

Quantity, Quality, and Balkanization

The Failure of Apostolic Mission Leading to The United Methodist Church's Current Deadlock over Human Sexuality

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Failing as a Church, Failing as United Methodists

In his book, *Permanent Revolution*, missiologist Alan Hirsch “maintains that because social movements (religious or otherwise) are strongly ideological and radical in nature, they need to achieve tangible outcomes in terms of their perceived mission or else face inevitable disintegration into sects and splinter institutions.”¹

In the case of the church, the tangible outcomes are people’s transformed lives as they become disciples of Jesus Christ. These disciples, gifted by God, enact the apostolic ministry of the church by carrying the gospel message and the teachings of Jesus to new places where they plant new faith communities and nurture new disciples. They then join in this apostolic ministry and continue the process of multiplying the church across the globe.

If an organization that claims to be part of the church fails to engage in apostolic ministry, visible by failure to make new disciples, it will collapse. This is because new people will not join the organization, and existing people will become disillusioned with it. Those within will either split to create a purer version of what the church is supposed to be or abandon the church altogether.

Using Hirsch’s insight, the fact that The United Methodist Church is being torn at the seams over human sexuality is a sign that it has failed to be apostolic. It is splintering along cultural fault lines into subgroups that each claim to be a purer version of the church. All the while it is failing to attract new people.

The stark membership numbers bear out this failure. The United Methodist Commission on Archives and History reports that in 1970, the membership of the denomination within the United States stood at 10,671,774.² According to the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration, as of 2015, it was 7,067,162.³ That is a drop of 34 percent in the course of a single generation. To put this into context, the denomination has lost more people than it gained in the previous four decades (from 1930 through 1970) or, put another way, it has lost five times as many people as it gained by merging with the EUB in 1968.⁴

Some might object that I am being too simplistic by looking at these numbers to make my claim that The UMC has failed in its apostolic ministry. After all, on Monday, June 25, 1744, did not John Wesley himself describe in his journal how numbers were of secondary concern to developing disciples? He wrote that at the conference that year:

[W]e endeavored to purge the society of all that did not walk according to the gospel. By this means we reduced the number of members to less than nineteen hundred. But number is an inconsiderable circumstance. May God increase them in faith and love!⁵

This passage is a godsend to those who want to push back against numerical growth as defining the denomination's success. Discipleship takes precedent for Wesley; he and his leaders intentionally removed members from the societies if they were not increasing in "faith and love."

However, this attempt to pit numerical growth against growth in discipleship misunderstands what I mean by *apostolic* ministry. In Matthew 28, when Jesus commissioned the church to go and make disciples, which is the heart of the apostolic ministry, he expected that the church would grow in both ways: numerically by baptizing new people into communities of faith, and in depth of faith by teaching people all that Christ had commanded.

John Wesley accepted the importance of both. As George Hunter explains:

Mr. Wesley brings needed depth and perspective to a current controversy in the Church, a discussion on the relation between "quantity" and "quality" in church membership strength. One camp insists "the more members the better," that an increasing membership correlates with an increasing quality. The other camp . . . insists that a church gets better as it gets smaller, that quantity and quality are inversely correlated. Mr. Wesley, for the most part, sides with the first camp and challenges the second. . . . Wesley observed that as a church grows it becomes stronger and better, as a church declines it becomes weaker and less healthy. He also found a correlation between growth and depth: The societies in which members thirsted for and expected their own sanctification were also experiencing growth.⁶

An example of how Wesley connected quantity and quality is in another journal entry made on Tuesday, August 5, 1777. A rumor had been spreading that Methodists were a "fallen people" in England, and he forcefully moved to crush it. After interviewing the preachers who gathered for conference, Wesley concluded:

In most places, the Methodists are still a poor despised people, laboring under reproach and many inconveniences; therefore, wherever the power of God is not, they decrease. By this, then you may form a sure judgment. Do the Methodists in general decrease in number? Then they decrease in grace; they are a fallen, or, at least, a falling people. But they do not decrease in number; they continually increase. Therefore, they are not a fallen people.⁷

Wesley explained that Methodists were unpopular, so the only reason their number would grow is if God supported them with divine power. In making this claim, Wesley argued that numerical growth is evidence of God's power flowing through the Methodists. God would favor the Methodists with power only if they were being faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. If the number of Methodists had been declining, it would have been because the Methodists were not faithful disciples. Thus, the quantity of growth was an indicator of the quality of disciple.

