

# An Ecclesial Vision for The United Methodist Church

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*Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.*

—*The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

*We need forms of polity that are consistent with our core convictions: that is, forms that honor the radically inclusive scope of God's saving grace, forms that recognize and build upon the transformative character of that grace, and forms that will serve, rather than subvert, the growth of genuine community.*

—*Wonder, Love, and Praise*

*The question for The United Methodist Church at this juncture is a local parallel to the question that drives the ecumenical discussion: How are we to find and live out an adequately diversified form of Christian community—one that could be a model and inspiration for an adequately diversified human community?*

—“An Ecclesial Vision for The United Methodist Church”

By action of the 2016 General Conference, a study document entitled *Wonder, Love, and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church*, prepared under the auspices of the Committee on Faith and Order of The United Methodist Church, is to be the basis of a church-wide study over the next four years.<sup>1</sup> My aim in what follows is to highlight some of what I take to be the principal points of that study document and to offer some reflections on the understanding of the unity of the church—of the church universal and of The United Methodist Church in particular—that might emerge from an engagement with it.

The Committee on Faith and Order is a relatively new thing, having been established by the General Conference in 2008. It was then inadvertently abolished by the 2012 General Conference, reconstituted provisionally by action of the Council of Bishops, and formally reestablished by General Conference action in 2016. The chief mandate of the committee, as I understand it, was and remains twofold: first, to engage in theological reflection on matters of faith and order on behalf of the church; and second, to encourage and support such theological reflection throughout the church.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the term *faith and order* has a history of more than a century of usage in the ecumenical movement, where it has represented the two main elements of the ecumenical goal of visible unity. Let me borrow from the ecumenical veteran Michael Kinnamon's “a short list of ‘tangible signs of the new life of communion’”: shared confession of the apostolic faith, mutual recognition of members and ministries, shared celebration of the Eucharist, an ability to meet and

make decisions together when appropriate, and cooperation in mission.<sup>3</sup> The very name of the committee, then, immediately and (I think) rightly implies a close relationship between the concerns of the Committee on Faith and Order and of what is now the Council of Bishops Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships. And it symbolizes a long-standing United Methodist commitment to do our theological thinking, including our thinking about the nature and mission of the church, within an ecumenical context.

These shared concerns also help to explain why the committee undertook, as one of its first tasks, a major effort to articulate a theological understanding of the church: a United Methodist ecclesiology. Theologians and leaders from many branches of Methodism and beyond have wondered for a long time whether there is such a thing as a Methodist doctrine of the church. The majority opinion over the years would appear to be no, though there is also a general recognition that Methodists have a number of ecclesiological commitments, implicit if not explicit. The task given to the committee was to bring these commitments to the surface, reflect on them in the light of current needs and possibilities, and articulate a coherent United Methodist understanding of the church for these times.

As the committee was getting underway with its study, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches was bringing to completion its own long-awaited “convergence text” on the doctrine of the church under the title *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.<sup>4</sup> This meant that the United Methodist committee’s work on the topic could take advantage of that achievement, and proceed in conversation with this new ecumenical document. Since members of several Methodist churches across the world had been heavily involved in the production of the World Council of Churches’ statement, connections were not difficult to find, and those connections have influenced both the structure and the content of the present study document.

As readers of these pages will recognize, the title “Wonder, Love, and Praise” is derived from a line of the Charles Wesley hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”:

Finish, then, thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee;  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise.<sup>5</sup>

Wesley appears to have borrowed that line “lost in wonder, love, and praise” from a hymn by his contemporary, the English poet and essayist Joseph Addison.<sup>6</sup> *Wonder, Love, and Praise* is also the title of a supplemental hymnal published by the Episcopal Church in the United States some twenty years ago,<sup>7</sup> and the phrase has occurred in the titles of a number of other works over the years, as one might expect. What particularly commends it in this case, however, is the way it represents a Wesleyan, Trinitarian understanding of what life is all about. In another hymn, Charles Wesley writes that we human creatures are called to be “transcripts of the Trinity.”<sup>8</sup> By a kind of creaturely participation in the life of the triune God, we are meant for wonder, love, and praise. As John Wesley put it in one of his sermons, human beings are “created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and to enjoy [their] Creator to all eternity.”<sup>9</sup> That is our chief end. That is the calling, the vocation, that Jesus Christ reveals to us, and that the Holy Spirit empowers us to accept.<sup>10</sup> And this is the reality of which the church is to be the sign and servant. The study document has a three-part structure. In the first part, it identifies some Wesleyan or Methodist presuppositions for a doctrine of the church. It speaks there of three distinctive

convictions that shape United Methodist thinking on the church. Then, in the second part, these three convictions are related to three key themes in the ecumenical document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, bringing our particular heritage as United Methodists into conversation with the wider ecumenical discussion. These two parts essentially lay out the vision of the church that is being proposed to us. The third part takes up three questions having to do with our current and future practice as a church that arise from this exploration.

## 1.

The three distinctive convictions identified in the first part are that the saving love of God is meant for all people, not just for a favored few; that it is a transformative love; and that it is a community-creating love. To amplify a bit, quoting from the document (lines 158–206):

*The saving love of God is meant for all people:* “God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). John Wesley’s comment on this statement in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* emphasizes the “everyone”: *all* of humankind is included in this desire—“Not a part only, much less the smallest part.” He also notes another implication of the statement: “They are not compelled.”<sup>11</sup> The grace of God extended to all does not override human freedom, but activates it, so that our salvation, while entirely a gift, involves our free participation. These two points about the universality of God’s saving love are repeated throughout his writing and embodied in his ministry. They were essential to Wesley’s understanding of the gospel, and to the power of the movement he inspired. They remain a vital part of United Methodist affirmation.

