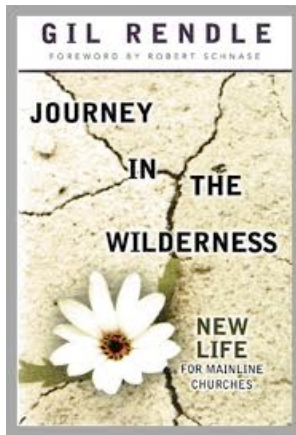


Jim's Tool Box

Jim takes a look at Gil Rendle's book *Journey in the Wilderness New Life for Mainline Churches*



In his new book *Journey in the Wilderness* (available through [Cokesbury](#)), church consultant Gil Rendle offers a perspective on the challenges and struggles of the mainline church (primarily from the perspective of the United Methodist Church) through the last forty years. Rendle recounts his experience as a pastor starting out in his first appointment to a United Methodist congregation in 1972 in Philadelphia. Since Rendle's time in ministry almost parallels my own time as a pastor in the United Methodist Church (I began my first full time appointment in 1975 although I had intern and student pastorates in seminary), I found his perspective on the dilemma facing the mainline to be on target with my own perceptions and experiences.

Gil Rendle is currently Senior Consultant with the Texas Methodist Foundation. Previously, he was a Senior Consultant with the Alban Institute and the senior pastor of two urban congregations in Pennsylvania for sixteen years. He also served as a denominational consultant for the United Methodist Church for nine years.

As Bishop Robert Schnase describes in the Foreword of the book that *Journey in the Wilderness* is part textbook on church leadership, part field guide for identifying organizational behaviors we have all seen but could never name, and part instruction manual on how to leave behind systems that are no longer conducive to our mission.

The premise of Rendle's book is to compare the last forty years of the journey of the United Methodist Church to the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness. He says he grew up in a mainline church that was strong, confident, growing, and a dominant voice in shaping the norms of North American life. But he describes his experience in the UMC as an adult this way, "... as an adult working in the mainline church took me out of that earlier way and introduced me to a time of questioning, doubt, and searching."

However, Gil Rendle says that he is encouraged, "The longer I am in the wilderness, the greater my hope grows. For I have been witness to people all around me who have been open to learning new ways to live what were earlier and deeply established identities." The theme of Rendle's book is that through the journey in the wilderness, we are learning new ways of being the church because above all else "the wilderness is a place to learn."

Rendle admits that the mainline denominations will be changed in size and shape by the rest of the journey. Some of the changes he identifies include:

- As many as 25 to 30 percent of the current congregations will not live through the journey and will close.
- Denominational structures, staffing, and use of resources will undergo deep change.

Rendle notes that the first time the United Methodist Church registered a net membership loss was in 1965. Rendle notes that was the beginning of the journey in the wilderness although few, if any, leaders would have identified that landmark at the time. Rendle identifies the paths and learning that the UMC and other mainline denominations have taken since that time to address the decline that has been experienced.

The first path was one of church growth drawing on the work of Donald McGarvan, founder of the Church Growth Institute at Fuller Seminary. Along that path Rendle points out that we have discussed and have learned from things such as

- Passive barriers: When a sanctuary is 80 percent physically full, it appears to be 100 percent full.
- Theological correctness: Liberal vs. conservative; mission oriented vs. social gospel, personal vs. social.
- Denominational identity: Should congregations put the United Methodist or the cross and flame on their church sign or not?
- Congregational expectations: High and low expectations for membership.
- Marketing and generational niche ministries: Do we invite people to the demands of the gospel or are we being asked to mold the gospel to fit the preferences of the people?
- Large churches and megachurches: Large congregations are most comfortable in the new culture. North Americans now seem to like our organizations and institutions to be either very large or very small.
- Large congregations have come to dominate our landscape by their influence: According to the National Congregations Study, the average congregation has a worship attendance of seventy-five people, while the average person who attends worship now goes to a congregation where the average attendance is four hundred people.

The second path that was taken in the wilderness was congregational transformation. In this part of the journey, the question facing leaders changed from *what to change* in a congregation to *how to change* the congregation. That insight led to such things as:

- Mission and vision statements: One of the earliest steps in the effort was to make sure that every congregation has mission statement and a vision statement. One learning in many existing congregations was that questions of identity and purpose are difficult to answer because the answers seem obvious. Many mainline churches had not asked these questions for a long time.
- Congregational studies: These studies looked at such things as size typologies of congregations (how congregations of different size and leaders of these congregations behave) and the family systems work of Edwin Friedman.
- Descriptions and measures of vital congregations: A lot of effort was made to identify the characteristics of vital congregations. In one Lutheran study cited by Rendle two conclusions were clear: 1. There is no consensus on the variables of vitality. 2. When seeking growth and vitality, “solutions are found within individual, motivated congregations taken one at a time.” As Rendle says, “In other words, there was no single answer and no single group of actions or programs that, if adopted, would make all, or even many, congregations, vital.”
- Strategic planning: Rendle describes much of the trial and error that led to deeper understandings of strategic planning for congregations. He says that models of strategic planning were reshaped so that leaders of congregations could learn to use new tools

and new information appropriately in the congregation, moving away from efforts to solve old problems toward conversations that undergirded a discerning search for God's purpose for the congregation.

- Connection to the neighborhood: Companies such as Percept began to deliver demographic information to congregations on a scale that was not possible previously. But some leaders made the flawed assumption that answers can be found in data and made the mistake of chasing the population described in the reports without regard for the gifts and sense of call of their congregations.

The third path identified by Gil Rendle is clergy development. During the wilderness journey, it became clearer that the leadership of congregations, especially clergy was of critical importance. Here are some of the ways this path has manifested itself:

- Continuing education: Rendle points out two issues that emerged as efforts were made to provide more ongoing education for pastors. The first is that it doesn't do much good to attempt to "fix" the person when both the person and the system in which the person operates need to change. Secondly, simply sharing information, even if it's new or better information, is not what continuing education is all about. He quotes Edwin Friedman's observation that "the unmotivated are notoriously invulnerable to insight."
- Personal and spiritual renewal: Rendle notes that the time in the new cultural wilderness also required that attention be paid to the personal and spiritual renewal of clergy. Because of the changed culture and competing and conflicting expectations of clergy, leadership in congregations was seen as more and more difficult.

But Rendle believes that there is a fourth path in the wilderness in addition to church growth, congregational transformation, and clergy development. He says that we have learned a lot through all these paths along the journey in the wilderness, but it is the fourth way that we need to pay attention to.

I plan to pay attention to that fourth way and share some of Rendle's conclusions in the February Tool Box article.