

The Reformation We Need (3/4)

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(3 of 4)

When we speak of the causes of the Reformation in the 16th century, we usually begin by describing the corruption that existed within the church. We speak of the common practice of buying and selling ecclesiastical offices, whose critics called "simony" because in the book of Acts it was Simon Magus who attempted to buy the power of the Spirit. We speak of absenteeism, the common practice of holding several ecclesiastical positions and being absent from all of them. (Remember the case of Albert of Brandenburg, who already had two bishoprics when he purchased an archbishopric.) We speak of 10 and 12-year olds who became bishops and archbishops, simply because they had the right patronage. We speak of the decline in Biblical studies, as well as of superstitious-practices that must be combated. We speak of a corrupt Papacy that was more interested in Italian politics and in the beautification of Rome than in its pastoral obligations.

And, as a response to corruption, we are told about people such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Cramer and Mena Simmons, who worked assiduously for the reformation of the church.

We are thus given to understand that a reformation of the church became necessary because its leaders were corrupt hypocrites who did not take their faith seriously, and because in the face of such corruption leaders arise to set things aright.

Obviously, there is a measure of truth in that. But if we take it at face value we may fall into the trap of thinking that reformation is mostly a matter of the past, and that to speak of the need for reformation in the church today is to imply that its leaders are corrupt, hypocritical individuals who profit from the present situation.

When we fall in that trap, it becomes futile and wrongheaded to speak of the need for a reformation today. It is futile, because conditions today are not what they were in the sixteenth century. It is wrongheaded because anyone who knows the leadership of the church today knows that they are mostly sincere, hard-working people committed to the gospel, to the mission of the church, to the quest for justice, and to the advancement of the gospel.

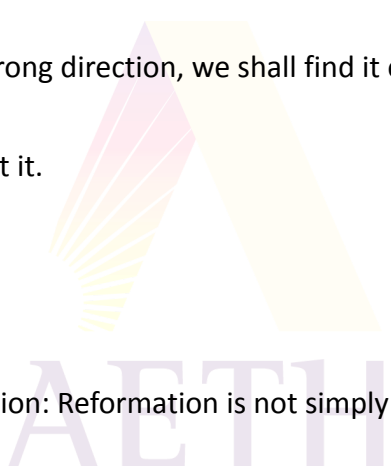
So, I would suggest that we need correction on two scores: First, we must redefine the nature

and causes of corruption. And, secondly, we must consider anew what is the true cause of a true reformation.

First, as to corruption. The corruption that existed in the 16th century was not caused simply because some individuals decided to take advantage of the faith of the people. It took place through a long process in which things that were originally good and necessary evolved in twisted ways, mostly through the situation in which the church was living. The indulgences that Luther so decried had evolved from the conviction of the early church that when people committed grievous sins such as idolatry there must be a period of penance during which they would show that they had amended their ways. Out of that, through the influence of many cultural and social patterns, evolved the notion that for each sin there was an appropriate restitution that had to be made, then these restitutions evolved into pilgrimages and crusades, and then, when people could not participate in such ventures, the difficulty was solved by paying for someone else to go, and finally this led to indulgences that could be sold. Eventually, what to us now is scandalous and hypocritical, emerged. It was not created by Leo X, nor by the Medici, nor by Albert of Brandenburg. It was simply the normal, commonly accepted way of

doing things.

This is crucial, because if we believe that hypocrisy and self-seeking interests are the cause of corruption we shall find it difficult to recognize many of the things in the church today that need to change, because we are not hypocritical and we are not self-seeking. But if corruption simply evolves out of practices that may have been good at another time and that for a number of reasons have evolved in the wrong direction, we shall find it easier and less painful to recognize it and to seek to correct it.



Then, as to the cause of reformation: Reformation is not simply the result of the corruption of the church and the work of reformers. The true cause of true reformation within the church is and has always been the Holy Spirit of God. And the Spirit reforms the church, not just because the church is corrupt, or because it is wrong, but because reformation is an essential element in the life of the church.

This was expressed during the Reformation period in the often-quoted phrase, coined by an

unknown author, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* —a reformed church in constant reformation.