It is not hard to imagine what Wesley would think of The United Methodist Church today based on our numbers in the United States. He would conclude that we are a fallen people, failing to form people as faithful disciples. Our freefall in numbers alongside of our divisions and wrangling are symptomatic of this. I don't believe Wesley would think that The United Methodist Church is succeeding, because it is failing in apostolic ministry. It is failing to maintain Wesley's vision of growing both the quantity and quality of disciples. And, currently, we are failing in our witness as a united faith community, as seen by the disputations that have erupted about human sexuality at the past several General Conferences. While specific local congregations run counter to this description, it is accurate for the denomination in the United States.

My reason for starting with such a blunt assertion is so we can take stock of what real options The United Methodist Church has for its future. If the denomination was healthy and growing, the issue of human sexuality would not be as crippling as it has become. We would find ways to accommodate the different sides so long as we could keep the institution's numbers on a continued upward trend. However, that is not the case, and we find ourselves desperately trying to defend our respective sexual turf as the field we engage shrinks. If we assume that we are fundamentally succeeding as a United Methodist church, whatever solutions we generate will ultimately fail. We need solutions that will address our apostolic collapse before we deal with anything else. We can begin searching for these solutions by considering the path that led us to our current state.

Unhooking Quantity from Quality

Balkanization

A byproduct of claiming quantity as an indicator of the quality of United Methodist discipleship is that it demands leniency regarding those who are at least initially welcomed to become disciples. For United Methodism, it means that we must leave the door open for all those who would participate in the connection. John Wesley did this by stating that a “desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins” was sufficient reason to be admitted into a Methodist society.⁸ There is no doctrinal test here, nor a declaration of faith, just an interest in avoiding punishment for sin. That is opening the door wide for initial membership.

Wesley used the same logic in welcoming a variety of local classes and societies into the connection. While the connection defined the Methodist identity through the *Discipline*, Methodists on the local level were given a high amount of autonomy so they could engage in more effective recruitment and discipleship by being contextually relevant. On this point, Hunter explains:

John Wesley pioneered and mastered the church growth principle called today . . . “the multiplication of units.” He was instrumental in the spawning of many hundreds of classes, bands, societies, and other groups with distinct agendas, and he labored to develop the indigenous lay leadership this growing vast network of groups would need. He was driven to multiplying “classes,” for these served best as recruiting groups, as ports of entry for new people, and for involving awakened people with the gospel and its power.⁹

To put this in more provocative language, Wesley allowed for a *de facto* form of congregationalism to exist within the connection. He did this out of what Hunter describes as a “sanctified pragmatism,” that had the salvation of people as its primary goal.¹⁰

American Methodism followed Wesley's pragmatism. Even as we have touted our connectionalism, we have been on the lookout for ways to increase our numbers through granting greater independence to local gatherings of Methodists. This continues today, through Path 1, for example, the new-church-start initiative of The United Methodist Church. While we want new congregations to become chartered so that they are fully a part of the United Methodist fold, many denominational leaders stand back to provide substantial freedom as the new congregations constitute themselves. Anecdotally, I have had DSs tell me with a wink and a nudge that the bishops of the conferences they represent are not terribly concerned with congregations obeying the *Discipline* provided the congregations grow. Congregations do not

even need to acknowledge the denomination publicly so long as they send in positive statistics forms and apportionments. This is seen in how many new United Methodist congregations do not include the words “United Methodist” in their names.

The benefit of this open door is the potential for us to extend our apostolic ministry by creating more contextually sensitive United Methodist gatherings that can invite a more diverse set of people to become disciples of Jesus Christ. This is why Wesley supported the practice and the early American Methodists adopted it.

There is a danger to it, though. If connectional identity waivers, then local group identities that have been allowed to develop will assert themselves. This especially occurs when the emphasis on quantity of people becomes disconnected from the call for quality discipleship formation.

When quantity is unhinged from quality, two things happen: First, local groups begin to claim they are the true carriers of the connectional identity. Second, local groups come into conflict because they realize their respective identities stand at odds with one another. The term for this is *balkanization*.

