

You Can Do This!

Jeremiah 29:11

John 21:15-19

*To face great challenges, we bring
God's greater resources.*

A sermon preached by
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In his classic leadership book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins gives principles for leading an organization from mediocrity to excellence. One of the principles is, “Confront the brutal facts, yet never lose faith.” If a company or a church or a disciple is going to be great, you have to realistically assess the current reality without losing sight of and hope for the future.

He calls this principle the “Stockdale Paradox,” which I have shared with you before. It is named after the late Admiral James Stockdale, the Navy pilot who was captured by the North Vietnamese in 1965 and was held prisoner in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” for eight years. As the ranking officer in the prison, Stockdale was singled out for torture more than twenty times. For eight years he had no rights, no release date, no certainty of ever seeing his family again. Yet he shouldered the burden of command, devising ways to communicate secretly with other prisoners and to encourage them to persevere. At one point he beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor, deliberately disfiguring himself so he could not be shown as an example of a well-treated prisoner. Finally, in 1973, Admiral Stockdale was released and returned home to the U. S. and his family.

When Jim Collins interviewed Admiral Stockdale, he asked him who *didn't* make it in that horrible situation. Stockdale answered quickly, “The optimists. The ones who kept telling themselves that things would get better and that they would be home by Christmas or Easter or July 4. They died of broken hearts.”

What gave Admiral Stockdale the strength to endure was a combination of realism and hope. Whatever he was facing at the moment, he always believed that he would ultimately be victorious. “I never lost faith in the end of the story,” he said. “I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”¹

As we have been thinking about the future of The United Methodist Church, we have confronted some brutal facts:

- The Christian church has been in decline in America for at least 20 years, if not more. We have seen that trend in our own church.
- The coronavirus pandemic disrupted everything, including church life. It accelerated and exacerbated the decline we were already experiencing.
- The pandemic shutdown exposed a crisis of discipleship in our churches. We have to reteach and reclaim the five practices of faith—prayer, Scripture reading, worship, serving, and giving.
- The United Methodist Church is going through an ecclesiastical divorce. There has been conflict and pain, and a number of churches are leaving the denomination.

How can a church hope to survive in the face of these brutal facts? Let me circle back to a podcast I mentioned three weeks ago. Tod Bolsinger is a former pastor and current church leadership guru who wrote a prophetic book right before the pandemic called *Canoeing the Mountains; Church Leadership in Uncharted Territory*.² Little did he know how far off the map we were about to go! The driving metaphor for this book is the Lewis and Clark expedition in the early 19th century. They were called the Corps of Discovery, and their mission was to find the fabled Northwest Passage from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. They went up the Missouri River to its headwaters, then scaled the Lemhi Pass, on the border of what is now Idaho and Montana. They expected to see a river on the other side that would take them to the Pacific Ocean. But all they saw were more mountains. At that point, they could have turned back in failure, but they didn't. They left their canoes behind, and they moved forward in a new way. They did not discover the Northwest Passage, but they discovered a new world. They put the vast reaches of the northwest part of the Louisiana Purchase on the map.

In the podcast I heard about a month ago, Bolsinger answered the question, “Which churches are not going to make it?” Not all churches are going to survive the reality we are now living in. He said, “Who are the churches that won't make it? We all don't want to think that's us, but churches are closing. Churches are declining. Here's the brutal answer. It's the churches that cling to the past. It's churches who decide it's not about discovering a world; it's about canoeing. It's about preserving the great history of canoeing. It's about trying to make better canoes and tell people stories about canoes. It's about protecting the canoeing guild and all the things. Almost every church I know is standing right here on the precipice of the Lemhi Pass. They are looking at the future, and it looks totally different, and they have to decide what to do. And some literally decide, we are going to go back. We are going to fight for the past. We think somehow God was more present in the past than today. We want to get the world back to the way it was. Those folks are not going to make it. There are others who want to stay on the Lemhi Pass. They want to set up an Airbnb with a view, talk about the future, but actually not go there. The folks that are going to make it are groups of folks who are learning to let go and learn as they go. That's why in many churches it starts with a small group of people who love their church enough to begin to experiment their way forward. And sometimes it's just a small group of people who come alongside a pastor who is really dedicated to doing this, but [he or she is] really afraid that they're going to be alone, saying, 'We'll go with you. We'll be a little Corps of Discovery that goes with you.' We'll be folks that will be a part of it, because if you don't have that, you will die.”³

So here we stand at the precipice, astride the Lemhi Pass, with mountains in front of us. Will we give up? Will we go back? Will we resign ourselves to continued decline

and eventual death? I hope your answer to all of those questions is a resounding and emphatic, “No!” But why not?

We are people of hope. We are not just a bunch of optimists. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism says, “Things will get better; everything’s going to be all right.” Hope says, “Whether or not things get better, God will give us the resources to endure. And in the end, we will be victorious.” Optimism is based on faith in human character; hope is founded on faith in God’s providence and sovereignty.

We have hope because we have a strong church. All churches have suffered some blows lately, but the measure of our strength is how we were doing before the pandemic, and how we are recovering those strengths. We talked about the assets we bring to the table of ministry: great facilities, great staff, programs for all ages, good financial support. We are so blessed in so many ways.