This is due to two reasons. The first of these has to do with the nature of the church as a priestly people with a mission. This implies that the context in which the church witnesses and fulfills its mission must affect the manner in which the church acts and organizes itself. A practice that was valuable a hundred years ago may no longer be as useful as it once was —in fact, may even become a hindrance. In such a case, there is a need for reformation, not because the church has strayed off its course, but because realities have changed, and the church as a priestly and missionary people must take into account the circumstance in which it lives.

The second reason why the reformation of the church is necessary leads us back to Luther and his assertion that a Christian is at once justified and a sinner - *simul iustus et peccator*. The justice and justification of a sinner is not in that he or she no longer sins, but rather in the grace of Jesus Christ, who declares the sinner to be just. Justification obviously means that there must be a change in one's life. But that change is the result of justification, and not vice versa. We are

not saints because we are good, but because God is good. We are not saints by reason of our virtue but by reason of our connection with the God of all virtue. This is why Paul calls Corinthians, "saints," and then he goes on to point out and bemoan all the sinfulness that still persists. The Corinthians are saints, not because they are pure, but simply because they have received the grace of Jesus Christ. Again, this does not mean that the Corinthians should feel free to practice all sorts of evil, as Paul strongly affirms in his letters. But it does mean that there is an important difference between being a saint and being pure. Purity does not make us saints; but being saints calls us to be pure.

What is true of individual Christians is also true of the church. Holiness is certainly an essential part of the church. As we say in the Creed, we believe in the Holy Catholic Church. To speak of a church that is not holy is a contradiction. But that holiness is not due to the purity of the church. If it were so, when we repeat the Creed and say that we believe in the Holy Catholic Church we should also add, "which doesn't exist." The church is holy, not because it is pure, but because its Head is holy.

Precisely because its Head is holy, and because we are joined to it through baptism, we are called to a process of sanctification, a process of becoming what we already are by the grace of Christ. If such a process does not exist, this may be a sign that we are not truly joined to our holy Head. Believers, made holy by virtue of our union with Christ, still have to be sanctified—that is, made more apt to belong to this holy body that is the church. This needs fuller clarification. We cannot simply say that we are holy, and let it go at that. We are saints, yes; but we are still in need of a process of sanctification through which the Holy Spirit makes us more fitting members of the holy body of Christ.

In short, while being holy is not the same as being pure, holiness entails a process of sanctification. This is true of individual members as well as of the church as a whole. This understanding of holiness is crucial for the church today. Indeed, forgetting it led to many divisions in the early church, and has been the bane of Wesleyanism. Wesleyan tradition has always emphasized the importance of holiness and sanctification, but it has repeatedly split over it. If we forget that the holiness of the church is God's work and not ours, that the church is holy not by virtue of the purity of its members, but by virtue of its holy Head, and because it

is brought together by the Holy Spirit, there will always be in any church some who consider themselves purer than the rest, holier than the rest. Then, in order to preserve the holiness of the church, they have to break away from the supposedly unholy church and create a church that is truly holy. Obviously, as we all know, what actually happens is that in that holier church a group emerges that is even holier than the rest, and who decide that they must break away in order to belong to a truly holy church —and so ad infinitum, in a process that began shortly after the death of Wesley and continues to this day.

We seem to think that, just as sin makes us unholy, so does purity make us holy. But the truth is that by the grace of Jesus Christ we are holy even in the midst of our sinfulness — *simul iustus et peccator*. We imagine that we should leave a church in which there is sin, when in fact no matter where we go we shall still be sinners. And the church we may be leaving is holy not through its own doing, but because its Head is holy. Certainly, we must oppose all forms of sin, error, and corruption in the church; but if we set out to find a church pure of all sin we shall not find it.

Having said all that, we may then return to the matter at hand, that is "the Reformation we need." Again, to make matters clear, if we need reformation — and we do — it is not necessarily because we are corrupt or hypocritical. It is rather because circumstances around us are changing, and because the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of transformation — *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*.

If it is true, as I tried to show in the previous presentation, that reformation often comes from the edges, and since in this meeting we are looking at the same time at the Reformation of the 16th century and at the National Plan for Hispanic Latino/Latina Ministry, allow me to offer a few Latino perspectives on the reformation of the United Methodist Church.