Balkanization is the process of a larger unit breaking into smaller units that are often hostile to one another. This hostility is based on long-standing disagreements that have existed within the larger unit, but that were suppressed by common allegiance to the larger unit. The term was coined based on how the various Balkan peoples that were part of the former Yugoslavia separated from one another during the 1990s. So long as the strong identity of being Yugoslavs was in place, the Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, Croats, Slovenes, and Macedonians lived together in relative peace. However, when that identity slipped, the long-standing differences among these people resurfaced as each sought to hold sway over Yugoslavia. The result was open warfare and ethnic cleansing.

The same process can occur within a denomination that has reduced its apostolic ministry to just trying to pack more people into the pews. Without denominational clarity about how those people should be formed as disciples (i.e., the quality of those disciples), local congregations assert their own ideas about this. As the denominational identity weakens, they recognize their ideas disagree with other local congregations and begin to battle over which is the true carrier of the denominational identity. Ecclesial, if not ethnic, cleansing is often the result, with congregations banding together in caucuses or behind para-church organizations seeking to push one another out of the denomination.

A Case Study in Denominational Balkanization: Methodism and Slavery

This is what happened to the Methodist Episcopal Church as it dealt with slavery during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Beginning with a clear condemnation of slavery, the denomination quickly sacrificed this stance in order to increase its growth in all regions of the United States.

The earliest reference to slavery in MEC documents is in the General Minutes for the Conference of 1780.

Question 16. Ought not this Conference to require those traveling preachers who hold slaves to give promises to set them free? Yes.

Question 17. Does this Conference acknowledge that slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others should do to us and ours? Do we

pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves, and advise their freedom?
Yes.¹¹

This clear condemnation of slavery not only demanded preachers manumit their slaves, but called on preachers to speak out against anyone who kept slaves, whether those people were Methodists or not. To be a disciple in the MEC was to take this stance.

By 1784, however, a moderating tone is detectable in the General Minutes.

Question 12. What shall we do with our friends that will buy and sell slaves? If they buy with no other design than to hold them as slaves, and have been previously warned, they shall be expelled and permitted to sell on no consideration.

Question 13. What shall we do with our local preachers who will not emancipate their slaves in the states where the laws admit it? Try those in Virginia another year, and suspend the preachers in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New-Jersey.¹²

The first question softens the absolute disapprobation of friends who engage in the slave trade, stating that only those who have 1) been warned and 2) who buy with the design to hold the slaves should be expelled from the denomination. The second question subsumes Methodist scruples to state law and regional considerations, so much so that preachers in Virginia who owned slaves could be granted an extra year in the itineracy, unhindered before being placed on suspension.

By the early nineteenth century, while rules against slavery remained in the *Discipline*, it was understood that they could be ignored with no repercussions. In 1808, a special copy of the *Discipline* that omitted the rule forbidding slavery was even printed for distribution in South Carolina.¹³

The reasons for this rollback toward slavery were 1) Methodism's growth in the South during the Revolutionary Era, and 2) its increasingly positive social standing among pro-slavery southern whites.¹⁴ This led even Francis Asbury to accommodate himself to pro-slavery Methodists.¹⁵ This is the same Asbury who recorded in his journal, "I find the more pious part of the people called Quakers to be exerting themselves for the liberation of the slaves. This is a very laudable design, and what the Methodists must come to, or, I fear, the Lord will depart from them,"¹⁶

Asbury deplored this state of affairs but saw it as unavoidable. He needed to tolerate pro-slavery Methodists if the denomination was to grow. He confided in his journal:

[M]y mind is much pained. O to be dependent on slaveholders is in part to be a slave and I am freeborn. I am brought to conclude that slavery will exist in Virginia perhaps for ages; there is not a sufficient sense of religion nor of liberty to destroy it; Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, in the highest flights of rapturous piety, still maintain and defend it.¹⁷

While slavery might be evil in the eyes of Asbury, it was not evil in the eyes of a great many Americans who could join the Methodist Episcopal Church. Realizing this, Asbury concluded slavery could be winked at so as not to impede the movement of the largest possible number of Americans into the Methodist fold.

