough number of worship services and programs to address varied views is hard or even impossible.



## What our best leaders have learned

√ **Wrestle aspirations down to outcomes.** Aspirations, Rendle points out, give great purpose but not specific direction. They speak of hope and intent, not strategy. Outcomes, by contrast, are measurable, describable differences that are desired. In the church, an outcome is the intentional difference that you believe God calls you to make in an upcoming, specific, limited time. Aspirations without outcomes invite congregations to just keep doing what they are doing, because grand transformations seem obviously beyond reach.

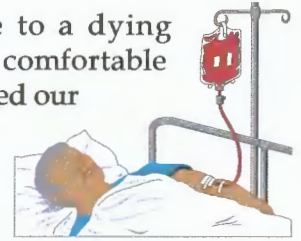
√ **Ask disturbing questions.** Ask questions that require learning. In our culture, says Rendle, the rate of change is now so fast that leaders can no longer really lead it. Instead, leaders must constantly adapt by reflecting on the organization's experience and its rapidly changing context. They must help the organization to make sense of its purpose, then provoke it to change. Leaders don't have to have answers and solutions. Instead, they must keep asking hard, uncomfortable questions.



"The leader," Gil Rendle finds, "provokes the system to learn how to change by asking unwanted questions." A leader who does this, of course, "must be prepared for an irruption of distress in response to the provocation," and must consider the next step, maybe even before posing the question. "One has to take the heat in stride, seeing it as part of the process of engaging people in the issue." But this means that church members and clergy supervisors must evaluate pastors on their adherence to and successful accomplishment of the church's purpose, not on whether they keep themselves and members comfortable.

√ **Keep focused on the mission field.** Much of it is outside the local congregation. Don't focus on the pain and weakness of those closest at hand. "Neither pain nor proximity are the appropriate clients of courageous leaders," says Gil Rendle, and I expect he's right about that to a great extent. Other observers warn that we can't expect our pastors to

give mere palliative care to a dying church, simply keeping it comfortable while it dies. Instead, we need our leaders to promote healing.



Although I agree with Rendle's point here, I wish he had referred to church purpose or the way of Jesus instead of the mission field. For much of my life in church, "mission" seemed to mean sending Christians to primitive, faraway places to convert people to Christianity, often meaning Christianity as practiced in the U.S. Mission-related words therefore have a negative or at least misleading connotation for me, and I fear they also do for many other churchgoers. My understanding is that the church's purpose is to follow and promote the behavior that Jesus taught, which can be done and sometimes is done by adherents of non-Christian religions. To me, the word "mission" doesn't adequately express that.

√ **Allocate resources to purpose.** Rendle sees this as the critical test of courageous leadership. People in the church tend to ask leaders to alleviate pain and solve problems, but the real need is to shape new practices that will help achieve our purpose in a changed landscape. It requires giving attention well beyond the earlier generations of church joiners, to the many people who now answer "none" when asked what religion they're part of.

In Rendle's view, it also means intentionally directing resources away from congregations that cannot thrive in the new situation, and from programs and projects that may be good and right within the full context of the Christian faith but aren't necessary priorities for this time in the church. I'm uneasy about this advice. It can too easily be interpreted, I fear, to mean we should just keep quiet for now about combatting racism, sexism, and other injustices. To me, those seem to need constant attention from Christians, not to be moved to the church's back burner even temporarily.



I'm not sure that Rendle's article will give much direct, concrete help to the new UMC Commission, because the Commission can only come up with a church-wide policy, while the article applies mainly to what leaders and members at local and regional levels need to do. However, the article rightly calls for the courage that is needed at those levels, so I hope it will at least motivate more leaders and members to answer the call.

*Barbara*