Let us look first at financial matters. Many years ago — actually, almost 40 years ago —, as I was doing an interdenominational and national study of Hispanic Theological Education, I came across a document in which one of our Annual Conferences stated that for a United Methodist congregation to be viable in that conference it must have an annual budget of at least \$100,000. At that time, the average income of a Latino family within the bounds of that Annual

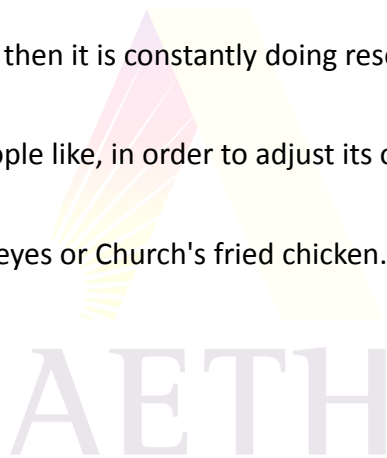
Conference was \$10,000. This meant that, in order to be merely "viable," a Hispanic United Methodist church must have at least a hundred tithing families. I did not ask how many churches there were in that conference with a hundred tithing families; but I suspect there were not many.

Obviously, those numbers were from 40 years ago. Inflation has increased both the budget of churches and the income of Latino families. But it has produced an increase in church budgets that is not paralleled by the increase in the income of poor families. I have no idea where those figures stand today in that Annual Conference or within the bounds of these two Annual Conferences. In fact, I purposely have not tried to find out, because by not knowing those figures I also do not know what toes I may be stepping on. As we sat in Spanish, "*A quien le sirva el sayo, que se lo ponga,*" which roughly translated means "If the shoe fits wear it."

At any rate, as I looked at those figures and realized that the same was true of other major denominations, such as Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians, I came to the conclusion that most Latinos and Latinas cannot afford to be United Methodist, or Presbyterian, or

Episcopalian, or Lutheran.

As I shared these views with a friend who is a Presbyterian pastor, he said that in his denomination this has led to what he called a "Kentucky Fried Chicken theology of mission." When Kentucky Fried Chicken decides to open a franchise, it does not ask who needs chicken, but who can afford chicken. It does not look for hungry people, but for people who have the wherewithal to buy chicken. And then it is constantly doing research to find what kind of chicken and what side dishes people like, in order to adjust its offerings, and make sure they remain more attractive than Popeyes or Church's fried chicken.



He went on to say that for decades judicatories in his denomination had been looking to places where middle-class, mostly white people were moving, buying land there, and building churches. Most of these churches, he said, were "viable" within a few years. And, just as it happens with the various brands of fried chicken, they often were in the same corner as the United Methodist and the Episcopal Church. People in those areas could afford to be Presbyterians, or United Methodist, or even Episcopalians, and their churches thrived — just as

at certain times in the evening there are long lines of cars waiting at the drive-through windows of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

But then, he pointed to another even more bothersome parallelism. Just as Kentucky Fried Chicken is constantly revising its offerings in order to compete with Popeye's, these churches near one another are competing among themselves in order to attract more "customers." One builds a gym where young people can play basketball. Another offers a "Mom's day off." A third brings in organic produce from nearby farms. One builds a sanctuary that looks like a theater, and where worship will be able to compete with TV shows. Another brings in a famous athlete to witness to the youth. And a third offers fabulous fish fries...

Please do not misunderstand me. Many of these things may be good and valuable. It is a very good thing for a church to offer young people opportunities for wholesome sports, and to make arrangements so that mothers who are tied at home 24 hours a day may have some time off to themselves, and to provide wholesome food and support nearby small farmers. All of this is good, and churches must do it. The problem is that too often it is tainted by a spirit of

competition as Kentucky Fried Chicken adjusts its menu in order to outsell Popeye's. And the problem is that, as was the case with much that was being done in the 16th century, we are not even aware of such things.

But then there is a worse possibility. Once we are along this path it is easy to begin adjusting our message to what people like, just as Kentucky Fried Chicken adjusts its flavorings as generations pass. And, just as in the case of Kentucky Fried Chicken, those adjustments may be slight and hardly noticeable, but in truth they may be part of a process similar to what led the church to be what it was early in the sixteenth century. We all know churches that have grown by giving people what they want. Promise them prosperity, and they will come. Tell them that the gospel has nothing to do with how they deal with their unwelcome neighbor, and they will love you.

