

Rambling Thoughts of a Seasoned Pastor on Denominational Church Conferences: What They Are and What They Possibly Could Be – More Questions than Answers

by Dr. Jim Garlow, on the eve of the Wesleyan General Conference, May 2026

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RELATIONSHIPS

Beginning on May 17, a thousand or more Wesleyan pastors and laypersons will gather in Marion, Indiana for the once-every-four-years General Conference. Almost every denomination has such meetings.

The good news: like most such gatherings, these are remarkable family reunions, bringing together so many of God's people who have known each other for decades. Although I will not be attending (I will be in Israel), the relationships are remarkable. That makes the event so spectacular. That's the positive. It is wonderful.

But is there a negative? Well, maybe. I am not trying to "rain on anyone's parade," but may I share some thoughts about this?

What I am sharing are not some recent thoughts. These are ponderings I have had for much of my adult life. I am going to pose more questions, perhaps, than I will give answers.

I have been attending District Conferences my entire life, since I was a baby. Once I was ordained as a Wesleyan pastor in 1974, I obviously attended in a different capacity. I have also been to many – I do not recall how many – General Conferences.

Once again, the relationships are rich. I praise God for so many wonderful people in my life. I have attended both Wesleyan and Church of the Nazarene district and general conferences. Since the two denominations have a very close relationship, I am a graduate of both Wesleyan and Nazarene colleges. In addition, I have served in both denominations as an ordained pastor (Wesleyan 1974-1980; Church of the Nazarene 1980-1996; Wesleyans again 1996-present).

EFFECTIVE?

However – you knew a "however" was coming, didn't you? – I have wrestled with these conferences for decades. Why? My question: Are they really effective? Is there a better way? In the scope of church history, the first *annual* conference that we are aware of was called by John Wesley, our denominational namesake, in June of 1744 in London, England, for the purpose of discussing doctrine, discipline (lifestyle of both pastors and congregants), and practice (how we function). Reflecting the harsh challenges that the movement faced, Charles Wesley wrote, in 1749, a special hymn for them to sing at these meeting titled, "And Are We Yet Still Alive." These meetings were necessary and important. And quite likely, so are they today.

However – there is that word again – are these meetings really, truly impactful today? Yes, the relationships – both new and renewed – are vitally important. But are these conferences, based on true results, effective? Might there be a better way?

Such conferences are costly. Every person must pay for transportation costs, often costly airfare, plus many nights in a hotel, and food. In addition, the denomination pays a great deal to “produce” the event. These are not inexpensive. However, my issue is less the cost as it is the *bona fide*, measurable effectiveness of them.

District and General Conferences of denominations have a predictable flow to them. There are resolutions to be passed. Sometimes there is doctrine to be discussed. There are statistics to be shared. Interspersed will be worship and the teaching of the Word. But mostly it is stats shared and resolutions to pass. Such conferences are run exactly the same way from the time I was a child. But the world has changed, lots. It is not the same world. Is it possible that the church conferences are functioning the exact same way as they did in a 1950s world, when that world is long gone? Is there a better way?

The resolutions get word-smithed to death. Is that important? Well, yes. But it can be laboriously excruciating. Some might say, well, church conferences have always been that way, and you would be right. Any study of church history reveals the wrangling over language and language does matter.

However – and we are finally getting to my concerns – most of the resolutions passed, while admittedly important, are not *strategically* (key word – strategically) acted upon. And that is a big part of my struggle with these conferences.

LIFE IN THE WOMB

Let’s take the abortion issue as an example. Every serious follower of Jesus knows that abortion is murder. Period. And in evangelical denominations, that has been historically accepted. Thus, such denominational conferences pass such legislation. Then what? Answer: Nothing. Well, close to nothing.

What do I mean? It is likely not an exaggeration to say that 99% of the pastors in the two denominations I have been part of (Wesleyan and Nazarene) do not participate in actual structural or institutional activities that attempt to bring a halt to abortion. The murder continues.

There are a few Wesleyan or Nazarene pastors who might have gone to an abortuary – a killing center – to lead in prayer outside and attempt to talk to pregnant women and the men who impregnated them, to attempt to save a baby’s life.

There are very few denominational leaders or ordained pastors who go to the state capital or to Washington, DC in an attempt to change the laws to save the lives of the most innocent in the womb.

