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A Women's Ministry Network
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RENEW

Seeking, Sharing, Serving...Christ

A Women's Ministry Network for United Methodists

Winter Newsletter

Winter 2010-2011, Vol. 18, Issue 2

A Vital Christmas Faith

Vital is defined as....that which is essential to maintaining life; affecting the existence, well-being, and truth of something. In essence, vital means life-giving and applies to something one just can't possibly live without.

A new focus of the United Methodist Church for the next decade is "building vital congregations" across the denomination. This initiative is based on the Call to Action Report, a study on congregational health approved by the Council of Bishops. It has been determined that without major changes, the United Methodist Church is on a path that is "unsustainable".

Vital churches, vital ministry, vital leadership, and vital mission outreach—these four objectives are all life-giving components of a vital denomination.



The core of a vital church is an intentional focus on Jesus Christ. At this time of year, it is especially important to be mindful of the vital, physical birth of Jesus—born so that all who believe in Him will have life, both now and eternally. Sadly, in modern Christianity, from church pulpits to seminary classrooms, the biblical account of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is being challenged and re-interpreted.

In a recent article in Interpreter Magazine, "The Nativity: Evoking Wonder", author Ray Waddle quotes two New Testament seminarians on this topic. Rev. Sharon Ringe, a professor at Wesley Theological Seminary (an official UMC seminary in Washington, D.C.) communicates that readers of the Nativity Story must take the narratives of Jesus' birth and ultimately interpret them individually.

Although Ringe acknowledges the doctrine of the United Methodist Church that "the Bible is the inspired word of God and bears authentic witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ" and affirms that John Wesley took a high view of infallible biblical authority, calling Scripture "the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice", her own views diverge.

Rev. Ringe teaches that "the four Gospels are not newsreel transcripts or eyewitness accounts, but ancient biographies produced to tell the vivid story of Jesus, the impact he made and the theological truth he embodied. The Christmas story....features supernatural details that everyone—scholars, laypeople, clergy—must sort out for themselves." "The wonder is that the stories communicate differently to each believer."

Rev. Ben Witherington III, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, KY, emphasizes that the historical details of the story are critical. "The details mattered to the original writers, and they should matter to us." Witherington says, "As Wesley saw it, these were not fractured fairy tales but real stories told with literary language. We're a historical religion. No one in their right mind would make up a story like the virginal conception if they wanted to start a world religion. Such a story would inevitably be challenged as a story about an illegitimate child. Our religion stands or falls on certain historical events. The Incarnation, Jesus' Crucifixion, and his bodily Resurrection are historical bedrocks."

Are the historical accounts, given by the prophets and followers of Jesus, as told in the Bible vital bedrocks of your Christian faith? Is the story of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ a vital truth in your mind and heart? Should the events surrounding Jesus' birth be treated as historical facts or a story to be "sorted out" differently for each believer?

Is God's greatest gift to humankind—the humble birth of a baby, His Son—vital to your life? These are the questions we must ponder as Christians—crucial questions with critical answers. Answers that will define our faith and determine the vitality of our Christian life.

*"Behold, a virgin shall bring forth a son,
and they shall call His name Emmanuel,
which means, God with us."
Isaiah 7:14*



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WINTER 2010 RESPONSE FORM

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."
Luke 2:14*

(Please use a ballpoint pen on this form to prevent smearing!)

Yes, I would love to help RENEW further its mission of promoting women's ministry in the United Methodist Church by giving a donation of _____.

Yes, I would love to help RENEW in ministry by giving a monthly gift of _____ or a quarterly gift of _____.

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Thank you and God bless!

In This Issue

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Blessed...
With a Vital Church





Vital Women's Ministry

Dear Friends of RENEW,

As we draw close to the end of 2010, I bring important news regarding the future ministry of RENEW. Beginning January 1, 2011, RENEW will become its own separate 501c3 non-profit organization. RENEW will continue to collaborate closely with the Good News organization as we have for almost twenty years. As the Good News office completes the transition to their new location in Texas, RENEW will be making some transitions as well.

RENEW will continue to work with Good News on your behalf, advocating for reform and renewal in the United Methodist Church regarding women's issues. RENEW's monthly column will still be a feature of Good News Magazine where we will uplift current happenings in the church that relate to women's ministry. RENEW will remain a member of the Renewal and Reform Coalition, a partnership of renewal groups, that will represent evangelical perspectives at the 2012 General Conference.

With the recently released Call to Action Report (see next article), adopted by the Council of Bishops and being implemented by the Connectional Table, RENEW believes the timing is ripe for change regarding the acceptance of a variety of women's ministry options in the denomination. RENEW will continue to work towards this goal on behalf of the women in the UMC. With a new mandate on "building vital congregations" and empowering pastors and laity to actively be involved in this process, surely building vital women's ministry programs would be a priority. Strong women's ministries are essential to vital congregations.

RENEW will still be an avenue of support and encouragement for the women of the church in beginning or restructuring their women's ministry. We are able to recommend resources, connect you with other network members, and suggest speakers for women's events and meetings. RENEW plans to increase our focus on leadership development and partnering with women's ministry leaders in the UMC to highlight and share information on fruitful women's programs.