Asbury was not alone in his thinking. In Freeborn Garretson's very thin allegory, *Dialogue between Do-Justice and Professing-Christian*, in which the character of Do-Justice seeks to convince Professing-Christian to free his slaves, Garretson depicted Professing-Christian as a respected Christian in his neighborhood who attends church and has had a genuine conversion experience. That character's willingness to reject slavery simply demonstrates a new level of

Christian maturity. Even then, Do-Justice acknowledged that mature Christians might still hold slaves if state laws forbid manumission.¹⁸

Peter Cartwright likewise took this approach, arguing that slave owners could be challenged to manumit their slaves only after first leading those owners to become Methodists. For this reason, Cartwright rejected political abolition movements as thoroughly as he rejected slavery. Both ran counter to saving people's souls. He wrote:

The most successful way to ameliorate the condition of the slaves, and Christianize them, and finally secure their freedom, is to treat their owners kindly, and not to meddle politically with slavery. Let their owners see and know that your whole mission is the salvation for the slaves as well as of the owners, and that you have not established any underground railroad, and that it is not your mission to abduct their slaves. In this way more is to be done for the final extirpation of American slavery than all others put together. . . . [I]t is my firm conviction that every Methodist preacher sent as a missionary herald to labor in slave territory, ought to be instructed by the ruling authorities of the Church not to meddle with slavery, but to attend strictly to his spiritual mission.¹⁹

For Cartwright, welcoming all into the MEC would bring about the salvation of the slave owner and the slave alike. The byproduct of this, as the slave owner came to recognize the power of the Christian faith he accepted, would be the slave owner setting his slaves free. Another byproduct was that the MEC would grow, since no moral hurdle was placed in front of the slave owner first joining the denomination.

Asbury and other Methodist leaders relied on Wesleyan soteriology to support their decision to allow pro-slavery congregations to be formed while continuing to condemn slavery. They did this by shifting the onus of condemning slavery from the early stages of calling people to conversion to the later stages of sanctification. In other words, it was more important to people's salvation that they first be converted and brought into the Methodist Episcopal Church as those who were recognized as having been justified. Later, as part of their growth in holiness, those people could be challenged to change their view of slavery.

This approach itself is not problematic. After all, Jesus set the example of associating with sinners so they might come to repentance. However, this approach would work only so long as all local Methodist Episcopal congregations and their leaders agreed that they should move their members toward anti-slavery positions. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

Problems developed as Methodist Episcopal congregations formed that encouraged people's explicit disagreement with the denomination's moral claims about slavery. My strong hunch is that leaders like Asbury saw these congregations as a necessary interim between attracting pro-slavery southerners into the denomination and then bringing those new Methodists around to the denomination's anti-slavery position. Asbury articulated this idea when he commented in his journal about one of his preaching stops:

I felt as if the Lord and his messages had left this place. My spirit was grieved at the conduct of some Methodists that hire out slaves at public places to the highest bidder, to cut, skin, and starve them. I think such members ought to be dealt with. . . . I will try if words can be like drawn swords, to pierce the hearts of the owners.²⁰

Asbury was ashamed that the Methodists were slave owners, but he also accepted that certain MEC congregations needed to be pro-slavery if slave owners were to be saved. He hoped that Methodist membership provided the means to exhort these pro-slavery Methodists to repent and grow in holiness by becoming abolitionists. However, it is not clear that he or other early

American Methodist leaders recognized the problem of allowing congregations to form that had diametrically opposed beliefs from the denomination on such a charged moral issue.

This strategy inevitably broke down. As Asbury and the first set of strong Methodist leadership died, the already shaky Methodist stance on slavery faltered even more. The identities and beliefs of the local congregations, bolstered as they were by the values of the regions where those congregations were located, proved to be far stronger than any moral commitment of the denomination. Southern congregations claimed their support of slavery was fully Christian and should be recognized as such by the entire denomination, while northern congregations became increasingly uncomfortable participating in a denomination that gave sanctuary to a pro-slavery caucus. It was based on this that the denomination found itself at the point of schism by the middle of the nineteenth century.

All this is a result of a reduced apostolic ministry by the Methodist Episcopal Church, allowing the focus on quantity of members to obscure a clear denominational definition of the quality of disciples. The theological acrobatics the denominational leaders used to allow this ended with making room for congregations to claim the same Methodist name while holding opposing positions on the crucial moral issue of the age. As C.C. Goen explained, this created a situation that carried “the risk of disrupting the whole church. . . . [A] major national issue like slavery could neither be confronted nor evaded without traumatic repercussions throughout the whole denomination.”²¹ The Methodists had created the perfect conditions for balkanization.

