

United Methodists Join Forces to "Turn Worlds Upside Down"

Area Four: Global Health

From the very beginning of our movement, John Wesley recognized the correlation between poverty and health, according to the Rev. Larry Hollon, general secretary of United Methodist Communications. "Wesley's holistic theology led him to engage with individuals and systems that dealt with health-care systems," Hollon said, and one of his first ministry areas was a health clinic for the poor.

Preventable diseases are taking a terrible toll on people around the world, Hollon said, but we are a people of hope. "We believe we have the power to make and create change."

A central partner and inspiration behind the denominational effort to eradicate malaria using bed nets, United Methodist Communications has begun creating wide-ranging conversations on the global health initiative.

"Bed nets save the lives of children in malaria-affected areas of the world," said Hollon. "But it is not only about bed nets. It is about training community health workers in participatory health care... it is about providing life-enhancing education through radio, mailings and other communication tools...it is about enlisting and deploying new missionaries for global health...it is about enlisting health champions and parish nurses in each annual conference."

The Rev. Gary Gunderson, senior vice president for Health and Welfare Ministries for Methodist Healthcare in Memphis, Tenn., sounded a hopeful note in his presentation: namely, we're already winning.

"We have science to drastically reduce, if not eliminate, the worst offenses of justice and poverty globally." He said. "In just 100 years, the average human life span grew 37 years, a miracle John Wesley would not been so bold to pray for. God's abundance is far greater than imagined. In most of the world we are already winning and we have hardly gotten our act together. In Africa and South Asia, we have only begun to fight."

Since Foundry Church 262 years ago, Gunderson said, one cannot think a Methodist thought without thinking health. Wesley so integrated God's grace that he blended health and faith before he said it out loud, he said.

"We are the 262nd edition of Methodist global health, an unbroken line of creative efforts that evolve deeper and smarter as both science and faith mature. Creating an epidemic of good health is what we are all about."

Comparing the United Methodist efforts at impacting global health to the roots of the banyan tree -- a tree with roots that grow down from the branches into the ground to form new, secondary trunks, according to the dictionary -- Gunderson said that global health is also a justice issue.

A girl born today can expect to live for more than 80 years if she is born in some countries," he said, "but less than 45 years if she is born in others. Differences such as this should not happen."

Stating that the most important assets on the assault on global health were right there in the hotel ballroom, Gunderson said we have to know what we have to work with and go from there.

Dr. Cherian Thomas, a physician who is executive secretary for the Hospital Revitalization Program of the General Board of Global Ministries, said that like the issues of poverty, the issues of global health require partnerships.

"We have United Methodists in Pittsburgh who are helping fight cholera in Zimbabwe," he said.

The most important function we have is to connect people, he said. Without people, there are no programs.

At the General Board and through its United Methodist Committee on Relief agency, their strategy is to strengthen the governing hospital boards by training the boards on their responsibilities.

"The second strategy is to have full-time coordinators of global health in Africa," Thomas said. "In each of the African countries, we have a coordinator on global health. We then bring the partners together -- from the United States and from Europe -- with people in Africa, to hear their dreams, their visions, and then to make plans."

Global health is not something new to United Methodism and not something that's going to be done in one four-year time span, Thomas said. The key to moving forward is investment in ideas and people.

"We have to train people in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. We have to have people to move forward. We need to develop programs as well as people. It's not money we need; it's ideas and investment in people. This is my dream for today and for years to come."

Melba Whitaker, the wife of Bishop Tim Whitaker from Florida, took the stage to share the story of her experience in Brazil and how a "mother" church began a ministry in the slums of one large town by investing in ideas and people.

"This mother church went in and asked the women of the slum what they needed," she said. "The women said a dental clinic. So the mother church located a dentist who was willing to come work in the slum, a dental chair and other items, and they set a date for the opening of this clinic. They also selected a woman, Salina, to receive training on community-based health care."

When the new clinic opened, more than 100 children and women were served that first day.

"This is a story about a community deciding what they wanted to do," Whitaker said, "and about someone willing to invest in them with education and training... and then letting them do it."

Today, she said, they have opened up a new clinic on the outskirts of the slum, serving even more people from the surrounding community.

"When we invest in people like this, a community is totally transformed. For my money, I would rather invest in a poor community like this than a rich bank here in the United States," she said. "I know where my money is going and what it's doing."

Finally, the Rev. Gary Henderson, Executive Director of the Global Health Initiative for The United Methodist Church, challenged the participants on not just the global health area, but all four areas of focus.

"If we are going to turn the world upside down, this will require resurrection faith," he said. "We hope that the clear ministry areas of focus would ignite a passion in you...a resurrection faith."

Saying that the four areas of focus give United Methodists an opportunity to live out their resurrection faith, Henderson said the church has a "healing ointment" to offer the world.

"Why are we starting with malaria?" he asked. "It's a God thing. It began with the journey with Nothing But Nets. Those steps gave birth to what we are calling the global health focus. We were forced to understand the need for partnerships...it forced us to examine our own internal partnerships."

"Are we able to choose hope over fear? I say, 'Yes we can.'

"Are we able to choose the four areas of focus? I say 'Yes we can.'

"Are we able to raise \$75 million? I say, 'Yes we can!'

"Will you hear the challenge of Jesus?" Henderson asked. "Freely, freely you have received. Heal the sick. Will you freely, freely give?"

"This is not a four-year plan. The four areas of focus will be around for the long-haul. In 20-30 years from now, we should still be talking about these four areas. In 2050, we ought to still be working on them, though the language we use to talk about them may be different." Greenwaldt said.