*The love of God is transformative:* To use the language familiar to Wesley and his contemporaries, as God’s grace is accepted in faith, it brings both “justification,” the restoration of a right relationship with God, and “sanctification,” the renewal of our very being. There is a new birth. The love of God *for* us becomes the love of God *in* us. In the words of the apostle Paul, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1), and being “called to freedom,” we are to “live by the Spirit,” which means living by the love of God that empowers us to put aside “the works of the flesh” and to bear “the fruit of the Spirit . . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). A hallmark of John Wesley’s preaching, and of the preaching and testimony of the people called Methodist through the years, is that such an experienced, here-and-now transformation of human life by the power of the Holy Spirit is real.

*The love of God creates community:* The transformation just described is by its very nature a transformation of our relationships with others. It is through others that we experience the love of God; it is with others that the pattern of new life that God gives is both learned and lived out. . . . The church exists because the Spirit of God leads us into community, perhaps with persons with whom we would least expect to associate. . . . Wesley and those in connection with him found themselves moving beyond the established norms of churchly behavior, and challenging the church, by their own example, to enact more fully God’s gift of community. Thus the term “connection” took on new resonances of meaning, as what Wesley called “social holiness”—the growth in love and in the other fruits of the Spirit that is possible only in community—was realized in new situations and settings. . . .

Together, these convictions shape our United Methodist understanding of what it is to be the church. The ways they have come to expression in our history account in part for our particular ways of being the church, within the larger Body of Christ.

The story of their coming to expression has been, as the paper notes, “a complex and often ambiguous history of accomplishments and failures, growth and loss, separations and unions, over the past two centuries and more—a very human history, in which (as its participants would want to testify) God has been steadily at work both within and despite human plans, decisions, and actions” (lines 258–61). *Wonder, Love, and Praise* offers a brief sketch of some of our denominational history and our ecumenical efforts in illustrating this point. It is extremely important, if we are to have any worthwhile theological understanding of the church, that we recognize that ambiguity; that we acknowledge, for example, the racism, nationalism, and cultural captivity that have characterized our journey, as well as the ways we have been led and empowered at times to resist and overcome them.

## 2.

In the second part of the paper, these three convictions are related to three themes in the recent convergence text from the World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Here they are taken in a different order, beginning with the affirmation that the saving love of God creates community. This reordering allows a recognition that the ecumenical text begins with the community-forming power of the love of God, relating this directly to the mission of the church. The first paragraph of its first chapter, entitled “God’s Mission and the Unity of the Church,” affirms:

The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God’s work of healing a broken world. Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing (¶1, p. 5).

Citing the “Great Commission” of Matthew 28:18-20, it goes on to comment:

This command by Jesus already hints at what he wanted his Church to be in order to carry out this mission. It was to be a community of witness, proclaiming the kingdom which Jesus had first proclaimed, inviting human beings from all nations to saving faith. It was to be a community of worship, initiating new members by baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. It was to be a community of discipleship, in which the apostles, by proclaiming the Word, baptizing and celebrating the Lord’s Supper, were to guide new believers to observe all that Jesus himself had commanded.

Methodists can relate to all this, as our own document attests with some reference to John Wesley’s teachings, to Charles Wesley’s hymns, and to our common liturgy for Holy Communion.

The UM study text moves on (lines 445–588), to the conviction that the saving love of God is meant for all. This leads to a summary, informed by the ecumenical discussion, of different senses and definitions of “church,” and to an exploration of different ways in which people might be said to be participating in the *koinonia*, the communion, that the Spirit is creating. It leads to such an exploration because we might well wonder, as John Wesley did: If God wills all to be saved, then “why [is] Christianity . . . not spread as far as sin?”<sup>12</sup>

A distinction that may well come to have a more prominent role in future thinking about the church is used here. It is a distinction between, not two churches, but two *aspects* of the church: the church as the *community of salvation* and the church as the *community of witness*. The church

as we know it is called to be both a community in which persons are coming to fullness of life and a community with a mission to be Christ's witnesses in the world.

But, like John Wesley, we in The United Methodist Church have no reason to believe or teach that God's saving grace cannot reach beyond the churches that we know. The study text works with that distinction, then, to suggest that there may be an "ecclesial" aspect to the life of persons who are outside what is sometimes called the "visible" church, who are responding positively to God's grace. It is "ecclesial" in the sense that they are being drawn into communion with God and with their fellow creatures, as the grace of God is inherently community forming, even though they may not (or not yet) be part of the explicit community of witness. This possibility has implications for (among other things) how we, who call ourselves Christian, might regard our non-Christian neighbors and the religious traditions and communities to which many of them belong. And it might help us gain some clarity about our own particular mission as the "visible" church: to be a sign and servant of the triune God's redeeming, community-creating work in the world. What this means for our practice depends on the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, and this, of course, varies considerably from place to place.

What guides us as we pursue that mission? That question brings us to the third of the distinctive Wesleyan convictions enunciated earlier in the text—that the saving love of God is transformative—and to its counterpart in the ecumenical document's treatment of the way in which the church is to serve as a sign and servant of God's work of restoring human beings to their vocation. Not surprisingly, this has something to do with faith, hope, and love. One way of approaching this—a very Wesleyan way—is through the traditional theme of the "threefold office" of Christ, the three dimensions or aspects of his saving work: in traditional language, as prophet, priest, and king. The prophetic office has to do with his bringing us to know the truth; the priestly office has to do with his healing our relationship with God; and the kingly or royal office has to do with his guiding and empowering us toward fullness of life in community. The church, through its proclamation of the Word, its celebration of the sacraments, and the ordering of its common life, bears witness to what God has done and is doing through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in this way that our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith affirm the classic Reformation definitions of the visible church of Christ—and also find much common ground with other streams of Christian tradition so that together we might understand the church to be "a community of witness, . . . a community of worship, . . . [and] a community of discipleship" (lines 652–57).