But let us not look so much of the speck in our brother's eye, and look a bit at our own eye.

Could it be that one of the reasons why racism and xenophobia seem to be strongest in some of the areas where United Methodism is stronger is that we too have, perhaps unwittingly,

allowed ourselves to be swayed in what we say and what we teach by what people would like to hear? I do not know, but I think it is worth pondering and praying over.

Still on financial topic, and once again speaking of the long-gone past so as not to step on too many contemporary toes, I remember another incident that took place when I was still young and my brother was in seminary. In one of his visits home, he had been telling me about simony, and I had found it hard to believe that there was a time when one could purchase a bishopric just like one purchases a farm. A few days later, the bishop of Florida, who at that time was also the bishop of Cuba, was visiting the island, and was having dinner at our home. In the conversation, he mentioned his need to get back to Florida to work on appointments. He also explained that it was a complicated matter, because he and the Cabinet had to take into account the matter of salaries. Some of his larger churches were requesting specific pastors and offering higher salaries, and the Cabinet had to find ways to accommodate their requests. Being the uninhibited and untethered teenager I was then, I said: "My brother has just been telling me about simony – you know, the practice of bishops and pastors being able to buy positions in the church. What is the difference between pastors buying churches and churches buying

pastors? My father gave me a withering look, and my mother changed the conversation. The Bishop sank his eyes into his plate and did not answer. That was over sixty years ago, and I am still waiting for an answer. Yes, there are reasons for different salaries; but I wonder whether that is the logic of the gospel, or the logic of the capitalistic marketplace, theologic of ministry and verbatim, or the logic of career and advancement.

In the 16th century corruption had stemmed from paying verbal homage to ancient traditions, and actually adapting to the politics, culture, and social mores of the time. The ancient traditions were not necessarily bad. The problem was that they were adjusted to accommodate practices that had little to do with the gospel. I wonder if one could draw a parallel between that and a church in which itinerancy becomes an unquestionable value, and yet is applied in forms that are alien to the vocation for which the church was instituted in the first place. What are we to say about a church that loudly proclaims it is connectional, and yet sometimes allows its larger congregations to act as if they were congregational? As Latinos, we often experience a church in which connectionalism is often applied to establish what is required of us, but is less often applied to help us meet those requirements.

But enough about finances. If it is true that our United Methodist Church has tended to price itself out of reach for the poor, it is also true that it has placed itself out of conversation with the rank and file of many of its members. Our discussions are governed by a Rule of Order designed to make sure that everyone has a say, and that no one monopolizes the floor. Such rules are also very useful to make certain that the majority rules. But I come from a tradition in which the closest thing to a business meeting was a family gathering, where discussions were free-flowing and any decisions were reached by a sort of informal consensus. The effect of the Rules of Order is supposed to be that everyone is allowed to speak. But they do not always function that way. Suppose it is decided that it is time to name someone to represent a Latino congregation at a District or Annual Conference. We elect sister María Luisa, partly because she is an active church member, and partly because she is one of the few among us who can speak English with relative fluency. María Luisa goes to the conference in high spirits. But when she is there she finds that most of the matters being discussed have to do with churches very different from hers; and when finally there is a discussion on something that is important to her and her church, she gets lost in motions, amendments, and substitute motions.

Probably when María Luisa returns home she will be less of a United Methodist than she was when she went to this meeting. What will she be able to report back to her congregation? Will she show excitement about her experience? And then we wonder why it is that many of our newly formed Hispanic churches do not participate much in our common life as a denomination.

Obviously, this places the leadership of the denomination in a quandary. The Latino/Latina population is exploding. And so we ask: How do we reach them? The solution seems simple: We must find leaders to build faith communities and churches. So we set aside funds to hire a Latino or a Latina to serve as pastor of the proposed Latino church. A local church offers to share its space with the proposed Latino congregation. We find someone who speaks Spanish and hire them. That person goes out in the community, gathers a group of believers, and all seems well.

But eventually problems arise. Why? In my experience, there are many reasons. But allow one to mention the most common ones.

