

Methodist big-church pastors organize to help UMC: Many have felt undervalued

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The United Methodist Church, like other mainline denominations, is steadily losing members. Yet it has some large, thriving congregations, and about 100 of its churches draw more than 1,200 people on a typical weekend.

Sometimes, however, pastors of those big Methodist churches feel unappreciated or out of place in a nationwide church body that decentralizes authority and lauds committee work more than it does popular pastors.

“The [Methodist] denomination is built for the average church and serving its needs,” claimed David Travis, managing director of Leadership Network, a Dallas-based firm that serves mostly big evangelical churches. United Methodist megachurch pastors, Travis added, are “just as likely to attend an evangelical megachurch conference as they are to make an appearance at their own denomination’s meeting.”

Trying to change that mind-set is a United Methodist pastor near Kansas City who leads a congregation of 15,000 members and whose church tops all others in the denomination with a weekly worship attendance of 7,500 adults. (If the UMC included his church’s weekly average of 1,500 children in Sunday school, like the wider megachurch world does, then the total would be 9,000 people per weekend.)

The pastor is Adam Hamilton, 44, who started the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, from scratch in 1990. For the past two years, he has brought together growing numbers of fellow large-church pastors to discuss ways to invigorate the United Methodist Church by freely sharing ideas and setting targets for growth.

Meeting in late August at a retreat center in Atlanta, 80 pastors of Methodist churches with at least 1,200 weekly worshipers set eight-year goals that they hope will have a positive impact on the denomination. The cumulative results would be:

- A total of 370 new faith communities, ranging from separate churches to satellite arms of the mother congregations
- More than 1,000 young people from these congregations going to seminary
- Some \$256 million for missions and ministries with the poor, over and above the contributions to the denomination

Hamilton said those goals resemble four areas approved last April at the United Methodists' 2008 quadrennial General Conference as the focus for collaborative efforts.

However, the megachurch pastors worked out their agenda without any bishops, boards or denominational agencies present or involved. "We caught the attention of a number of folks who wanted to join in," Hamilton said in an interview. "But we just wanted the pastors present in this."

The nameless movement of Methodist megachurch pastors was praised by Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster, bishop of western North Carolina, who will become president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops in 2010.

"Overall, I believe these goals will be received with enthusiasm," the bishop said in an e-mail interview, adding that he greatly appreciates "the leadership provided by these thriving churches and the pastors." On relations between big-church pastors and the rest of the church, Goodpaster said, "I do not believe there is a great deal of hostility at all."

The bishop's view of how the United Methodist Church might reverse its slide appears close to the pastors' aims. In a book published this year, he said that "developing a cadre of mentors who are faithful and successful pastors of growing, healthy churches should be a primary task."

Goodpaster and Hamilton both said that the diverse, 7.9-million-member UMC has large, growing congregations that are situated at many points along the theological spectrum.

That may have helped Hamilton to take the lead. He sees himself as a centrist in theology and social issues who savors the intellectual side of faith. A forthcoming book—his ninth—is titled *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*. His leadership institute—the kind popular in evangelical circles—draws 1,600 pastors each fall, and 98 percent of them are mainline church pastors, he said.

Hamilton began his movement in 2006 by bringing ten fellow large-congregation Methodist pastors to Kansas City and his home. Almost all came from churches with a weekly attendance of over 3,000. Last January, Hamilton invited pastors from Methodist churches with average attendance of 2,000 or more, setting the stage for the large Atlanta meeting.

He said many clergy felt undervalued —felt that “nobody else really understood what pastoring a church with 120 staff people and a multimillion-dollar budget entailed.” Some have hunkered down with their own tasks and hoped “the denomination stays out of their hair,” according to Hamilton.

At times the UMC recognizes that larger churches are “a different order of creation,” a phrase attributed to researcher Lyle Schaller.

One megachurch pastor in the Hamilton-led movement, Kent Millard, said he is “thrilled” with the prospect of fellow large-church pastors getting more involved in denominational life. He leads St. Luke’s United Methodist in Indianapolis, which he called a “big tent” congregation with very liberal and very conservative members.

In the past, Millard confirmed, most big-budget church pastors were “divorced [from] or indifferent” to denominational activities. “What this has done is to reenroll them in the priorities of the United Methodist Church,” he said.