

# Thoughts From The Labyrinth

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**A** LABYRINTH is defined as an intricate structure containing a series of winding passages hard to follow without losing one's way; a maze. To most laymen and ministers, this would be a good definition of the boards and agencies of the Methodist Church. But, I did not find that they fitted this description.

Albert Burton and I recently were privileged to tour the "maze" of all of the Methodist boards and agencies as members of the National Methodist Scholarship Travel Seminar. All of the eleven Methodist seminaries were represented by two second-year students, and the group was led by Dr. Gerald O. McCulloh, Director of Theological Education of the Board of Education. We visited the offices and facilities of these boards in Chicago, Nashville, Washington, Philadelphia, and New York in a flying two-week trip.

On any kind of trip such as this, it is impossible adequately to report our many experiences along the way, but I can report a few of the thoughts I had growing out of these experiences.

I will not deal here with what is wrong with the bureaucracy of the Methodist system as any theology student, minister, laymen, or non-Methodist can and will sit by the hour and tell one another what is wrong with it. They can do this without ever having acquainted themselves with these boards by reading any of the materials that emanate from them, let alone by visiting them or trying out their programs. Instead, I hope to lift up a few thoughts and concerns of a more positive nature.

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DAVE STEFFENSON is a second year student at the Iliff School of Theology. Each year the students elected to this seminar report to the students and faculty at two of the chapel services. In this way what they have gained is shared with the entire school.

Having worked for the U. S. Post Office, perhaps the most inefficient bureaucracy in our government, I found the boards and agencies refreshingly unbureaucratic. While each one of them exhibits the weaknesses of any large, complex, human institution, I found the staff of these boards as a whole were the ones who were the most competent in their particular areas, who were the most aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and who were the most creative in seeking new ways to meet the challenges we face.

An example of this can be seen in the Division of Foreign Missions of the Board of Missions which is actually giving up power—something new for any church board. The issue that is bringing this about is the rise of nationalism around the world. This board is finding itself with increasing monetary resources while the area of need for these resources from the Board as it is now constituted is rapidly shrinking. With 65-70% of Methodist congregations throughout the world now self-supporting, the Board has come to realize that it can no longer be the "big daddy" of Methodist missions. It now sees itself as the Board of Missions of the American jurisdictions on an equal basis with the Board of Missions of the various Central Conferences and churches overseas. The power is gravitating to these autonomous boards who are also engaged in missionary outreach on their own. For example, a missionary couple from India is doing a splendid job in Indonesia that could not be done by a "Yankee" missionary from New York. The Board is rapidly moving in the direction of channeling its funds through direct grants to these autonomous boards with no strings attached. In this way, this very creative board is moving to face the world real-

ities of exploding revolution and nationalism.

As I found it, there are three types of boards in the Methodist Church:

1. The "oil can" board which has the function of keeping the machinery of the church running smoothly and has a specific job to do. An example would be the Board of Pensions which is charged with providing for the security of the ministry in cooperation with the annual conferences.

2. The second type would be one which begins with a job to be done, but does this job within a matrix of a larger vision of the task of the church. An example might be the Board of Education.

3. The third and rarest kind would be the board that begins with a vision of the goals of the church and then comes down to outline its job in bringing this about. An example might be the Board of Christian Social Concerns.

Of course, this is a gross over-simplification as all boards could in some way come under all three of these categories, but I found this helpful in classifying our structure in order to analyze its effectiveness.

In Ephesians 4:11, the early church found it necessary to add an office of the ministry that was left out of Paul's earlier and famous list in I Corinthians 11:4-10—the office of the evangelist. I think the thing that struck us all in this tour was that all of the boards and agencies are making the same addition to their list of the offices of their ministry, and in most cases it is heading the list.

There is a growing awareness that a fundamental task underlies all that we are doing in the ministry. This task can be expressed in many ways from many frameworks of theology and methodology, but it all boils down to the complex task of evangelism for commitment on the part of every person to the life of deeper and more

meaningful wholeness that has been the witness of the Christian Church through the centuries. It is the growing knowledge that until our concept of the ministry includes at its core a doctrine of redemption of the individual with the corollary of evangelism to bring this about, our ministry will be peripheral.

The boards are now beginning to see anew that at the points where they have been peripheral, they have lacked this vision. While the scope of their vision varies from board to board, they all are beginning to see their various responsibilities as supplemental to this basic task.

The Board of Christian Social Concerns is now seeing that social concern is meaningless without Christian commitment at its base. The Board of Lay Activities sees the Methodist Men as having to work within the framework of the church in everyday evangelism to keep from becoming another Rotary Club. The Board of Evangelism in its own way is working to make the church a "force for evangelism instead of a field for evangelism." (Dr. Harry Denman) This is being repeated all down the line of the Methodist hierarchy.

Unfortunately, we who call ourselves liberals have fallen behind other theological persuasions in clearly formulating our concepts of redemption as well as our zeal for evangelism within our own framework. We need to get busy doing this if our witness is to be felt in the ongoing work of the church. It is not my place to formulate this doctrine as this must be forged out by each person. But if we are to be ministers and not just expositors, technicians, or entertainers, at whatever level of the church we may work from the local church down to the bishop and board executive, we must seek to formulate the central task of the church and commit ourselves to it.

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