But the main thing we have going for us is the key attitude for a church moving with strength into the future. We are learning to focus our ministry outside the walls of the church. We want to take care of our people, sure, but the real work of the church is with the lost, broken, hurting people in the community who need to know the love of Jesus. Bishop William Willimon, in his book *Don’t Look Back*, says, “Your congregation’s health before the pandemic and before the threat of separation is more determinative of your future than either the pandemic or separation. Eighty percent of all Methodist congregations are in decline and have been for the last two decades. In studying four decades of UMC diminishment, we’ve found that *the single most influential factor in the life of a Methodist congregation is its external focus.*”⁴

We are a strong church, and we can have hope because our unity gives us focus. Because we are not wrangling over what denominational sign to put out front, we can focus our energy and resources on the mission—to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. When you’re busy with the main business of the church, there is less time for fussing about smaller issues. There’s an old saying, “When fishermen ain’t fishing, they’re fighting.” Let’s be fishing for people, as Jesus said, and our unity will give us hope.

We can have hope because the future is not dependent on us. The church is God’s idea. It’s the Body of Christ on the earth. The Methodist movement is God’s idea, or else it would not still be the largest Protestant denomination in the world, claiming almost 13 million believers in 130 countries. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves. We did not create the church, and we cannot destroy it. When I was confirmed into the brand-new United Methodist Church in 1968, these were the words spoken over me: “The Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of His Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.”⁵ There is our hope.

In these times of great uncertainty, here is something we can trust, something we can depend on. God wins! Jesus will be victorious! The end is assured for all God’s people. Bishop Willimon says, “Nothing is more certain in this life than the victory of Christ, bringing along with him into glory his rag-tag congregation of improbable, unreconciled but being reconciled, squabbling saints, his dear but beleaguered Bride, his besmirched but beloved church.”⁶ That is our certain and steadfast hope.

When Jesus was crucified, the disciples had to confront some brutal facts. Their leader was dead. The Jewish leaders were still corrupt. The oppressive Romans were still in control. There were no instructions, no organization moving forward. Despite the appearances of the risen Christ, they went back. They returned to the life they knew. They went fishing. They were trying to forget about everything that had gone wrong, until a shadowy figure stood on the beach. When they followed the stranger's instructions, they caught a boatload of fish. Then they recognized Jesus.

After breakfast, Jesus had a conversation with Peter. He didn't look back to the three times Peter had denied even knowing him. He asked in the present tense, "Do you love me?" Three times, Jesus gives Peter the chance to step forward into a new day, to get things right this time, to focus on what's important. And three times Peter said, "Yes." Then Jesus gave Peter the words that would form the mission of every disciple and every church from that point until now: "Follow me." These words form our call.

Bishop Willimon: "Fellow Methodists, the risen Christ is talking to us. He wants us to succeed. Don't look back; look forward. ...Focus on what's important. Center your attention on him who put you into Methodist Christianity in the first place. Look to Jesus. Listen to and obey Jesus."⁷ There is only one question that matters, and it's the one Jesus keeps asking us: "Do you love me?" There is only one answer that makes sense: "Follow him."

Rev. Donald Haynes is a retired United Methodist pastor and seminary professor from North Carolina. He tells about a night at the Western North Carolina Annual Conference a few years ago. It was the last night of Annual Conference, the yearly meeting of the Methodists in a particular area. They were doing the ordination service for people coming into the ministry. It is a very stately and dignified liturgical service. The people who come are very religious people. They heard Bishop Bill Hutchinson from Louisiana preach a powerful sermon, challenging the congregation to holiness of heart and life and the church to new mission. Then they did all the ordinations—a long liturgy, meaningful to all who like inside baseball.

At the end of the service, Bishop Larry Goodpaster (his real name!) stood up and said that he might get in trouble with the worship committee, but they were not going to have the recessional as planned. He felt the Spirit moving. Instead, he invited the District Superintendents to line up in front of the stage, and then he invited any lay person who felt the call to ordained ministry to come forward and make an appointment to talk to his or her superintendent. A nervous whisper went through the assembly hall, "Oh, my. What if nobody comes?" This was not some revival meeting altar call; this was Annual Conference.

They stood to sing the hymn. All of a sudden, from the back of the hall, there was shouting and clapping. Someone was coming forward! Then from another place, clapping and shouting—somebody else. People began to come forward from every part of the congregation. The bishop was trying to hug each one as they came forward. The newly-ordained pastors came back to the stage to hug members of their churches who were stepping forward. People were hugging and crying and clapping all over. The liturgical order dissolved into chaos, but 37 people answered the call to ministry that night in June.

Donald Haynes was there, and he said, "As I walked to our car, I felt closer to John Wesley's 'strangely warmed' heart than I had felt in a long, long time! Back at home, I pulled the little volume from my shelf I love to re-read on rare occasions like this—William

Sangster's 1945 volume, *Methodism Can Be Born Again*. The Lord is not through with this church yet!"⁸

Does that resonate with your heart today? Methodism can be born again! God is not through with First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith. God is not through with the United Methodist Church. The challenges are great, but the resources of God are greater. Don't look back! There is a new world coming, just over those mountains. You can do this, so help you God!

¹ James Collins, *Good To Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 83-87.

² Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing The Mountains; Church Leadership In Uncharted Territory* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018).

³ <https://freshexpressions.com/2022/11/02/why-some-churches-adapt-and-others-do-not-with-tod-bolsinger>. 31:40-33:37

⁴ William Willimon, *Don't Look Back; Methodist Hope For What Comes Next* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2022), 50.

⁵ "Baptismal Covenant III," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 45.

⁶ Willimon, 167.

⁷ Willimon, 170.

⁸ <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=5623>.