There are very few – if any – evangelical denominational executives or megachurch pastors who have even once marched in a pro-life gathering, let alone applied legislative pressure to stop the killing.

There are very few churches who have proactively championed adoption – I write this as one who has adopted four children, and as one who has helped “place” children for adoption – or even has ever offered a Post-Abortion Healing Class for women who have had abortions or men who have paid for them.

In fact, the opposite is true. Ask any pro-life worker today, and they will tell you, “The pastors won’t give us the time of day. Most will not even allow us to have a table in the foyer, telling people about abortion and the alternatives.”

Just look at how hard it is for pro-life pregnancy centers to get a church to sponsor them. Almost impossible. Every time I had the leader of our local pro-life pregnancy center come and talk to our congregation, she would lavish praise upon me for doing such a thing, because other pastors would not.

And yet, there are tens of thousands of dollars spent for pastors and laypersons to gather at district and general conferences where resolutions are passed, calling for an end to abortion. Yet the voting delegates go home and, for the most part, do nothing *strategically* to end abortion.

That is my beef.

MARRIAGE

Oh, but there is more. Lots more. (You expected that, correct?) Take one more topic: marriage. Like the previous topic, we pass resolutions declaring that marriage is one man-one woman. And, respectfully, the pastors will hold that view, personally and for their congregation. Yet, they are fearful to speak too strongly on this, for fear of “offending” (key word there – “offending”) those who might support sodomy. And so, while passing nice resolutions in the comfort and isolation of the district or general conference, they won’t go “into the fray” and “mix it up” where the discussion *really* counts: the broader culture.

How many denominational executives and megachurch pastors have supported a biblical definition of marriage in their conferences, yet are unwilling to do the heavy lifting and interact extensively with political and governmental persons who can make a difference on this issue.

How many of them say they are pro-life and pro-biblical marriage, yet don’t have a clue which candidates stand on the biblical side of those issues? How many pastors say they support the scriptural view for abortion and marriage, yet won’t deeply engage with persons running for office, to try to impact their thinking on this issue?

Historically, I have invited all candidates, Republican, Democrat and Independent, to my church on the Sunday prior to the election, and even told them they could hand out fliers, but they would have to sit through my “election sermon” in order to do it. That way they heard teaching on “the purpose of government,” “life is the foundational issue,” and “God’s definition of marriage is sacred” before they were introduced or handed out material.

I invited a man who was running for governor of California to my office and said, “Since you are for abortion, have you actually seen one?” “No,” he replied. “Well, that being the case,” I continued, “since you are for abortion, we are going to watch one, on my computer. Then after

you watch it, let me know if you still support such barbaric activity as slowly dismembering another human being, and even doing it without anesthesia.”

To be candid, I could give hundreds of examples of such interactions over my pastoral ministry, but I will only give one more. When a prominent Ohio senator suddenly switched from supporting biblical marriage to that for which God had destroyed Sodom, I sought him out. I talked respectfully and treated him honorably. However, I called him out, prophetically, for his sin. How many other pastors loved him enough to try to reach him in his lostness?

My point? We pass resolutions and do nothing to activate them where it counts. The devil does not care how many pro-life resolutions you pass, so long as you don't truly go where you need to go to actually save babies' lives. He does not care how many traditional marriage resolutions you pass, so long as you don't try to impact the legislative or judicial process to actually protect marriage.

To see how stunningly sacred marriage is to God, from the Hebrew words in Genesis 1 and 2, see this 17 minute teaching: <https://subsplash.com/u/wellversed/media/d/9pqkz4g-the-sacredness-of-marriage>

And for those who might be inclined to say, “Jim is being political,” please listen to this: <https://stream.org/i-am-not-political-i-am-biblical-dr-jim-garlow/> I am biblical, but “biblical” is not recognized anymore. It was God who invented government. It was God who established and establishes nations. It is God who instructs in his glorious Word how civil government is to function.

To the extent a nation follows the biblical principles of governance, to that extent, human pain, suffering, and poverty will decrease. To the extent that a nation violates the biblical principles of governance, to that extent a nation will increase human pain, suffering, and poverty.

I'll leave this theme, but you get it. We talk (or pass resolutions)...but we don't follow up with *strategic* action.

STRUCTURE

But there is more. At these conferences, we will faithfully follow *Robert's Rules of Order*. We will have a parliamentarian to rule on disputed procedure, and we will even have an attorney there to tell us if we, according to his or her view, whether we are breaching church or civil law.