The United Methodist Church has put itself in the same situation today. Desperately afraid of the freefall in its numbers, which have been decreasing as a percentage of the population in the United States since the 1950s, it has made a clear decision to decouple quantity from quality. This means that, like the Methodist Episcopal Church, while it may define itself formally through the *Discipline*, it functionally operates in a manner that allows for deviation from the *Discipline* if there is the potential to attract and hold more members.

The only difference between then and now is that we are dealing with sexuality instead of slavery. Beyond that, the situations surrounding the Methodist struggle with these two issues are strikingly similar. Both:

- are the defining moral issue of their day in American culture, causing American Methodists to take up positions in solidarity with existing cultural groups;
- arise at a time that is precarious for the future of Methodism in America (Slavery arose when the denomination was just launching, so it was uncertain of continuation; and sexuality has arisen at a time that the denomination is waning, making many wonder if it will fold completely.);
- have no middle ground between the positions available (One is either pro-slavery or anti-slavery; one either supports current disciplinary language or does not.);
- have deviating interpretations of the Bible and church history used to support the respective positions people take on them; and
- spawned tortured theological and political attempts by Methodists to make room for congregations that stand on opposite sides of them, creating the conditions for balkanization.

Given the seemingly intractable situation this sets up, how can we move ahead? Here we can turn to two possible options, one historical, the other from our current Methodist siblings overseas.

Possible Ways Forward

A Lesson from History: The General Conference of 1844

Faced with the polarities on slavery it allowed to arise within itself during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Methodist Episcopal Church ultimately was forced to clarify its position. This occurred in 1844, when Bishop James O. Andrew became a slave owner through his wife's inheritance.

At the 1844 General Conference, the northern delegates moved quickly to censure the bishop on this point, and they succeeded in passing a resolution that called on Bishop Andrew to "desist from the exercise of his office so long as this impediment remains."²² This action was in league with the discipline the church, but sorely out of step with the latitude concerning slavery the denomination had allowed its congregations in actual practice.

The action incensed the southern delegates who, after an evening of caucusing together with Andrew, returned to the General Conference session with the message that they could not remain part of the Methodist Episcopal Church if the denomination could not support Andrew in his episcopal position. With the clear outline of denominational schism on the horizon, the conference voted to remand the issue to a special committee of nine, composed of northern and southern delegates. This committee would study the concerns of the southern delegates and offer recommendations to the conference as to how to bring resolution.

The committee of nine returned with what became known as the Plan of Separation, which recommended the Methodist Episcopal Church split into two denominations, a northern one for those conferences that stood against slavery and a southern one for those conferences that approved of slavery. It further included recommendations for how to divide clergy, members and various denominational resources between the two denominations. This plan was accepted by an overwhelming majority of General Conference delegates and led to the creation, two years later, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

What is critical to note for our purposes is that the foremost concern that led to the Plan of Separation was the denominational leaders' common desire to grow the quantity of Methodists unhooked from a common formation of those disciples. In the original motion that called on Andrew to desist from his duties as a bishop, the primary argument was that Andrew's status as a slave owner would "greatly embarrass his exercise of the office of itinerant general superintendent, if not in some places entirely prevent it."²³ While there were moral and ecclesiastical concerns being raised in this statement, there was also the concern that having a slave-owning bishop would decrease the ability of the Methodist Episcopal Church to recruit abolitionists in the North that might have joined the denomination otherwise. As such, Andrew should set aside the episcopacy to allow continued church growth in the North.

The southern delegates countered this with their own quantity-based argument. They stated, "the continued agitation on the subject of slavery and abolition by a portion of the Church . . . renders a continuance of the jurisdiction of this General Conference inconsistent with the success of the ministry in these slave-holding states."²⁴ Turning the logic of the northern delegates on its head, they argued that they would be incapable of attracting more people in the South if the denomination removed the functional freedom southern Methodist Episcopal congregations had enjoyed in supporting slavery. As such, to make membership growth possible in the South, the southern delegates either needed the northern delegates to desist from enforcing their anti-slavery policies or the southern delegates needed to withdraw from the Methodist Episcopal Church altogether.