First, the sharing of facilities goes very well as long as the two pastors work well together and the Latino congregation is not too large. But as our itinerant system is applied, every few years at least one of the two pastors is substituted by another. How long will it be before you have two pastors who do not work well together? If in the meantime, particularly if the Latino congregation has grown to the point that the previous congregation begins to find them disruptive, the time will come when the Latino congregation has to leave the facilities.

Another example: at the center of the city there is a church that has lost most of its members. We can't close it, because for a long time it was considered our flagship church. Part of the reason why the previous congregation is declining is that the demographics of the area are changing, with a rapidly growing Hispanic population. So the solution seems obvious: let's start work with Latinos, and let them have most of the facilities, in the expectation that the building will eventually be theirs. But the cost of maintaining the facilities is overwhelming, the Latino congregation, mostly poor people, cannot afford the building, and so the experiment fails. But that is not as shocking as it could be, for what we are closing is not the Holy Trinity United Methodist Church, but Iglesia Metodista La Trinidad.

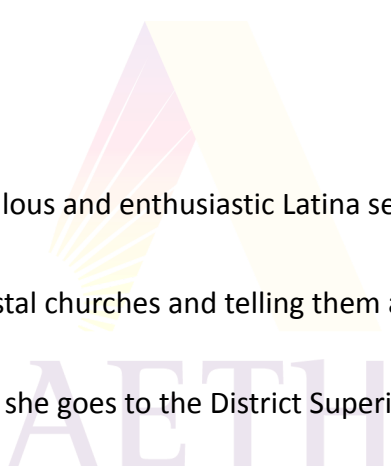
Or: we decide that it is time to establish a Latino ministry in a particular community, and we set aside a dollar amount as a starting subsidy, with the understanding that this amount will be reduced by 15% each year, until the new congregation becomes self-sufficient. The new congregation begins with great enthusiasm. They are witnessing among their neighbors, and attendance is growing. Since they do not have too much they can give as a monetary offering, they make and sell tamales and pupusas. They wash cars, they give sacrificially. And at the end of the year they find that the money they have raised barely covers the extra 15% they will need next year. Their sacrifice is not reflected in expanding programs and mission. How long will they continue working at the same pace? How long before their enthusiasm flags, and the congregation begins declining?



Or: The same amount of dollars is invested in a middle-class Latino community, under the same conditions, and that church eventually does become self-sufficient, because its people do have the necessary resources. This success encourages us to replicate the experience in another similar community, and all seems well. But we have fallen into the Kentucky Fried Chicken approach to mission, and we have effectually priced ourselves out of the lives of the vast

majority of the Latino population.

Or: We decide that all one needs in order to lead in Hispanic ministry is to know Spanish. If we had more time, I could tell you horror stories about the results of such practices. But in any case, we must take note that here there is an insidious form of racism involved: **our** pastors must meet specific requirements; but for **them**, anyone who speaks their language will do.



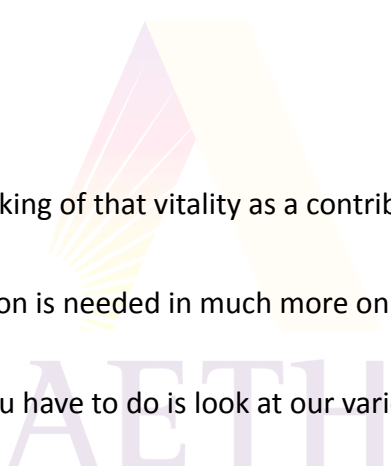
Or (2nd this is a true story): A zealous and enthusiastic Latina seminary student starts visiting Latino independent and Pentecostal churches and telling them about the wonders and beauty of United Methodism. Eventually she goes to the District Superintendent and tells him that there are several congregations and their pastors that wish to become United Methodist. The DS encourages her, and a few months later, without much explanation or discussion, brings several of these churches into United Methodism. I do not need to tell you what the outcry was when these churches were told that they were supposed to pay apportionments, and even more when their pastors discovered that they were now part of the appointment system.