*Wonder, Love, and Praise* calls us to acknowledge in this connection that (borrowing the words of the Westminster Confession) this visible church "hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible" (lines 569–71). The visibility at stake here has little to do with the amount of real estate a particular church owns, the size of its membership roll or its budget, or the impressiveness of its architecture. It has to do rather with the extent to which this particular community in its particular circumstances is showing forth the love that rejoices in the truth (1 Cor. 13:6): that is, the extent to which it is truly the community of witness, worship, and discipleship that it claims to be.

There are other themes taken up in the second part of the document that I must pass over in this brief review. There are, for example, some elements for a basic theology of ministry and ministerial leadership. There is also some reflection on the ecumenical document's helpful treatment of diversity in the church—"Legitimate diversity in the life of communion is a gift from the Lord," which the ecumenical document affirms (§28, p. 16)—as well on some of our struggles with that gift (lines 599–639). While more on this aspect appears below, this review of

the first two parts of *Wonder, Love, and Praise* closes by returning briefly to the theme of ambiguity, mentioned earlier.

In a recent and well-received book on ecclesiology entitled *Church, World and the Christian Life*, Nicholas M. Healy laments the fact that so many proposed theological understandings of the church are what he calls “blueprint ecclesiologies.”<sup>13</sup> They look very attractive on paper but they do not adequately take into account the situation on the ground. I am reminded of Francis Bacon’s line, written some four hundred years ago, about “philosophers” who “make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths; and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light because they are so high.”<sup>14</sup> We could easily find ourselves with a blueprint ecclesiology if we just rested content with the affirmation that the church is the gift of God, and implicitly denied, or at least neglected to attend to, the fact that it is also our creation. As we receive the gift, as we appropriate it—to *appropriate* something means “to make something one’s own”—we shape it to our own uses, as well as shaping ourselves in accord with it. *We make use of the church* in all sorts of ways; and these human uses deserve our careful study and reflection. As our text says (lines 416–26):

Like other religious traditions and communities, Christian churches serve a variety of human needs and purposes, in ways that vary a great deal from one place and time to another. They commonly serve human needs for order, coherence, stability, belief-reinforcement, companionship, ethical guidance, and so forth. They are affected at every point by the typical ways human beings interact with each other in the satisfaction of those needs. They are also put to use in the service of other interests on the part of adherents and “outsiders” alike, for example, by being made to serve particular political and economic ends. No one acquainted with the history of the Christian churches from the earliest centuries onward can fail to acknowledge this complex intertwining of human needs, desires, ambitions, and fears in that history. Sometimes it is much easier to recognize those elements in the life of the church in some other place and time than in one’s own.

This ambiguity, so evident in our own history and current experience, is well described by another recent writer who observes that

the church is a divine-human institution. The Spirit is mixed up in it, and we do not know what it looks like until it is already before us. Nobody invented the . . . church, nor would anybody have invented it in the form in which it evolved. It could not have emerged without builders, of course, for which reason there was and is much that is human about it, sometimes for good, sometimes not. But the Lord also builds the house.<sup>15</sup>

The church is the gift of the triune God. It is inherent in the gift of saving grace, the grace that is offered to all, that draws us into community with the triune God and with other human creatures, and that, in doing so, transforms our lives so that we may learn to live in love, truth, and joy and thanksgiving. To be disciples is to be learners, after all; that is the very meaning of the word. As disciples of Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth, and the life,” we are called and empowered to recover our human vocation to live in wonder, love, and praise, and, by so doing, to bear witness to that possibility to others: to help others also to become learners, to accept his yoke and learn from him. In this way the church is both a school of wisdom and a community of witness.

But in affirming this, we must also keep in mind the implications of the fact that “the Church is both a divine and a human reality.” It is *God’s gift* to us, but it is God’s gift *to us*, and we have the freedom and the responsibility that comes with being recipients of such a gift.

### 3.

The third and final part of *Wonder, Love, and Praise* deals with some questions that I take to be relevant to reflection on the issues before us here and now.

First, how might we characterize the particular role of The United Methodist Church within the “Church Universal”? What is its niche in the ecclesial ecology? Second, what insights might our participation in the ecumenical discussion generate to help us deal more constructively and effectively with the vexing issues surrounding “legitimate diversity,” both as they affect our own life and mission in The United Methodist Church and in our ongoing relations with other Christian communities? Third, how might a renewed ecclesial vision inform our deliberations about our polity—that is, about how we structure our common life in the service of our mission? (lines 823–30)

#### **“First, how might we characterize the particular role of The United Methodist Church within the ‘Church Universal’? What is its niche in the ecclesial ecology?”**

Regarding the first question, the paper proposes three markers of United Methodist identity. These are not exclusive to our tradition, and the extent to which we actually succeed in living them out is, of course, another question, but these would seem to be things we would like to be known by. One (lines 849–889) has to do with the scope of grace, in both senses of the term *scope*: that is, the *extent* of God’s grace (offered to all, not just to a privileged few), and its *aim*, or what it is meant to accomplish (our full renewal in God’s image, what the Gospel of John calls “fullness of life” for all of God’s creatures). The vision of the church proposed in the first two parts of the paper is certainly in accord with this marker.

A second marker of United Methodist identity (lines 890–910) has to do with the characteristic of both polity and ethos that we associate with the term *connectionalism*, which is addressed in more detail below.

The third marker named is

a commitment to *theological reflection* as the task of the whole church. The presence in the *Book of Discipline* not only of doctrinal standards, but also of a statement on “our theological task,” indicates the importance of this commitment. Note that theological reflection does not *replace* standards of doctrine; we need and affirm both.

“The theological task, though related to the Church’s doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling ‘to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.’”<sup>16</sup>

By their very character and content, our doctrinal standards not only permit but require the sort of responsible, thoughtful critical engagement that “Our Theological Task” describes. Our theological work must be “both critical and constructive,” “both individual and communal,” “contextual and incarnational,” and “essentially practical.”<sup>17</sup> (lines 912–25)

This sort of theological work belongs to every responsible body and responsible individual in the church.