RENEW will continue to develop the use of internet technologies such as the RENEW website (www.renewnetwork.org), monthly e-newsletters, and the RENEW Network Facebook page. These vital tools are already having a tremendous impact on growing the network, connecting with other women in ministry, and disseminating information of interest to our members.

With the change in relationship with Good News, RENEW can only be effective as we receive support from our members and partners. In these economic times, we must be financially responsible with our resources. The growth and fruitfulness of RENEW will be based on the Lord's provision through you.

Please stand with RENEW as we advocate, encourage, and support the spread of women's ministry in the United Methodist Church. Vital women's ministries will help build vital congregations which will in turn build a vital United Methodist Church.

We especially need your year-end gift in order to move into 2011 with a strong foundation. We also would appreciate your fervent prayers as we move forward in ministry.

Blessings for a Christ-centered Christmas and a hope-filled New Year.

Liza Kittle

Liza Kittle
President, RENEW Network



A Vital Church—Call to Action



The Council of Bishops, at their recent meeting in Panama, voted unanimously to endorse the recommendations of the Call to Action Report. The report, based on two independent studies, calls for widespread church reforms in order to address decades-long membership losses in the United Methodist Church. Building vital congregations over the next decade, consolidating and eliminating church agencies, reforming clergy leadership development, and holding bishops accountable for church vitality were the major recommendations of the report.

While RENEW applauds the Council of Bishops for approving the Report, we were disappointed that theological orientation of a pastor/church was not a parameter used in measuring church vitality. Fred Miller, president of one of the consulting firms involved in the study and a United Methodist, stated in his presentation to the bishops, "In the U.S., we have this struggle for dominance between liberals and conservatives. The research says that theological orientation doesn't make a difference for having vital congregations."

RENEW strongly disagrees with this assessment, as most of the denominational decline has occurred in liberal jurisdictions of the UMC, whereas the only areas of church growth are in more conservative, evangelical areas of the denomination. Conservative groups are not trying to "dominate" the church, but are merely trying to maintain the doctrinal integrity of United Methodism and the foundational tenets of the Christian faith.

At the Connectional Table meeting held in Nashville in late November 2010, an Operations Team was created to begin implementation of the recommendations in the Call to Action Report. The Connectional Table is a 60-member international panel of jurisdictional, church agency, bishops, and caucus leaders. The Operations Team, called "an advisory group on steroids" by one member, conveys that although the team will be unencumbered in providing leadership for the task, they cannot take decision-making authority currently held by another body in the church. Please pray for our leaders and our denomination during this process.

The seven member team will operate on a budget of \$750,000, will map responses to key issues, needs, and challenges identified in the report, submit appropriate legislation to General Conference, and conclude its work by December 2012. Some of the recommendations can be implemented before General Conference 2012, while some will require legislative approval at that time.

Blessed....With a Vital Church (A Personal Reflection)

I have been a member of the same United Methodist Church since I was born. I have seen many changes take place and many pastors come and go. I have even left my church home during the darkest days of my life when I turned away from my Savior.

But recently, as I sat in worship, I found myself in the midst of a church that encompasses all the pieces of a vital church. Listening to 150 young people in our middle and high school youth choirs sing praises to the Lord and knowing that so many of them already have a deep relationship with Jesus Christ, made my heart sing. It gave me joy to know that while we were worshipping, volunteers were loading up a truck in the back parking lot with Christmas gifts for needy children bought with loving hearts in our congregation.

I was also remembering the service two weeks prior where the entire congregation met in our sanctuary---a construction zone due to the first renovation on this historic church since the 1950's---to write scriptures on the walls and floors before the final surface is laid on top. The service was a permanent, symbolic consecration signifying the importance of God's Holy Word in the life of this church.

I pondered all the opportunities available and how blessed we are as a congregation....multiple small groups; vast choices for Bible study; a multi-faceted women's ministry program; youth ministry that brings kids from all over the city; senior and men's ministry; young families and children's ministry; college ministry; and local, national, and international mission outreach.

All these things make up a mirror image of "a vital congregation" as described in the Call to Action Report. But what makes it "vital" is that everything that happens here is centered on promoting a deep, abiding relationship with Jesus Christ and a living faith that reaches the world for Christ. "Knowing Christ...and Making Christ Known". I pray that everyone in this denomination will feel the same assurance in their church home. That United Methodism will reflect the words sang by our youth....that Jesus Christ is truly the "Great Light of the World". They sang.....

"Sometimes at night I am afraid. I cover my eyes; I cover my shame.
So here in the dark, broken apart, come with Your light, fill up my heart.
O Great Light of the world, fill up my soul. I'll never mend here, so come make me whole.
O Great Light of the world, come to impart, the light of Your grace to fill up my heart.
The wind of this world can push us around, folding us up, backing us down.
But here in the dark, I'm not alone, so come with Your strength, and carry me home.
O Great Light of the world, fill up my soul....make me whole.....come to impart.....fill up my heart."

May Jesus be the Great Light of the World for you personally and for your church home.