Frankly, maybe all that is necessary. But I have some questions.

Is *Robert's Rule of Order* actually biblical? Is that the biblical pattern? I know it well represents democracy, or is supposed to. But is it actually the scriptural way to function? Possibly. Possibly not. Is there a better way? Maybe there is not.

Once the IRS coerced us all to have a 501(c)(3), did that cause us to function differently? Is current church government more like a major for-profit corporation than it is an apostle/prophet-led church? Are we more like the Ford Motor Company than we are like Acts 2?

Have we turned our district superintendents and general superintendents into administrators following denomination polity more than apostles leading us as the church victorious? Many

years ago, a person asked me, “Have you ever considered being a district superintendent or a general superintendent?” Horrified at the very thought of that, I responded, “If God ever...ever...ever called me to be a district superintendent or a general superintendent, that would totally change my entire view of God. I would no longer believe that God loves me.”

I do not mean to take cheap shots at the district superintendents I have had over the years. In fact, I have had great ones. But I felt sad for them. They drove mile after mile, often functioning as managers and administrators, when the position calls for an apostle. (Yes, I know, with all the charges regarding people being part of the [fictitious, non-existent] NAR [New Apostolic Reformation], we are not even allowed to use the word “apostle” anymore. But the reality is, we need (Ephesians 4:11) apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.)

I do recognize that discovering *biblical* church governance is not easy. One semester when I was a grad student at Princeton Theological Seminary, I spent four months trying to finally understand the biblical pattern for church government. After I had completed the study, I recognized that “church government” in the Bible was a “moving target.” It developed over time, from Acts, and then as Paul wrote his letters. So, it was not as static as I would have hoped. It seemed rather dynamic across the pages of the New Testament.

Yet I still wonder. Are we doing it right?

Be assured, I am not condemning our leadership. In fact, I think their job is extremely hard. I admire them for having the persistence to persevere. My question is much broader. Are we doing church government the way God designed? I don’t have an answer. But I ponder this a lot. And I think we all might want to ponder it.

But there is still more.

ALCOHOL

I feel we have – and I am really trying to say this gently – misplaced priorities.

Allow me to cut to the chase. Just think of the hours, in district conferences, general board meetings, and now in general conference, that will go into discussing “Can ordained Wesleyan pastors drink alcohol?”

Candidly, it seems bizarre to me that we are “loosening” our standards on this, while the secular culture around us is tightening its standards. We now have Gen Z talking about “no alcohol events,” and we are wanting to make sure our pastors can drink. This seems – well, how do I say this? – unwise.

As noted above, I was ordained a Wesleyan, then went to the Nazarenes for a season, and then back to the Wesleyans when I became the pastor of Skyline in late 1995. Once a year, the pastors of the larger Wesleyan churches would gather (generally the week after Easter) for a time of fellowship.

In April of 1996, I was the host of the group, maybe around 20 or 25 pastors. The host pastor was supposed to emcee the meeting, where topics were discussed. Pastor Wes Dupin tipped me off right before the meeting that he had heard that “the alcohol issue” would be coming up. I was a bit taken aback.

Wes was correct. It came up. When it was brought up, I listened for quite a while and then expressed my surprise and dismay. Perhaps I did not use the most politically correct language. I recall precisely what I said: "I am shocked we are discussing this. I resolved this issue in the third grade." That apparently triggered some others to express similar thoughts, however I am unable to reconstruct the conversation from 30 years ago.

What I do recall is that Wayne Schmidt, who was a pastor of Kentwood at the time, who I barely knew at that time, and who was the strong advocate for alcohol to be permitted, left the room crying. Wes Dupin chased after him down the hallway, comforting him.

I then got a tape – this was in the day of cassettes – and listened to Wayne's rationale on this issue. I listened to it, one sentence at time, wanting to understand what his thinking was. Although I came to know and love Wayne as a person, I was very unconvinced regarding his thinking about alcohol.

And I still feel that way, even stronger, 30 years later.

Alcohol has done massive damage to our nation, our cities, our communities, and our families. Very few families have escaped the wrath of the "demon of alcohol." My own family was unable to "dodge that bullet."

Enormous grief and damage has been done by alcohol. I would think we would be shouting from the housetops, "Don't touch that stuff. It's poison." But no, we are going to expend enormous time and energy discussing, "Should the preachers drink?"