#### **“Second, what insights might our participation in the ecumenical discussion generate to help us deal more constructively and effectively with the vexing issues surrounding**

**‘legitimate diversity,’ both as they affect our own life and mission in The United Methodist Church and in our ongoing relations with other Christian communities?’**

On the second of our questions, here is a pertinent passage from the study text:

It should be said that our problem is not conflict. Our problem is in the way we sometimes deal with conflict. We would do well to remember at the outset that conflict is a “given” in the church. It is to be expected. Disagreements creating conflict may arise over (to use the Wesleyan language) “what to teach, how to teach, and what to do.”<sup>18</sup> Embedded in and accompanying these disagreements may be other, sometimes hidden or unacknowledged, difficulties also leading to tensions: antagonisms stemming from the complex histories and relationships of the persons and groups involved, differences over political or cultural values, struggles over the possession and uses of power, and so forth. Different sources and varieties of conflict may be interrelated in any given instance. Given the variety of the human uses of the church, it sometimes happens that conflict over one issue is promoted or exploited by individuals or groups as a means of accomplishing some other aim, or in order to satisfy other needs. Conflict is as complex as it is common. (lines 935–46)

The paper goes on to say that our having differing judgments among us on important matters may be a good and productive thing, if it leads us into sharing our experiences and insights in ways that yield new understanding—understanding that surpasses whatever any one of us may have brought into the conversation. In this way, difference is a value, and we ought not to put a premium on the avoidance of conflict. We ought, instead, to show the world how conflict can be explored thoughtfully and in an atmosphere of mutual respect, as an occasion for growth. The English Roman Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash tells of a parish priest who one day remarked of a neighboring parish, “They have so little charity in that place that they can’t even disagree with each other.”<sup>19</sup> Woe to the church of which that can be said, whether it is a local congregation or a denomination.

Especially relevant to the situation of a church that has moved into many different cultures and contexts—such as Nicholas Lash’s, or our own—is the fact that, as our study document says:

[S]ome differences within the church aid the church in its mission to a diverse world. New technologies give rise to previously unimagined possibilities; new knowledge changes our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live. When the church is confronted with a new situation and is pondering its best response, it is well to have a wide range of experience and perspectives at hand. To understand and respect one another’s differences and the ways in which they contribute to the church’s fulfillment of its mission is itself a mode of sharing; and something like the ecumenical pattern of ‘convergence,’ in which differences are held in the midst of a deeper and richer unity, is a hoped-for experience. (lines 961–70)

When we are faced with unavoidable differences that appear to threaten that deeper and richer unity, however—when we seem to have a situation on our hands that goes beyond “legitimate diversity”—what then? At that point, our study document first says: not so fast.

One important consideration in this connection is that we may not yet be in a position to render a responsible judgment on the matter at hand. We may not know all that we need to know. We may not have adequate conceptual resources. We may not have the spiritual maturity to see what we need to see. We may not even have posed our questions rightly. We may, in short, need to gain some intellectual and emotional humility, and to cultivate some dispositions that would permit wisdom to grow. (lines 987–92)

We may also be succumbing to a very human tendency to block and reject the very things we need. Ruled knowingly or unknowingly by our fears or our self-interests, we may instead pursue strategies that will subvert mutual understanding and create deeper separation, even alienation. In this connection, our paper turns to some familiar counsel of John Wesley's, from his sermon on "Catholic Spirit" and from his introduction to his published *Standard Sermons* (lines 993–1035). But such counsel is effective only when it is received and taken to heart. Maybe we need to take a further step.

The Wesleyan counsel quoted in the study paper—such as his observation that we can be sure that we are mistaken in at least part of what we take to be true, but we may not know in just *which* part—came to Wesley, directly or indirectly, from some seventeenth-century English Protestant writers. Some of their wisdom was compiled and published for the benefit of the Methodists in America by Bishop Francis Asbury in 1792, under the title *The Causes, Evils, and Cures of Heart and Church Divisions*.<sup>20</sup> It was composed of selections from the works of two Puritan leaders, Jeremiah Burroughs and Richard Baxter. They, along with a number of their colleagues in both Britain and North America, had something to do with the eventual development of what we have come to call "denominations." For these seventeenth-century leaders, as they were contemplating separating (or being separated) from the established Church of England, it was vital to recognize that one's own church is part of the church universal, but not the whole church, and that the scope of the true church is known only to God. They believed that they were right to act upon their own convictions, yet importantly, "they were aware that they might be wrong."<sup>21</sup> And so, rather than regarding all other churches as false and schismatic, they avowed a hope to learn from them. As one such group wrote to those from whom they had recently parted: "We see as much cause to suspect the integrity of our own hearts as yours; and so much the more, as being more privy to the deceitfulness of our own hearts than to yours . . . which causeth us with great reverence to accept and receive what further light God may be pleased to impart to us by you."<sup>22</sup>

These leaders believed that differences among Christians may, in fact, be used by God to bring us to a fuller understanding of the truth. One historian, in describing these developments, rightly and vitally observed: "This, quite obviously, is no doctrine of relativity so far as truth itself is concerned; the relativity is in terms of one's apprehension of the truth."<sup>23</sup> To apply such insights to how we deal not only with differences among the churches but also with differences within our own church community may be among our most pressing tasks.

**"Third, how might a renewed ecclesial vision inform our deliberations about our polity—that is, about how we structure our common life in the service of our mission?"**

This leads us naturally into the third of the questions raised in the final part of the study paper. *Wonder, Love, and Praise* (lines 1056ff.) observes:

[A church's polity] has to do with the way the church orders its own life responsibly so as to fulfill its calling. . . .