I have listed a number of problematic practices and misguided intentions. By dwelling on them I do not have the intention of minimizing the impact and success of the denomination for Hispanic Latino Ministry. The United Methodist Church has reason to boast that it was the first major Protestant denomination in the nation to develop a national plan for Hispanic ministries, and to fund it from its denominational resources. When I moved to Atlanta some fifty years ago, there was not a single United Methodist Latino congregation in Georgia. Now I lose count of them, and have to look at the reports of the Annual Conferences in order to find out how many there are. While many of these congregations and their history could well serve as examples of some of the practices and problems I have just mentioned, in general they are thriving. All you need to do is read the report of the National Plan to see that it has indeed been a successful endeavor. On that score alone, the investment has been well worth it.

But the most significant impact of that investment may still be just emerging. If what I said yesterday is true, that reformation often comes from the edges, could it be that God is employing the presence of Latino churches in our denomination in order to call the entire church to its own reformation?

If reformation comes from the edges, in what ways is the Latino presence in our United Methodist Church calling and inviting all of us to reformation?

The answer most commonly given is that the vitality and commitment of our ethnic minority churches will revitalize our sometimes more staid and stagnant congregations. That may well be true, and simply that in itself would already be a valuable contribution.



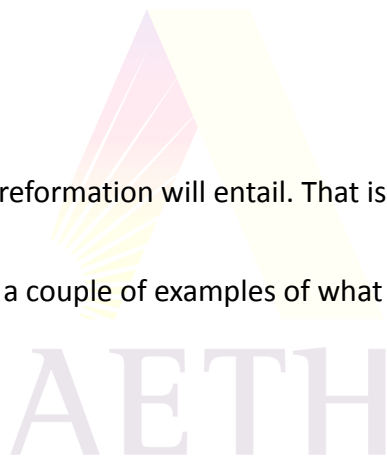
But I fear that sometimes in speaking of that vitality as a contribution of our Latino churches we miss the point that the reformation is needed in much more on our approach to the marginalized and the poor: All you have to do is look at our various pronouncements over the years in defense of racial minorities, of farm and industrial laborers, of immigrants and refugees, of oppressed women. We certainly have good reason to declare that over the years we have been a church **for** the poor. But, are we, can we be, a church **of** the poor.

We certainly stand in need of reformation. But not simply a reformation that will make it a more lively church. All over the nation large and lively churches are emerging whose views and

practices we do well in rejecting. Let them and Kentucky Fried Chicken worry about their product. What we need is a reformation, not a rebranding.

Such a reformation will be extensive, difficult, and controversial, for it will bring into question some things that today we take for granted, and even some that we cherish with an almost idolatrous love.

Again, I do not know all that this reformation will entail. That is for the Spirit of God to tell us along the way. But I can mention a couple of examples of what I mean by affirming that it will not be easy.



Take our system of itinerancy. When it was developed it was a means whereby Methodist preachers could be appointed to those places where they were most needed. Over the years it has become a means of career advancement similar to career advancement if you work for GM or for Microsoft. Is it still a means whereby the best pastors are appointed to the churches with most problems? Or is it rather a means whereby the rich and powerful congregations get the

pastor they want, and the small and poorer ones get the ones nobody wants? I don't know, but the question I asked that bishop more than half a century ago still buzzes in my head.

Or take this connectionalism of which we are so proud. It is indeed a valuable thing, to recognize that we are all part of the same church, that we cannot each go our own separate ways without regard for the rest, that we are responsible for one another, that there is an order and procedures to which we all agree. But true connectionalism also means sharing resources.

If we were truly connectional, there would be no rich churches and no poor churches, for the resources of the church would be shared by all alike. If we were truly connectional, we would never ask if a congregation is "viable" or not. If it is a worthy expression of God's mission, we shall find ways to make it viable.

We have long called ourselves a "mainline" and we have been proud of the respectability this implies. But today, in a nation in which increasing numbers are being marginalized because of their race or ethnicity, where millions have to live in hiding from the authorities, where masses are threatened by unemployment, can we really claim to be both mainline and Christian? Or

must we reinvent ourselves with the aid of God's Holy Spirit, and follow this Spirit whose wind blows, not where we wish, but where it listeth?

If the latter, we must prepare for a difficult ride, but we can also look forward to the day when we come to rest and hear the words: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

So be it.