I wish the question was, "How can we better reflect a holy life?" I doubt that the conclusion would be, "Let all us pastors have a beer!"

When you consider the hours of hundreds of delegates, plus all those outside the voting area (I did not want to call it the "bar"), we are expending a massive amount of man-hours (person-hours) to do what secular culture is now warning us against.

It is not uncommon to now hear on the national news stories of research telling people that even small amounts of alcohol are not good for our health.

I was once young. I am now – well – "up in years." I have never had a taste of alcohol. When I go to my doctor, and they hand me the clipboard to fill out, and I say that I do not drink or smoke, and that I never had, I have never had one single doctor or nurse say, "Oh wow, you should take up drinking and smoking." But let me keep the focus on just drinking, not smoking for now. Every single time that I have stated, "I have never had a single drink of alcohol," they have affirmed that I have made a wise decision.

If the Wesleyans decide that pastors (and church board members) can drink, I am so thankful that I was a Wesleyan when that was not the pattern of behavior. I am so glad I grew up in an era in which the Wesleyan Church did not allow drinking.

Why? Because I suspect I would have become an alcoholic. I don't know how to do anything "halfway." And I think that would have applied to drinking. I would have made a great drunk.

Had I been raised in a church that allowed or encouraged drinking, I suspect that by now, I would have gone through a number of marriages, have done serious harm to a lot of people, and possibly be dead by now.

I praise God, I really praise God, that I was raised in a family and in a denomination that did not drink. It set me free. And I thank God every day for that.

But...not anymore, apparently. Based on the vote on this issue in the last general conference, I am being told it will likely pass.

A hundred thousand dollars total – or some amount – will be spent for hundreds of people to come to a general conference. In addition, a lot of precious irretrievable time will be spent on discussing “can preachers now drink,” right as the “world” is coming to the awareness that “drinking is not a good thing.”

I suppose the “but-Paul-mentioned-wine” crowd might prevail. But that was medicinal. And if I had lived in Paul’s world, with no other medical options, I would have used wine the very way he said.

If I had lived in the time of Proverbs, I would follow Proverbs 31:6 for a dying person. It was alcohol. And it was to dull the pain of death.

I know what it is to hold a dying wife (in 2013). I know what it is to have to administer morphine to your wife, knowing that she will never wake up again. Carol’s last words, in the midst of pain, before I gave her morphine that final time, were, “I love you.” I know what it is to stand by the bedside of your daughter’s death bed, only one year ago, May 15, and watch the morphine go in, to ease the suffering. I understand what Proverbs 31 is speaking of. But we have morphine now. We don’t need what they used then.

But there is more. Lots more.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

We are the *North American* General Conference. That includes Canada. Do you know what we should be talking about? Answer: Lots.

I was in Canada, at their nation’s capital, Ottawa, on March 25 of this year. Do you know what happened in Canada on March 25th? There was a critical vote that impacted every single Wesleyan pastor in that nation.

I was in the visitors’ gallery at the House of Commons for a critical vote on what was called “Bill C-9.” It passed overwhelmingly, 186 to 137. It was painful to watch the vote. It was apparent that religious freedom was going to disappear.

The most positive aspect was watching Bible believing Parliamentarians vote. In the House of Commons, the vote is not electronic. They don’t merely push a button. They are required to register their vote by standing, one at a time, and publicly declare their position. The process required a roll call not merely once, but twice.

The Bible believing Parliamentarians, or at least many of them, realized what was at stake. Thus, many of them registered their concern and protest by holding up a Bible as they stood to vote. They knew that this vote was ultimately a vote against the sacred Word of God.

What is C-9? It is the "Combatting Hate Act." It passed the House of Commons. It passed the Senate. (Canada's Senate is not like the U.S. senators. Their senators are appointed. For life. The Senate is, reportedly, 90% liberal.) Bill C-9 is now law. What does that mean?

Let me cut to the chase. Canadian pastors can now be arrested for preaching about homosexuality. That is considered "hate." It is now illegal. (Beware of those who try to tell you something to the contrary.) What will Canadian Wesleyan preachers now do?

As I stated, I was in the visitors' gallery. Knowing that this bill was enormously controversial, I called ahead to the House of Commons to try to reserve seats for those I was bringing. I was speaking at a conference two blocks away. I went to one Canadian after another to ask them to take me, as I had never been in the Parliament building before. Not one had any interest in going, except a couple whose son was a member of the Parliament, and one other who I finally convinced "this is important."

