



A Message to the People of The United Methodist Church
from the President of the Council of Bishops,
Chair of the Table of General Secretaries,
and the Chair of the Connectional Table

The global financial crisis is bringing hardship and suffering to people in every part of the world. For those in wealthy nations, it causes anxiety and uncertainty about declining pension accounts and the threat of lost jobs. Others are coping with unemployment and foreclosed mortgages. And for still others who live in places with scarce resources or exist in conditions of poverty, it means empty stomachs, lack of care for urgent health needs, and no prospects to earn a day's bread.

The International Labor Organization projects a loss of 50 million jobs globally by the end of 2009. The World Bank warns that an additional 53 million people will fall into poverty (living on less than \$2 per day) and that 200,000 to 400,000 more children will die by 2015 if the crisis persists.

Local congregations, annual conferences, and the general agencies likewise face economic constraints, requiring them to reassess how they carry out ministry and to seek greater effectiveness and economies while keeping focused on loving God and neighbor.

In addition, the crisis is generating increasing global unrest and violence, creating even more misery and an insecure world. It is a prophetic reminder that our destiny as a worldwide community and a global church is interwoven with complex bonds of prosperity, security, dignity, and justice. We are no more secure than the most vulnerable among us; no more prosperous than the poorest; and no more assured of justice and dignity than those who live in the shadows of power, void of fairness and equity. We reclaim anew Jesus' teaching, "as you [cared for] the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40), as an urgent appeal for how we can live today.

At all times, but especially in fearful and dangerous days, we followers of Jesus are called to live in hope and in the assurance that God is present with us. Facing hard times, the Apostle Paul asked: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35 and 37, 39).

To the Israelites, having lost everything and living in exile, God offered assurance: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you" (Is. 41:10). The psalmists are similarly convinced: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear" (Ps. 46:1, 2).

With this firm assurance that the whole of creation lives within the embrace of a loving God, we are confident that the Four Areas of Focus for the mission and ministry of the people of The United Methodist Church affirmed by General Conference 2008 are among the most important ways we faithfully bear witness to the Gospel. We urgently need principled Christian leaders for the church and the world. People searching for meaning are seeking new places of welcome and hospitality for worship, prayer, and spiritual growth. It is abundantly evident that United Methodists must engage in ministry with the poor and tackle the diseases of poverty that rob people of the fullness of life, health, and wholeness.

As we enter into the season of Lent we are called to reflection, repentance, and sacrificial living. Lent is a time of preparation when we look beyond human frailty and the brokenness of the world to resurrection, hope, and new life. We are reminded that our faith does not rise and fall with the financial markets but resides in the enduring love of God who is present with us as we struggle and strive to love God and our neighbors. This Lent can be a time when we recommit to practice every day the Wesleyan values to do no harm, do good and stay in love with God.

A churchwide conversation is asking that we envision ways to reinvigorate our outreach to a hurting world and offer hospitality to those seeking deeper spiritual understanding. Local congregations are engaging in self-examination to “Rethink Church” and strengthen their outreach beyond the doors of the church buildings. Annual Conferences are working to ensure the human rights of the poor, to address the diseases of poverty, and to offer direct intervention to relieve human needs arising from poverty, including those of women and children in local communities and of persons who lack opportunity for artistic expression.

The general agencies of the church are finding ways together to achieve economies and assure greater effectiveness in support of annual conferences and local churches. Information on the Four Areas of Focus can be found by contacting the general agencies of the church directly and at www.umc.org/focusareas.

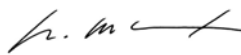
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) calls for individual and corporate responsibility. John Wesley wrote, “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social. No holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection” (Hymns and Sacred Poems, 1739, ¶ 5).

As we pray and reflect this Lenten season, may we embrace life with hope, expectancy, and the assurance that God through Christ Jesus is calling us to prepare our hearts, minds, and hands to work for the New Creation. And may we nurture and care for one another and for those to whom we are inextricably connected by God’s grace around the world.

With expectancy and hope,



Bishop Gregory Palmer
President,
Council of Bishops
Table



Neil M. Alexander
Chair
The Table of General Secretaries



Bishop John Hopkins
Chair
The Connectional