



Background

# DATA *for* Mission

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## 2011 AND BEYOND

**A**s we begin the new year, and by some counts, the new decade, much media attention is focused on what has transpired in the last year and decade, and on what may lie ahead in the next. This little epistle will join the fray. It has been quite a period indeed. For example, Global Ministries' UMCOR and UVMIM units have been busy with a Tsunami, Gulf hurricanes, and Haiti. The latter is especially fresh, as the one-year anniversary is being remembered as this goes to press. The loss of Sam Dixon and Clint Rabb are still being felt in a personal way by many staff, including this writer, as well as numerous United Methodists around the world.

Over the past decade we have seen a tech-stock bubble burst, 9/11, and the associated fallout. This was followed by the real-estate bubble and its pop, along with financial weapons of mass destruction (OTC derivatives, in their various forms), bringing us into the great recession. Now we are seeing a public debt run-up to try to inflate our way out of this mess. Time will tell the consequences. Through it all, The UMC has had ongoing membership declines, with some acceleration of late. New to the equation has been a falling off in worship attendance. Budgets have tightened, given the times.

*The Economist* recently published a 25-year special edition entitled, "The World in 2011." Economic and political issues around the world were addressed. Robin Blew, chief economist for this publication, sees the next year as a tough one globally, though with some parts of the world more impacted than others. She writes, "In America, Europe, and Japan the withdrawal of government support will expose just how weak the private sector is. Fears of recession and

deflation will dog these countries for some time. But in the emerging world the slowdown will be almost welcomed, as a way of cooling overheated markets."

Another article noted that the world population will pass seven billion in 2011. The article noted the usual resource challenges that a rising population generates, such as sufficient food and clean water. On the positive side, there seems to be a slowing of the rate of growth, suggesting that the next billion may take longer to reach and the one after that even longer. This may even give our world time to address the many issues impacted by all of us and those to come. We are reminded again of the importance of demographics in understanding the world we live in. The Research Office remains committed to serving the church in understanding the demographics where they serve.

Though not mentioned in this issue of *The Economist*, another significant demographic development is the arrival of the leading edge of the Baby Boomer cohort at age 65, or the standard retirement age. Assuming that they do in fact retire, the economy notwithstanding, a whole host of implications follow. One which may benefit local churches is that the new time on the hands of church members and constituents in this segment may lead to increased participation. The age profile of many churches suggests that a healthy percentage of the congregation may fall into this category. We can also anticipate many clergy retiring.

Somewhat surprisingly for a publication of its type, *The Economist* noted that May 2nd will mark the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. This will be accompanied by many events, especially in Britain, the birthplace of Methodism.

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In a November 22, 2010 summary article, *The Economist* reflects back at what they got right in last year's comparable issue. They then confessed that in the first place there were areas they missed, or about which they were wrong. One misread was Polish politics, even before the horrible plane crash with so many leaders on board. "That crash points to the second, perennial reason for humility: stuff happens. Other out-of-the-blue events in 2010 included a horrendous earthquake in Haiti, tragic floods in Pakistan, the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and a volcanic eruption in Iceland that played havoc with air travel. In other words, they were some of the biggest events of the year.

"So as well as the wins and losses of forecasting, there are the inevitable misses too. Nassim Taleb...coined a phrase for high-impact, prediction-defying events: 'black swans.' There are sure to be a few of them gliding around in 2011 too."

Interestingly, Nassim Taleb contributed a short article in the same issue, looking out to 2036. Amongst the many observations he presents, he notes, "Religious practice will experience a revival, seen as a conveyor of robust heuristics, cultural values, and rituals." Unfortunately, the short article does not give us more depth and background into this tantalizing sentence, and 25 years is a long time, when revival is needed now.

If the coming years are anything like the recent past, we can anticipate many major events. There may be significant changes in store, which will impact how we live and how we operate in church life. If the large-scale natural disasters keep coming, we can anticipate plenty of opportunities to respond as United Methodists do. We can hope that there is no disaster response fatigue and that negative factors do not inhibit our ability to respond.

One of Taleb's observations concerned companies. "Companies that are currently large, debt-laden, listed on an exchange (hence "efficient"), and paying bonuses will be gone. Those that survive will be the more black-swan resistant—smaller, family-owned, unlisted on exchanges and free of debt." It is difficult to draw implications to church from this, but there may be a few. Rapidly changing times require organizations to be able to change rapidly as well. This is not the strong point of The UMC. On a more local basis, megachurches may face some challenges not faced by smaller, more nimble congregations. Those congregations where a smaller percentage of the budget is concentrated on facilities and staff may be more resilient.

As the old saying goes, we may not know the future, but we know who holds the future. The more in tune we are to that one and the more responsive we are to God's leading, the brighter the future of the denomination and the local church.

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