We got there, very concerned that there would be no seats left. I knew there were only 200 seats. We got there as early as we could, knowing full well that it would be 90 minutes, or perhaps even two hours, until the actual vote.

We arrived at the visitors' gallery. It was empty. Completely empty. The only people who came were the ones I had recruited.

We watched painfully as Canada's rich spiritual history was trashed. Their national anthem is a prayer, with one line of the song stating, "God keep our land glorious and free." Read that last line one more time, please.

Oh, but there's more. The preamble to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, a profoundly important part of the Constitution, states, "Whereas Canada is founded upon the principles that recognize the supremacy of God..." That is the opening of the Constitution.

These words were not written in the 1700s or 1800s, when western nations were more spiritual. This was written in 1982. This is recent history.

But 191 of the 200 – I brought nine persons with me – seats were empty (except for a family of four who came for a few moments) in the visitors' gallery. I turned to a lady (who I had strongly encouraged to leave the conference and come to the vote) who had led the charge nationally to fight for religious liberty and asked, "Where are all the Canadian Christians?" On several occasions after that, she has told me, "That question haunts me: 'Where are all the Canadian Christians?'"

And where were the pastors? A former member of Parliament, Stockwell Day, later said, "There was only one pastor in the House of Commons for this terrible vote, and he was from America."

Canada just took an enormous step back in religious liberty. It will impact Canadian Wesleyans. But where was the Wesleyan Church? Where were people from our "international"

headquarters? Do they even track what is happening regarding religious liberty in the 200 nations of the earth? Do they care? I am sure they do. But given the fact that Canada is a significant neighbor to the U.S., and our *North American* General Conference includes this great nation, why were Wesleyans not “front and center” on this issue? I don’t get it.

And that is my great disappointment regarding denominational conferences. Every year, or every four years, they are conducted the same way, oblivious that the world is on fire. Or so it seems. While the Canadian pastors just lost their religious freedom, we will spend our finite energy on whether pastors can drink or not. Why?

I am friends with quite a number of Canadian pastors of various denominations who have been jailed for preaching, for feeding the poor, and for staying open during covid. I can name them. I am in contact with them. Religious liberty has been rapidly disappearing in Canada. Will the General Conference focus on that – with a strategy on what to do? Perhaps it will. I sure hope so.

And speaking of religious liberty, will there be one word of commendation for our U.S. President launching the Religious Liberty Commission? Will there be any discussion, praising God that the “Johnson Amendment” (at least for now) has “had its wrist slapped” and been driven back, so that the IRS cannot have “pulpit police” come into our churches?

Will the current administration be appreciated for changing so many policies regarding abortion? Will the current American president receive commendation for not advancing the radical gay agenda, or for stopping child mutilation and gender ideology? Will he receive affirmation for standing firm on that? I hope so. But I doubt it, given our “fear of looking like we are in the hip pocket of the Republican party.” (My hope is not in a political party. My hope is in the God who is over all, whose Word speaks to every aspect of life, including the governmental.)

As one who served on the Trump Faith Advisory Board (and other iterations from that) during “Trump 45,” I was in meetings with Donald Trump eight or perhaps nine times. I saw what he was trying to do.

I do not defend his words, his tweets, his swearing or his name calling. None of the members of the Faith Advisory Board do. Period. We agree with Franklin Graham who has had the most direct contact with the President on these issues. Trump is complex. He has flaws (like you and I do). I don’t defend any of those.

His policies are another matter. I have just completed a new book, where I and my co-author analyzed 200 recent executive orders (*The Executive Orders of President Donald J. Trump: A Biblical Perspective*). They are overwhelmingly biblical.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION TO GOVERNMENTAL ISSUES

Among the other things I wish the General Conference would do, is to equip us all on how to respond with biblical answers to the thorniest issues of today’s world. I have laid out biblical responses to almost 90 political issues in two books (*Well Versed: Biblical Answers to Today’s Tough Issues* and *Reversed: From Culturally Woke to Biblically Awake*). Why did I write these books? Because God has the answers – for personal government, for family government, for

congregational (ecclesia) government, *and for civil government*. God is good. He loves us so much that he even has all the answers for civil governance in his wonderful Book.