The way the church orders its own life is itself an aspect of its witness to the world. When its polity enables and manifests an openness to the community-forming power of the Holy Spirit, when it serves the church's mandate "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) with such power and clarity as to bring to humankind a new understanding of the possibilities for fruitful life together, then it has fulfilled its purpose. (lines 1057–66)

As United Methodists, “we need forms of polity that are consistent with our core convictions: that is, forms that honor the radically inclusive scope of God’s saving grace, forms that recognize and build upon the transformative character of that grace, and forms that will serve, rather than subvert, the growth of genuine community” (lines 1091–95).

That is quite an order. In its brief comment on this question (lines 1096–1115), *Wonder, Love, and Praise* refers to the Methodist usage of “conference” as a resource. It may be well to bring into the picture the other hallowed Wesleyan concept that was mentioned earlier, that of *connectionalism*—if only for a moment. One problem is that there is no concept of connectionalism; or perhaps more accurately, there are many concepts of it.<sup>24</sup> Methodist use of the term *connexion* arose in the eighteenth century and derived from the fact that certain religious societies in Britain were at that time considered legitimate or lawful if they were supervised by, or “in connexion with,” an Anglican cleric. As John Wesley was a bona fide Anglican cleric, the Methodist societies were set up to be in connection with him; and he insisted on this point, vigorously. As anyone familiar with John Wesley’s leadership style might attest, *connection* in his day did not immediately have some of the connotations we have come to associate with it: interdependence, mutuality, consultation, the sharing of power, and so forth. It chiefly meant being under Wesley’s direction, or under the direction of those appointed by him. It had, and for many it still has, strong connotations of centralized authority, and of an effective chain of command. These can be in some tension with the other connotations just mentioned, though it should be granted that tension goes with just about any arrangement involving authority.

### **Conciliarity**

*Wonder, Love, and Praise* suggests that “‘conciliarity’ is a related (though not synonymous) term in the ecumenical discussion” (lines 892–3) for what connectionalism has come to mean among us. That is not a novel idea. A number of ecumenical theologians—not only Methodists—have recognized a kinship between the way Methodists have come to speak of connection (as a “network of relationships”) and conciliar thought.<sup>25</sup> Conciliarity has to do with the ways that local Christian churches, or groups of them, relate to one another, either directly or through representative gatherings, to learn from one another and occasionally to decide on matters of common concern on which it is deemed important for them to have a common witness or practice. The Methodist conference system, understood as a connectional system, can be seen as a form of conciliarity. But *conciliarity* in its fuller usage is a term that might move both *conference* and *connectionalism* in a promising direction, if we were to explore it further. It may help to undergird those related values of interdependence, mutuality, consultation, and sharing of power, and might help us understand better how we might embed such values in our polity. A conciliar model might be a fruitful guide to our future as a worldwide church, enriching our current repertoire of concepts. That is to say, conciliarity has implications internally, with regard to our polity and relationships within The United Methodist Church, as well as externally, with regard to our relationships with other Christian communities.

## **Denomination or Denominationalism?**

It may be particularly important to undertake this exploration now, as The United Methodist Church seeks guidance for its own internal life as well as for its relations with other Christian bodies. The report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of The United Methodist Church to

the 2008 General Conference expressed a hope that as we embrace that global or (as we would say now) worldwide nature, we might “model a new way of being church in the world” and “offer the world a better version of unity and interdependence.”<sup>26</sup> And it offered this critique of the current structure of the church: “It disempowers central conferences from being fully actualized within the body and allows the church in the United States to escape responsibility from dealing with its internal issues.” Both the hope and the critique might be constructively addressed by going more deeply into the promise of conciliarity.

The United Methodist Church recognizes itself as a denomination, as did its predecessor bodies, pretty much from the time they got organized as churches. Historians and sociologists who study such things are generally agreed that, although its roots may go back through English Protestantism to the Reformation, the denomination as a “way of being church” is largely an American product, fitted to American circumstances. Not all churches, even within the United States, readily fit the description of a denomination: Catholics and Episcopalians, long regarding themselves as parts of a worldwide communion and structure, have difficulty matching their experience and self-understanding to that model, though they may admit that for practical purposes within a given national or regional setting they have to fit themselves partly into that frame; many Baptists have strong reservations about the idea, believing that the congregation is the real church; and at the same time a fair number of megachurches, independent missions, nondenominational movements, and other sorts of Christian enterprises reject the model. Sometimes such movements *become* denominations in fact, if not in self-understanding, as their needs for stability, organization, authorized leadership, and so on reach a certain point within civil contexts where “denomination” is the expected form of religious organization.

At their best, denominations are ways of giving the Christian movement the structure and resources it needs to thrive. There is an increasing recognition, though still a contested one, that “denomination” can be a useful category in ecclesiology. It can play a proper role in our theological understanding of the church—or at least, one that we cannot safely ignore—as an “intermediary” form of church. One student of the form has written that “denominations exist to mediate between two realities: the church universal and the local congregation. Denominations exist rightly only when they serve as a means for something else. . . . It is idolatry for denominations to proclaim themselves to be ends, whether the proclamation is made in word or deed.”<sup>27</sup> Still, whether the denomination is the most apt conceptual category for envisioning our particular future is an open question.