The quantity-focused logic of the southerners carried the day. This is shown by the wording in the preamble to the Plan of Separation, which picks up the “success” language the southerners had used in their complaint:

Whereas a declaration has been presented to the General Conference with the signatures of fifty-one delegates of this body, from thirteen Annual Conferences in slave-holding states, representing that, for various reasons enumerated, *the objects and purposes of Christian ministry and Church organization cannot be successfully accomplished by them under the jurisdiction of this General Conference as now constituted.*²⁵

In the end, the Methodist Episcopal Church chose a formal division to solve its dilemma. The delegates believed that this sort of amicable divorce was the most effective way to retain some sense of Methodist fraternity, contrasted to a schism, and that it would allow Methodism as a movement to grow in quantity of members, if not in a common formation of those members.²⁶ Neither side would have to accede to the other, both were free to pursue their own ministry, and both would have sufficient resources provided out of the originally united denomination to use in attracting more people in their respective regions to their particular brand of Methodism.

This is the solution that our American Methodist forebears chose to solve both their moral disagreement and their desire to continue growing the church. It did not go nearly as smoothly as the Plan of Separation anticipated. Because of the powerful local identity that the Methodist Episcopal Church had allowed, the quadrennium following the 1844 General Conference was spent with local congregations and annual conferences coming to different conclusions on whether the Plan should be adopted. The southern conferences believed it should, and moved to set up a new denomination, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, by 1846. The northern conferences thought this new denomination was constitutionally illegal and demanded the southern conferences return to the original denomination. This would lead to a serious scandal as the two denominations sued each other over their respective shares of the Book Concern, with the case ultimately being decided in the Supreme Court.

There are two lessons we can learn from this in our current situation. First, the idea of creating a middle way that simply deletes language about sexuality from the *Discipline* and allows congregations to live-and-let-live while remaining part of a common denomination is untenable. Just as with the slavery argument, the lines are too firmly drawn and too charged both inside and outside of the church to allow for this. Moreover, as the delegates of 1844 understood, it is sure to do damage to our ability to attract new members if we are lukewarm on such a divisive cultural issue. For this reason, I think we should reject the idea of both the big-tent denomination that allows for everyone regardless of what they believe. Clarity of moral formation is essential for the denomination if we are to be effective in apostolic ministry.

Second, if The UMC chooses to separate, it will likely find that at the same time it thinks it has solved the problem of sexuality for the denomination, it will have also created new animosities it did not anticipate. There will be anger, pushback, and potential scandal. All of this will also harm the ability of The UMC to recruit new people. Any discussion of separation over such a divisive cultural issue must proceed with extreme care because of this. For this reason, I recommend rejecting any notion of separation in which organized groups retain a portion of the original whole denomination. This sort of move will only harm the Christian witness by showing the watching world Christians who cannot agree with each other, and it will invite those who join the various, formerly United Methodist denominations to do so based on their beliefs about sexuality rather than their beliefs about Jesus Christ. In both cases, we fail at apostolic ministry in a new way.

Lessons from Overseas

In addition to looking at historical precedent, The UMC can look overseas to gain insight into how sister Methodists are dealing with a loss of apostolic ministry in the present day. The Methodist Church in Britain lost 36 percent of its members from 2003 to 2015. By its most recent statistics, it now numbers only 195,000 members.²⁷ This is a faster and farther fall than what we have experienced in The UMC, demonstrating a serious lack of apostolic ministry.

How has the Methodist Church in Britain chosen to deal with this? They have opted to revitalize their call to mission, even at the expense of their institution. The late Rev. David Gamble, then president of the Methodist Conference in England, told the General Synod of the Church of England on Thursday, February 11, 2010: “We are prepared to go out of existence not because we are declining or failing in mission, but for the sake of mission. In other words, we are prepared to be changed and even to cease having a separate existence as a Church if that will serve the needs of the Kingdom.”²⁸

This declaration set off alarm bells that the death of Methodism in the British Isles was at hand. However, Karen Burke, media officer for the Methodist Church in Britain at the time, explained that this was not the case. She wrote:

Methodists don't need to be a Methodist Church in order to be Methodist people; they can be Methodists either within a wider church or as a separate church—whichever creates the most effectiveness in mission. An iconic Methodist image is an engraving of John Wesley preaching—not in a church—but in the open air at Epworth market cross in the 18th century. This isn't to say that Methodists do not cherish their institutions and structures; it simply means that Methodists are prepared to change and evolve in order to respond to the challenges of the 21st century.²⁹

She made the point well. The Methodists were choosing to reclaim the apostolic ministry of the church. To do this, they did not need to hold onto their institutions. They simply needed to recommit themselves to the mission of God to make disciples. In doing this, they, like John Wesley before them, could be a powerful servant of God in the British Isles regardless of whether they met with people in their own preaching houses or in city streets.