TRAFFICKED CHILDREN / IMMIGRATION

I doubt that the General Conference will discuss the alleged 300,000 (or whatever the current number is) children that were “lost” to human trafficking (and to what else?) during the Biden administration. I doubt that there will be discussion of the horrific loss of life caused by persons in this country illegally.

I suppose it won't be discussed that the Bible has teaching – at least three Hebrew words - on immigration, that *ger* refers to those here obeying all our laws, that *zakhār* are those who come temporarily and then leave when their visa is expired, and *zar*, those who violate the law whether in the way they come or after they are here. That won't get discussed, I presume. I wish it would.

MORAL FAILURES AMONG CLERGY

All too often, we open social media to see another pastor has fallen. We used to think it was only the Catholic clergy, or maybe liberal Protestants. But it seems to be a problem in all denominations. In fact, we have never faced what we as Wesleyans went through these past two months. Don't we need to focus strongly on what is happening with clergy across America?

ECONOMIC ISSUES

I wish we would discuss the reality of massive fraud in government, and why we, as Wesleyans, stand against it, and then strategize how to be part of the solution.

In the 2012 Lexington, Kentucky General Conference, I tried to bring up for discussion a memorial (passed by the Pacific Southwest District) regarding the moral, ethical, and biblical nature of national debt. Our national debt (and that of most nations) has reached an exorbitant level. It is a violation of Scripture. It is – can we say this? – sin.

However, the General Board voted it down. I was told by the General Superintendent that she would appoint a “study committee” and I would be on it. I never heard another word about it.

The national debt at the time was a staggering \$16 trillion. It is now an unsustainable \$39 trillion. But we, as Wesleyans, were silent. The Bible says, “Thou shalt not steal” (from future generations). We could have sounded an alarm. We could have proposed a debt limit tied to GDP. And yes, it would or could have been biblical. But we were silent.

TRANSGENDERISM

I would think that there should be some celebration for the victories of getting men out of women's sports and then discuss how we are going to take strong actions in those states where they are insisting on continuing to violate young women. I suspect that might not get discussed. And we will not develop a strategy to really make a difference.

FERTILITY RATES

The cascading birth rate across Europe and parts of Asia has now hit America. Former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban had a strategy for trying to deal with it. Do we as Wesleyans care that the birthrate in America is below replacement levels? We should. That was, after all, the first command.

Our entire culture is experiencing video addiction. It is destructive. We are all impacted by it. It is pandemic. And it is destroying lives. Shouldn't we focus on what the spiritual solutions might be, followed by a strategic plan?

ANTISEMITISM

There is a global outbreak of antisemitism. Can't we as Wesleyans not merely pass resolutions, but can't we have a strategy? What if every Wesleyan local church that was within 25 miles of a Jewish synagogue would "adopt" a Hebrew congregation and reach out?

In 2015, the Pacific Southwest District passed a memorial saying that Israel had the right to exist and defend itself. That was well within our theological heritage given the fact that Charles Wesley wrote a hymn in the 1700s about Israel returning to its land, just like it was prophesied, and then finally occurred in 1948. The General Board nixed it. How unfortunate. We could have been on the front end of a social cancer. Antisemitism, or rather Jew hatred, is rampant across our nation.

PERSECUTION AND MARTYDOM OF CHRISTIANS

Will the General Conference address what is happening in persecution globally? I suspect it will, and for that I will be very thankful. Will the horrific "Red-Green-White" axis be mentioned? Red is for Communism and Marxism. Green represents for Islam. White represents globalism. Will the fact that likely approximately 20% of Muslims are violent, and 20% of nearly two billion people means there are a lot of violent people? Will there be discussions about the "stop sharia" amendments, that are being passed in some states? Or will we be as naïve as Europe, in general, and London, in particular, until it is too late? Will we strategize against Islamic violence? Or would such a question be politically incorrect? Would the family members of beheaded Nigerian Christian pastors, result of Islamic violence, prefer we focused on preventing more violence, or discuss whether pastors should drink alcohol?

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Suppose you visit a military base at noon. You walk into the mess hall. One thousand military personnel are sitting down and eating a meal. What does that tell you? Nothing. It tells you nothing about what really matters. It does not tell you if the persons there are capable of flying planes, driving ships and tanks. It does not tell you anything about their troop readiness to wage war. It merely tells you there are 1,000 persons.

The defense budget of that base likewise does not tell you if they are an effective military unit.

The size of the military buildings also are not an indicator that there is an effective fight force.