A question that has come in for some discussion lately is whether or not, or to what extent, the denomination is a serviceable institutional form in a worldwide context. The burden of proof would appear to fall on those who would want to give an affirmative answer. As noted, Anglicans and Catholics, who see themselves as members of worldwide communions, would not apply the term to themselves in that context at least, if at all. Nor would the Orthodox churches. Lutheran, Reformed, and free-church Protestant traditions, though generally organized as denominations or something close to that in many national or regional contexts, are not worldwide denominations. We have instead the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the Evangelical Church in Germany (itself composed of some twenty regional bodies), the Lutheran Church in Liberia, and so forth. The Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches are not striving for organic unity as one institution, but rather for something like conciliar fellowship. And indeed—as Michael Kinnamon’s list of “tangible signs of the new life of communion” would indicate—something like conciliar fellowship has come to replace the

old ideal of organic union as the goal of the ecumenical movement overall, as churches have reflected together on “the nature of the unity we seek.”<sup>28</sup>

If we look back on the past forty or more years of efforts by The United Methodist Church and its predecessors to come up with a structure more in keeping with the fact that this “denomination” resides in many countries on several continents and under vastly different social, cultural, political, and economic conditions, we may wonder to what extent these repeated efforts have come to grief because they have assumed, and even insisted upon, a denominational model for the “world church.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, I might ask in my relative ignorance (if not total innocence) to what extent the results have been determined by the effects of *denominationalism*—that is, the kind of idolatry in which the denomination becomes the end rather than the means. This is, as I say, a question raised in ignorance. However, I might ask more constructively, to what extent models other than *denomination* have been seriously entertained in these deliberations. How much thought has been given to how thorough a recasting of the denominational model would be required in order to make it work? Denominations are in trouble, in their traditional forms and functions, in many places in the world, for many reasons. It may be that we need something quite different for our future. And it may be that we have untapped resources within our United Methodist traditions as well as in the broader Christian tradition to bring to bear on this need.

In recent years, the Roman Catholic Church has described itself as a “community of communities.” In this spirit, a group of Lutheran and Catholic theologians meeting together for several years to work on the issues separating the churches, has proposed thinking of the church universal as a community or communion of churches (*communio ecclesiarum, Gemeinschaft der Kirchen*).<sup>30</sup> A leading Orthodox theologian some years ago remarked that “before we understand the place and the function of the council *in* the church, we must . . . see *the Church itself as a council*.”<sup>31</sup> With such images before it, the World Council of Churches some years ago observed: “As the church itself is an ‘assembly’ and appears as assembly both in worship and many other expressions of its life, so it needs both at the local and on all other possible levels representative assemblies in order to answer the questions which it faces.”<sup>32</sup> Each of these ways of speaking of a non-centralized unity in diversity, or diversity in unity, has a particular resonance and transmits particular values; perhaps the most straightforward for our purposes would be simply to envision the church as a community of communities.

We have been urged repeatedly in recent years to “rethink church,” and to find “a new way of being church.” To do so in our present moment requires moving beyond a US-centric denominational self-understanding, and moving beyond some of the temptations of *denominationalism* that may arise in connection with a national or cultural identity, toward greater catholicity—a catholicity *ad intra* as well as *ad extra*, so to speak. This in turn requires holding fast to some of the key insights of those English Puritan forebears mentioned earlier: that we—any particular “we”—are not the whole church, that we might be wrong in some of our convictions, and that we need to listen closely to those with whom we differ in order to hear whatever God may be saying to us through them.

The question for The United Methodist Church at this juncture is a local parallel to the question that drives the ecumenical discussion: How are we to find and live out an adequately diversified form of Christian community—one that could be a model and inspiration for an adequately diversified *human* community?

Ted Campbell, in an address to the World Methodist Council in September 2016, said that the question before United Methodists now may not be whether we divide—he suggested that division is fairly likely, if not inevitable—but rather “whether we can divide well, or as well as

possible. Are there ways for United Methodist church bodies to divide that will minimize the distractions to mission that so often accompany divisions? That will allow more easily for future unities? That will perhaps create new unities even at the points of division? Can we divide in ways that keep us somehow responsible to our Wesleyan and ecumenical partners?"<sup>33</sup> I appreciate his way of putting the question. I also appreciate his saying, earlier in the address, that if what we are faced with is a separation into two groups, he would have a hard time fitting into either one. I am right there with him. United Methodists are really not divisible into two groups. (James Thurber says somewhere, "People can be divided into two groups. There are those who divide people into two groups, and there are those who don't." I belong to the second group.<sup>34</sup>) So my question is this: Can we, by the grace of God, come up with a way to allow adequate diversification that does not involve division, and that, over time, permits a fuller realization of and witness to genuine unity?

As noted earlier, there are times when we human beings are not at all interested in seeking or promoting mutual understanding. Sometimes we will do our best to avoid or prevent it. We have a range of effective instruments at hand for that purpose. Fear is one of the more accessible and more potent of these. When, for instance, we find that someone is trying to make us afraid, it is well to try to discover why they are doing so, and what they have to gain by our fear. Often, what they will gain—or at least what they hope to gain—is some sort of power or control. Our fear may cause us to stop doing something we are doing, something the fear-mongers do not want done. Or it may cause us to become suspicious of someone else, or to become defensive rather than open in our relations with others, and all of this may work to someone else's perceived advantage. The use of "wedge issues" and polarizing strategies in the churches as well as in our civil communities has become all too common, and it is up to all of us to see this for what it is, and to resist it; to refuse to divide people into two groups, and to insist on finding ways to make our conflicts serve our mission.

#### **Four Ecclesiological Concepts**

There are four ecclesiological concepts that might be of use to us here, if only as examples of the sort of imagination we may need. One is *subsidiarity*; another is *reconciled diversity*; the third is *differentiated consensus*; and the fourth is *reception*.

*Subsidiarity* is perhaps the simplest to employ, in principle. As commonly stated, it is the principle that decisions are to be made and policies adopted on the lowest possible level. The language of "levels" may be unfortunate, but it seems built into the term itself. Instead of "on the lowest possible level" we might say "in the least general, or most specific, context allowable." Perhaps we need a term that evokes the image, not of higher-ups and lower-downs, but of smaller circles within larger circles, whether we are thinking geographically or in some other relevant frame. Put another way: "This principle consists in not taking from individuals the tasks which they are able to undertake on their own, and in avoiding the transfer to a higher authority of functions that those authorities more immediately concerned can normally assume."<sup>35</sup> Some version of this principle is, I take it, at work in the current effort to work out a "General Book of Discipline," dealing with those things that are essential to the maintenance and flourishing of our unity as United Methodists, and then leaving it to regional conferences to work out the legislation and polity arrangements that are most suitable to their own circumstances where general uniformity is not required. If all goes well, the principle can be carried further in to smaller units, including the local congregation or ministry context. It is probably better, as a rule, to begin with the specific and work out toward the general, since doing it the other way around

often results in giving the impression that there is a general norm (inevitably crafted from some specific context) which might, if necessary, be adapted grudgingly to local circumstances.