While the Methodist Church in Britain continues to operate independently today, the missional logic their leadership displayed is healthy and helpful. It recognized the decline the denomination faced and realized that saving the institution was not the same thing as addressing the underlying missional failure. It chose to recommit to God's mission rather than to look for techniques or tricks to salvage their institutions. It further acknowledged that the dissolution of institutions and structures was well within the pale of Methodism, if doing so served the apostolic mission of making disciples.

Pulling It Together

If we combine the lessons from American Methodist history and the current situation facing the British Methodists, what do we have? From history, we learn that when denominations fail in their apostolic ministry they can reach intractable situations because there is not a common belief about what being a disciple is. This leads to balkanization as local groups within the denomination generate their own beliefs and begin to demand all others in the denomination accept those beliefs.

We also learn that addressing balkanization through separation apart from reclaiming the fullness of the apostolic ministry of the church is foolish. It will only exacerbate the problems the

different groups within the denomination already face. Worse, it further harms the denomination's public witness by leading to court cases and other scandalous activity in which the church submits itself to the world for arbitration.

The British Methodists remind us that mission must take precedence over institutions. This is no small insight. It reminds us that fighting for pensions, shares of the Publishing House, or access to other denominational assets does not address the central issue, which is that Jesus Christ commissioned the church to make disciples, baptizing them into communities of faith and teaching them all he taught us.

Is there a way we can combine the lessons from each? I think there is.

Like the Methodist Episcopal Church, The United Methodist Church must acknowledge we have reached an intractable situation. Due to a failure of being united, Methodist, or the church, because of how we unhinged the desire for growing our quantity of members from forming an agreed upon quality of disciple, we have allowed local United Methodist communities to define discipleship as they see fit. In doing this for long enough, we have allowed two positions to arise in the church that cannot be reconciled. Based on this, we must conclude that The United Methodist Church cannot sustain. It must be shuttered, and something new must take its place.

Rather than opt for separation by determining who gets what in the divorce, as the Methodist Episcopal Church did, we must first emphasize the importance of mission. Mission must take priority over our institutional thinking. For this reason, I recommend dissolving United Methodism as a denomination, functionally making each congregation currently in the denomination non-denominational. This would include revoking all trust clauses, ending all apportionments, and relinquishing any legal claims by the denomination on the congregations.

Why this drastic move? First, as already explained, it avoids the scandal of a public fight and the overt creation of denominations that came into being because sexuality was raised to the level of a creedal belief.

Second, it gets our priorities in order. Our goal should be to send out all those who once had been United Methodists as missionaries who are focused first and foremost on making disciples. By ending any capacity to continue battling over the old United Methodist identity, they are free to do this.

Third, doing this does not preclude these newly non-denominational congregations forming new connections with one another under whatever banner they choose to take. They could decide to band together and sustain new versions of the general agencies that would provide them with training in church planting, seed money for developing indigenous ministries, and other resources that would make them effective in the apostolic ministry of making disciples. Doing this does not require reinventing the wheel. The last decade has seen the rise of many international church networks, such as ARC (Association of Related Churches), North Point Partners, the Willow Creek Association, and Every Nation Family of Churches. Each has a different way of operating, but all emphasize the importance of evangelism and apostolic ministry.

If The UMC transformed itself into a more loosely organized, but more missionally defined network, it could be a juggernaut with its existing resources and locations for launching new leaders and ministries. In fact, this is the most positive message I can offer The United Methodist Church: that it shifts from seeing itself as a failed denomination to seeing itself as the most promising church planting network the world has ever seen.

Finally, while some may argue we would stand to lose an enormous amount by ending United Methodism, I would point back to my observation that the denomination has already

functionally failed. It already relies on individual congregations that are large enough to sustain it by their apportionments and leadership, waiting for the pastors of those congregations to stand at General Conference and provide guidance. It has already contorted and strained the Wesleyan heritage it has been given over time to fit any number of ideologies on the right and the left. Whatever we might lose by this drastic shift to non-denominationalism, we already have lost or are on the way to losing now. The difference is, the shift to a non-denominational missional network gets our priorities straight and launches us forward in apostolic ministry.

