

CIRCUITRIDER Reviews



**There's Power in the Connection:
Building a Network of Dynamic
Congregations**

by Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster
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Dynamic Congregations by Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster**

“The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again
take root downward, and bear fruit upward.”

- 2 Kings 19:30

Opening with these words, Larry M. Goodpaster, Bishop of the South Alabama-West Florida Conference, begins an intriguing book on the state of The United Methodist Church in North America. Written to provoke dialogue, *There's Power in the Connection* is a work that undoubtedly calls attention to what faces the UMC (as well as other mainline churches) in a new millennium. Goodpaster wants to stimulate the dialogue he believes is necessary to the church's life and health and assist the church in understanding where it has been and what it might be (viii). The book grows out of Goodpaster's experience as a pastor and a district superintendent where he has had occasion to reflect on God's life-transforming power and the church's heritage (ix). Throughout, Goodpaster takes persons on a journey into the many opportunities and challenges now confronting The United Methodist Church.

Goodpaster's thesis is simple and straightforward: The renewal of The United Methodist Church will occur through the interaction of three vital signs: clergy excellence, congregational health, and Wesleyan theology (ix). After an insightful analysis on the current realities facing the church (Chapter 1), and a sobering diagnosis of the clichés we use to keep the status quo in the church (Chapter 2), Goodpaster moves into the heart of his book, weaving together the themes of leadership, congregational health, and Wesleyan evangelical theology. In eight nicely nuanced chapters, readers discover where Goodpaster believes the church needs to go as he points the way toward how the church can sink its roots once again into its own theological heritage while also making the needed innovations to spread scriptural holiness across the land (p.14 and p.113). Goodpaster's book is a wonderful example of how the Wesleyan notion of "practical divinity" can serve the wider connection with vitality.

Therefore, as a way to highlight these major themes, Goodpaster calls attention to the way clergy must understand how they are (1) inspired, called, and led by God; (2) on a journey with Jesus; (3) called to equip others to be faithful followers; and (4) led to do kingdom work in this present time" (p. 35). Similarly, he writes how "the issue of clergy effectiveness...must be a major piece in any strategic makeover of the whole Methodist connection" (p. 37); "developing a cadre of mentors who are faithful and successful pastors of growing, healthy churches should be a primary task of the conference" (p. 48). No true renewal will take place without excellent pastoral leadership.

But Goodpaster does not end here. Instead, he continues to show how the conference must network and go about its mission: "The *conference* does not make disciples, but the conference-level leadership (starting with the bishop) can create an atmosphere of expectation that every local church will *thrive* and *make disciples* and *be alive*" (p. 71). It is important that "to be a thriving United Methodist congregation, a church...must reclaim the Wesleyan heritage, organize in ways that are consistent with the values and principles of that heritage, and function in a supporting role in the incredible expansion of Methodism across the globe" (p. 79). Here, Goodpaster has a significant chapter on the shape of healthy and vital congregations (Chapter 5). Renewal will involve the creative networking of conference and congregation.

In addition, and lastly, Goodpaster is passionate about the Wesleyan theological heritage. He writes how "the hope of the United

Methodist denomination will be found in reclaiming Wesley's great emphasis on love of God and neighbor, which was the foundation of his bold evangelical spirit" (p. 96). He stresses how "it is time to recover from our amnesia and reclaim our Wesleyan evangelical roots, not in an outdated revivalistic mode, but in the richness of Wesley's own doctrine of perfection, knowing that the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6) [p. 96]. In short, as Goodpaster concludes, "what is required for this present age is nothing short of a recovery of the Wesleyan evangelical spirit and discipline that offers those outside the church an unapologetic claim about Jesus that affects both individual lives and the social structures of this world" (p. 103). Goodpaster's account of how a rich theological past can point the way to a vibrant future marks a good starting point to a long, overdue conversation.

Goodpaster's work, therefore, is a helpful guide to the present terrain of United Methodism. The three major vital signs he puts forth go to the core of what is essential to renewal in the church. Goodpaster articulates what many throughout the connection have stated in other ways: *Deep change requires deep change in us!* It begins with a faithful and committed remnant and moves out from there into the world.

This is a key aspect to Goodpaster's book: Change begins with us! This is why the time has come for *outrageous preparation* for leaders (p. 119). Tending to the spiritual roots of one's life and heritage, immersing oneself in Scripture, committing oneself to lifelong learning and mentoring – are the basic components of renewal in the life of the church (p. 119). Little will happen in the church, let alone the world, until leaders realize that the real enemy of great is good and nice (p. 119). The whole church will need to face this challenge. Goodpaster has put his finger on a timely and hot button.

It is also here that Goodpaster has identified a key missional challenge to the church that crosses several areas of concern, especially with respect to theological education and clergy training. He notes how "seminaries will have to gear up leadership and church planting tracks to help equip the next generation of pastors. General agencies will have to eliminate some projects and programs – at least for a period of time – so that resources, energy, and investments can be made in reaching new people, who become new disciples, who engage in justice and mercy ministries with others, who reach new people, and the cycle becomes a continuous loop" (p. 88). It is the retrieval of an earlier Wesleyan practice: Raising up and letting go. Goodpaster goes to the heart of what is at stake with respect to the

church's mission in a new era.

Bishop Goodpaster's *There's Power in the Connection* strikes the key notes and themes of The United Methodist Church's life and mission. It can serve to provoke the UMC to take account of its life together and provide a framework for its renewal. It is a book that understands what is needed and what is required. It does not back away from complex problems, but expresses how they have been with us for some time, as they were for John Wesley and the early Methodists (p. 5). In fact, as Goodpaster reminds us, Wesley dealt with similar challenges. He always asked of his bands and classes: *Have they fruit?* Are they producing the fruit of God's transforming grace? It is a good question, and it is now being addressed to us: *Have we fruit?* Are we bearing the fruit of the Spirit? Are we moving ever deeper into God's life-transforming power? As this book makes abundantly clear: Only time will tell.



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