One advantage to subsidiarity, as one aspect of a conciliar future, is this: People have generally found it much easier to work toward mutual understanding when the effort does not involve an internal struggle over resources and power. As Upton Sinclair once observed, it is difficult to get a person to understand something when their salary depends on their not understanding it. It is not just salary that may be at stake; it could be authority, prestige, honor, privilege, or self-image; in any case, the larger the context in which something is at issue, the larger the stakes. When the scope is reduced, or when we are able to de-escalate things and qualify the outcome of a resolution in some important ways, this may enable folks to relax just a bit, and it may open the way to a more satisfactory outcome in the longer term.

The second concept, “reconciled diversity” is, in a way, subsidiarity after the fact. The term is used explicitly by the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe to designate the way that churches with historically conflicting ways of ordering themselves—different structures of ordained ministry and oversight, for example—can recognize one another’s orders as legitimate, though not binding on themselves.<sup>36</sup> The principle applies also, to some extent, to diversity in matters of official doctrine and doctrinal standards. It operates, at least tacitly, in many other settings than the European one where it has been explicitly invoked. More recently it has been given new currency by Pope Francis’s use of it in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and on subsequent occasions. There, Francis has emphasized that unity in reconciled diversity is the work of the Holy Spirit. It does not come about because we have decided to overcome our divisions, but because God is not allowing our divisions to have the last word.

With regard to some of our differences, for example, on ethical issues, the term “reconciled diversity” may sound too final, as if we were content to “agree to disagree” and no longer to explore the questions on which we differ. “Reconciled diversity” should not be applied too readily in such cases. On such matters, perhaps those involved need to make it clear that it is not our *differences* that are reconciled but rather that *we* are being reconciled (by God!) *despite* our differences, and that we hope to be led to fuller understanding and to fuller life together as we continue the journey.

“Differentiated consensus” is a term coined some years ago by Harding Meyer, long-time director of the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, a term that quickly came into general use. It describes the way that churches with seemingly conflicting teachings on a given point may, through a process of discussion and sharing, come to understand that these teachings are not actually in conflict. They do this by uncovering the “fundamental intentions” or originating concerns underlying seemingly opposed doctrinal statements, and finding that these—and the resulting doctrines, properly applied—are compatible. Some seemingly intractable disagreements between Catholics and Protestants on subjects such as ordination, the sacraments, and the doctrine of justification by faith, have been transformed by this experience, as the parties come to understand what gave rise to the differences. In such cases, each party can maintain its doctrine (and not rescind it or adopt the other’s) and be understood as affirming something the other would not need to deny.<sup>37</sup> When this principle is applied, not only to doctrines and practices arising in different historical contexts, but also to those pertaining to different *sociocultural* contexts, it may have greater relevance to some of our current struggles.

Our fourth ecclesiological concept, *reception*, has received a good deal of attention in recent ecumenical work, but it refers to a phenomenon as old as the Christian church. It is closely connected with the theme of conciliarity. Briefly put, it refers to the way in which the decisions

reached in council—in a synod or assembly or gathering of representative Christian leaders—attain their real validity only as they are received, interpreted, and put into practice throughout the church. Speaking of the authority of the early ecumenical councils (for instance, Nicaea and Chalcedon), a widely respected ecumenical study group observes:

Thus, the authority of a council does not function automatically. A certain number of conditions must be met before a conciliar gathering is considered legitimate and authoritative. Among these conditions, the phenomenon of *reception* is essential. A council can never be considered apart from the process of reception to which it gives rise, that is to say, the fact that a whole group of ecclesial communities with their bishops recognize its teaching as an expression of the apostolic faith.<sup>38</sup>

The importance of reception is such that—as the history of the Christian movement makes clear—a relatively minor regional council may come to be regarded as an ecumenical council if its teaching comes to be widely accepted, while “the decision of an ecumenical council may be forgotten.”<sup>39</sup> The process of reception may take decades, or longer; in a sense, it is an ongoing and never-completed process, but rather one in which the church is continually receiving, understanding, and passing on the apostolic witness.<sup>40</sup>

Recent ecumenical achievements, such as the World Council of Churches’ texts *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1983) and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2014), and the Lutheran–Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), are evidence of the importance of this continuing process of reception in an ecumenical context. Here, it underlies the principle of “differentiated consensus.” But consider for a moment its possible relevance to our current differences over doctrinal and ethical teaching within The United Methodist Church. What are we to make of the fact that some of the decisions on such points made by successive General Conferences—by majority votes of varying proportions—have apparently not been “received,” at least not in a positive manner, by a significant proportion of our members, clergy, annual conferences, and bishops? Has the concept of reception, and current ecumenical reflection on it, any bearing on this situation? If so, does it offer any guidance as to how we might best proceed to find a way forward?

These are only a few of the insights and provocations that we might garner from our ecumenical efforts, and from the renewed vision of the church that is worked out, however provisionally, in *Wonder, Love, and Praise*. I hope that the coming period of study, reflection, and response will lead to greater understanding and to a fuller realization of our common vocation as Christians.