If we do this, we will at least be about the work of the Great Commission, engaging it in a way that frees our conscience as to who we welcome and how we welcome people to participate in our respective congregations. And, we can stop wasting the disgraceful amount of resources we are currently using to fight one another. Much like the former Yugoslavia, we end the civil war by dissolving the country; but unlike them, we do it in a way that provides a broad overarching missional body that will still help provide resources.

This shift would be a difficult change. It will undoubtedly mean that many local congregations that are teetering on the edge will close or merge because they have no denominational safety net. It will also mean that many jobs will disappear, especially for people like me who work on the denominational level. Those are hard realities, but such is the cost of discipleship. We are not Christians for our ease but to be employed by God or laid aside by God, as Wesley writes in his covenant prayer:

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.
(from the Book of Offices of the British Methodist Church, 1936)

Quantity, Quality, and Balkanization: The Failure of Apostolic Mission Leading to The United Methodist Church's Current Deadlock over Human Sexuality—Mark R. Teasdale

¹ Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *Permanent Revolution* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 61.

² General Commission on Archives and History, "United Methodist Membership Statistics," <http://www.gcah.org/history/united-methodist-membership-statistics>.

³ General Council on Finance and Administration, "Data Services," <http://www.umc.org/gcfa/data-services>.

⁴ General Commission on Archives and History, "United Methodist Membership Statistics," <http://www.gcah.org/history/united-methodist-membership-statistics>.

⁵ John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries III*, eds. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 20, *The Works of John Wesley* [hereafter *Works*] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 34.

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- ⁶ George G. Hunter III. *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 48.
- ⁷ John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries VI*, Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 20, *Works*, 65.
- ⁸ John Wesley, *The Methodist Societies History Nature and Design*, ed. Rupert Davies, vol. 9, *Works* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69.
- ⁹ Hunter, *To Spread the Power*, 56.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹¹ Minutes of Some Conversations Between the Preachers in Connection with the Rev Mr. John Wesley, Baltimore, April 24, 1780.
- ¹² Minutes of Some Conversations Between the Preachers in Connection with the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, Begun at Ellis's Preaching House, Virginia, April 30, 1784, and ended at Baltimore, May 28, following.
- ¹³ Frederick Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 187.
- ¹⁴ John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Story: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 148–49.
- ¹⁵ As Wigger writes, “Gradually, Asbury, like the majority of Methodists, came to accept the fact of Methodists owning slaves and the church’s inability to rid itself to the practice short of quitting the South” (*ibid.*, 149).
- ¹⁶ Francis Asbury, 10 June 1778, in *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, vol. 1, *The Journal 1771–1793*, eds. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (Nashville: Abingdon Press; London: Epworth Press, 1958), 273–74.
- ¹⁷ Francis Asbury, 9 January 1798, in *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, vol. 2, *The Journal 1794–1816*, eds. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (Nashville: Abingdon Press; London: Epworth Press, 1958), 151.
- ¹⁸ Freeborn Garretson, *Dialogue Between Do-Justice and Professing-Christian* (Wilmington, D: Peter Brynberg, 1803).
- ¹⁹ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 275–76.
- ²⁰ Asbury, 19 December 1796, in *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, vol 2, 109.
- ²¹ C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 59.
- ²² *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church Held in the City of New-York, 1844* in *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 2, 1840, 1844 (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 65.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 65–66.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 135, italics added.
- ²⁶ Russell Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 109.
- ²⁷ “Methodism in Numbers,” http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2324645/Methodism_in_Numbers_2016.pdf, “Statistics for Mission,” <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-37-statistics-for-mission.pdf>, 3.2.
- ²⁸ Martin Beckford, “General Synod: Methodist Church Likely to Merge with Church of England,” *The Telegraph*, (Feb. 12, 2010), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/7216357/General-Synod-Methodists-likely-to-merge-with-Church-of-England.html>.
- ²⁹ Karen Burke, “The Death of Methodism? Not Quite,” *The Guardian*, (Feb. 15, 2010), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/feb/15/methodist-church-anglican-synod>.