The same is true for the church. The normal demarcations that we report are the proverbial "building, budgets and behind-in-seats." However, that is an ineffective tool to measure spiritual effectiveness and Christian maturity.

The attendance does not tell you if the people are actually spiritually mature, or even growing. It merely tells you that they showed up in the “ecclesiastical mess hall.” The massive annual church budget is no indicator of authentic spiritual health. The impressive campus buildings are also not an indicator of how much holy living is being produced.

I am not saying that we should not keep careful records of these things. I am not advocating not building nice church buildings. I have spent much of my pastoral ministry building such.

THE PLAGUING QUESTION

We have the largest churches we ever have. When I was a child a church of 200 persons was large and a church of 1,000 was incredible. Now our nation boasts of churches (multiple campuses admittedly) that attract 100,000 people.

We have Christian colleges that might have – including online – 100,000 students. While some Christian colleges have closed, many Christian universities are reporting record FTE enrollments.

Add to that the burgeoning Christian publishing.

And then consider that we now have Christian TV and radio networks that are worth well into the billions of dollars.

And yet...and yet...the nation is going to hell. Literally. Why?

We have the biggest and best of everything, and yet immorality, vulgarity, vileness – just plain sin – is the “rule of the day.” Why? With all our massive campuses, Christian educational institutions, Christian publishing, as well as TV and radio, and now online streaming capabilities, why is there not an outbreak of holiness?

This question is not an indictment on any persons, denominations, institutions or other entities. Yet it is a question that bothers me enormously. Why are so many dying without knowing Our Resurrected Lord. Most of the answers I hear given to this question are glib, dismissive, unconvincing, quite underwhelming.

Lest you think I am condemning others, I am not. I am asking myself, as a “seasoned” pastor: What impact did I have?

Let me clarify something. No, I am not depressed. No, I am not looking backward. In fact, I am enjoying ministry (www.WellVersedWorld.org www.WorldPrayerNetwork.org) today as much or more than I ever have. I get up every day so excited about the ministry possibilities of that day. I am highly stimulated by ministry.

As of this writing, God has given me good health. And my vision, energy for ministry and passion for the Lord and hunger for the work of the Holy Spirit have not faded. In fact, they have

increased. Succinctly stated, I am excited about life. I suppose I identify with Caleb, "Give me the mountains with the giants."

Therefore, I am not writing these plaguing questions in some type of depressive mood or even with obsessive navel-gazing introspection. I am writing this as a guy who has lived decades, observing thrilling ministry both personally and in so many other faithful servants of God. And yet – here is that question again – why are the vast majority, in fact, an increasing percentage of the population, not responding to the glorious gospel? The question is relevant well beyond our "tribe." Baptist, Reformed, Methodist, Anglican, Holiness, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Independent movements – if there are "movements" anymore – should be asking the same question.

Some will argue that the southern hemisphere is spiritually growing, and that is true. Africa, South America, and Asia as well, have experienced remarkable growth. However, of the earth's eight billion, we have such a long way to go. The places which have been associated with the Gospel – Europe, Australia and North America – have moved considerably less reflective of Christianity. That causes me to ask: Could we have done better? Can we be more effective in the future? Is there a better way?

From the time I was in college, these thoughts have rumbled around in my spirit: "Who on earth would, if they really understood Jesus, reject him. Who on earth, if they truly understood what it was like to have a daily relationship with Him, would ever walk away from Him? Who on earth, if they genuinely grasped the difference between heaven and hell, would ever chose hell? How could that be possible?" Those questions have remained echoing in my mind from my undergraduate days to the present.

All of this brings me back to this haunting question: Can't we do better? And to make direct application to the present, if we are going to spend a substantial amount of time and money to gather, is there a better way to use these moments we have at a general conference?

LOCAL CHURCH PROPERTY

We have watched in slow motion for 50 plus years the freefall of our "mothering institution," the United Methodist Church (previously in 1843, the Methodist Episcopal Church). Now it has split, with orthodoxy in the newly formed "Global Methodist Church." Do we as Wesleyans see any evidence that we are a decade or two behind them? If so, what can be done?

That being the case, all the way back in 2015, the Pacific Southwest District approved a memorial which I had written. The essence of it was, if the denomination left biblical principles (say, on the topic of homosexuality, as an example), the property would revert to the local church congregation. This seemed particularly appropriate given the fact that the people in the church are the ones who paid for it, and given the fact that at one time (as best as I can recall, when I was a child) local Wesleyan (Methodist) churches owned their own property. The General Board vetoed it.