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### **An Ecclesial Vision for The United Methodist Church—Charles M. Wood**

<sup>1</sup> The enabling legislation is found in Resolution #8007, “Study of Ecclesiology,” *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 676–77. The document is not mentioned there by name, because it had not yet been translated and made available in the requisite official languages of the General Conference. Currently, the English version is available online at <http://www.oucir.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Wonder-Love-and-Praise-English-final-draft-1-2017.pdf>, and references to passages in it in this paper will be by line number in that version. Both the document itself and a study guide for it are to be made available at [www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise](http://www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise). The hope is that the document will be significantly improved in light of the reflection and response generated during the period of study.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶¶443–50.

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- <sup>3</sup> Michael Kinnamon, "What Can the Churches Say Together about the Church?" *Ecclesiology* 8 (2012): 296, reprinted in his *Can a Renewal Movement Be Renewed?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), where the passage referred to is on page 40; the internal quotation is from *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), §32.
- <sup>4</sup> Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2014), downloadable at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>. It is also available there in several other languages.
- <sup>5</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 384.
- <sup>6</sup> "When all thy mercies, O my God, / my rising soul surveys, / transported with the view, I'm lost / in wonder, love and praise." Joseph Addison, "Hymn on Gratitude to the Deity," in *The poetical works of the Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.* (Glasgow: np, 1750), 198.
- <sup>7</sup> *Wonder, Love, and Praise: A Supplement to the Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997).
- <sup>8</sup> "Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 346.
- <sup>9</sup> John Wesley, "God's Approbation of His Works," in *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 397.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles M. Wood, "Methodist Doctrine: An Understanding," in *Love That Rejoices in the Truth: Theological Explorations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 1–22.
- <sup>11</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1950), 775.
- <sup>12</sup> Wesley, "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," *Works*, 2:581.
- <sup>13</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 32–49 passim.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in L. C. Knights, *Explorations* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 115.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Valliere, *Conciliarism: A History of Decision-Making in the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 69.
- <sup>16</sup> *Discipline* (2012), ¶105:78, citation in original.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶105: 79–80, (citation in original).
- <sup>18</sup> *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack, vol. 10, *Works* (2011), 778.
- <sup>19</sup> Nicholas Lash, "The Church—A School of Wisdom?" in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 72.
- <sup>20</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Causes, Evils, and Cures, of Heart and Church Divisions: Extracted from the Works of Mr. Richard Baxter, and Mr. Jeremiah Burroughs* (Philadelphia: Printed by Parry Hall, 1792). The book was frequently reprinted in the nineteenth century and has lately been reproduced electronically and in print. An abridged paraphrase "study edition" was offered by Abingdon Press in 2016, prior to the General Conference.
- <sup>21</sup> Winthrop S. Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity: A Seventeenth Century Conception," *Church History* 24 (1955): 36.
- <sup>22</sup> *An Apologetical Narration* (1643), quoted in Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis," 35.
- <sup>23</sup> Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis," 40.
- <sup>24</sup> Russell M. Richey has devoted much effort to sorting out this subject. See, for example, his *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009).
- <sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Valliere, *Conciliarism*, 10, 30.
- <sup>26</sup> "Worldwide Ministry through The United Methodist Church: A Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church," *Daily Christian Advocate, Advance Edition* (2008): 945. On first reading, I thought that "version" was probably a misprint for "vision." But perhaps what was meant was indeed "a better version of unity and interdependence," better, that is, than the version(s) offered by schemes for economic globalization.
- <sup>27</sup> Barry Ensign-George, "Denomination as Ecclesiological Category: Sketching an Assessment," in *Denomination: Assessing an Ecclesiological Category*, eds. Paul M. Collins and Barry Ensign-George (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2011), 6.
- <sup>28</sup> Kinnamon, "What Can the Churches Say Together about the Church?"
- <sup>29</sup> For an overview up to 1998, see R. Lawrence Turnipseed, "A Brief History of the Discussion of The United Methodist Church as a 'World Church,'" in *The Ecumenical Implications of the Discussions of "The Global Nature of The United Methodist Church,"* ed. Bruce Robbins (New York: General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, 1999), 12–34. A similar account and analysis of the past two decades might be instructive.
- <sup>30</sup> Group of Farfa Sabina, *Communion of Churches and Petrine Ministry: Lutheran-Catholic Convergences*, trans. Paul Misner (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014).

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- <sup>31</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Towards a Theology of Councils," *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 163.
- <sup>32</sup> *Councils and the Ecumenical Movement*, World Council of Churches Studies 5 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), 10.
- <sup>33</sup> Ted A. Campbell, "One Faith: Address to World Methodist Conference, September 1, 2016," unpublished. I am grateful to Professor Campbell for a copy of his address.
- <sup>34</sup> See Charles M. Wood, "The Primacy of Scripture," *Love That Rejoices in the Truth: Theological Explorations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 35–42.
- <sup>35</sup> Le Groupe des Dombes, "*One Teacher*": *Doctrinal Authority in the Church*, trans. Catherine E. Clifford (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 148–49.
- <sup>36</sup> The summary and critical assessment provided by the British Methodist scholar David Carter is informative: "Unity in Reconciled Diversity: Cop-out or Rainbow Church?" *Theology* 113, no. 876 (November 2010): 411–20. See also "The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling," the Canberra Statement of the World Council of Churches (1991), at <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-unity-of-the-church-gift-and-calling-the-canberra-statement>.
- <sup>37</sup> Having used the term in ecumenical circles since around 1980, Meyer provided his own account of its meaning in an influential essay on "Ecumenical Consensus," *Gregorianum* 77, no. 2 (1996): 213–25. He offered further reflections on its development and significance in "*Der Prägung einer Formel: Ursprung und Intention*," in *Einheit—aber wie? Zur Tragfähigkeit der ökumenischen Formel vom "differenzierten Konsens*," ed. Harald Wagner (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 36–58.
- <sup>38</sup> Le Groupe des Dombes, "One Teacher," 14.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.
- <sup>40</sup> A fine, readable treatment of the concept is William G. Rusch, *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007).