I was not present at the 2022 General Conference (I believe it was 2022), but it is my understanding that possibly as many as five districts brought forth similar proposals. Again, I was not present, but it was reported to me that just when it was about to be voted upon (and quite possibly passed) the denominational attorney stepped in and sidelined the entire issue. I was told that it was reported that a “study committee” would handle it. A “study committee” is the way to kill any legislation. When I reported this to another denomination whose general conference had had the exact same discussion, their official attorney for their denomination stepped in and halted it.

UNIVERSITIES

In 1999, I was asked by then Education Secretary Kerry Kind to give a three-hour lecture to our college presidents and deans, along with selected board members, trying to answer this question: “Is it sociologically inevitable that Christian colleges all eventually lose their Christ-centeredness and biblical grounding?” Twenty-seven years have passed. How are we doing? (By the way, one of the most remarkable encouragements are our college presidents. They are remarkable.)

REDEDICATING OURSELVES AND THE NATION TO GOD

The General Conference begins on May 17th. As the General Conference begins, an event will be concluding in Washington DC. For the first time in our lifetimes, a President of the United States has called for us *to rededicate the nation to God*. This is not merely window dressing. President Trump and his staff are serious about this.

Two ordained Wesleyan pastors, Jeff Eckert and I, were at the EEOB/White House on April 16th as the Administration laid out the program and the goals for the day. And we ended by going to our knees before a Holy and Righteous God.

(In fact, when I heard that a portion of the program would be about “churches and abolition,” I stayed afterwards and told the story of the early Wesleyan abolitionists to the program planner, and followed up with a detailed email about our rich heritage to seven persons at the White House Faith Office and the Freedom 250 office.)

Will General Conference tie into the moments of repentance, via livestream, at least at the time when the actual act of rededication takes place, led by our godly Speaker of the House? Will we even acknowledge that our President has called for this? This is historic. Haven’t we longed for the Chief Executive to do this?

I suppose what I am calling for, at General Conference, is for us to go to our knees, and to cry out to God. I think repentance is key. (That is why we host the annual National Gathering for Prayer and Repentance in Washington DC, in which we call for Congressmen, faith leaders, and others to truly repent. And we do.)

Church conferences tend to become almost like pep rallies. I get it. We all need encouragements. We love to hear great reports. I am not condemning that at all.

But given the fact of the deterioration of society, is there a right time for a church to say, “We aren’t cutting it. God, we need You. We need a fresh strategy. Would you show us? Can we wait here before You until we hear a fresh Word from You for what we are to do?”

Is that ever a possibility? Maybe not.

IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

I am not angry. Not at all. However, I do grieve for my nation. And now that we are in communication, via our ministry called Well Versed (www.WellVersedWorld.org) with government leaders (and some faith leaders too) from many nations, I grieve for the nations. There is so much pain in our world.

And I grieve over the church. Can we do better? To borrow from the official General Conference theme, can we truly be “empowered.” I mean, *really* empowered?

I see that Acts 1:8 is the theme. In 1966, in Greek class, at tiny Miltonvale Wesleyan College (now Oklahoma Wesleyan University), I read Acts 1:8 once out loud to my professor, pointed to the verse and said, “I like *that*. I like the church of Acts 1:8. I don’t know if I like the church like it is now. I want *that* church. Can I be a part of *that* church?”

I am, as you can tell, disappointed. I think we all, together, can do better. When I speak at a pastors’ event, I have asked this question, “Is there anyone here who can conclusively say that your community is more righteous today than it was 25 years ago?” I have never had one single pastor raise his or her hand. Does that bother you? It does me.

I stated at the outset that I had more questions than I have answers. And I have posed some of those questions here. I can summarize it: Is there a better way of doing things?

Where I have a few answers, or perhaps I should call them suggestions, I have stated them.

We all ultimately want to hear the same words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

Yet, I cannot help but think that one of the ways we can hear “well done” is to spiritually discern ways to do things better.

If I am wrong, I accept that. If my ramblings are incorrect, I am not beyond receiving correction. But somehow it seems, we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, do better.

Okay, I will stop now. The delegates have important things to consider. They must decide if Wesleyan preachers can drink.

(Okay, there I go again. I must stop. 😊) Thank you for reading some rambling thoughts.