

Occasional Papers

PREPARING A NEW GENERATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERS

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In Praise of Bureaucracy: Mission, Structure, and Renewal in The United Methodist Church

Hendrik R. Pieterse

“Organizing religious work is a theological task.”¹

Methodists have always felt deeply ambivalent toward their churchly bureaucracy, at times praising it for its potency in enabling world-transforming mission, at other times lamenting it for its dampening of denominational vitality. As Russell Richey observes, “Over machinery—the central, executive, decision-making apparatus of the denomination—American Methodists have gloried and agonized from the beginning.”² I doubt too many United Methodists today would disagree that ours is a time of agonizing over rather than of glorying in our machinery, our bureaucracy. For many of the United Methodist faithful, our church’s structure, especially as embodied at the national level in general boards and agencies, has become a blockage, an encumbrance to effective mission and ministry in a rapidly changing society and world. And so, calls for revitalization and renewal, for becoming a movement again, for trading in maintenance for mission and breaching the bureaucratic walls that have shut us in and shut us off from the world that is the rightful object of our mission have become commonplace.³

The latest exercise in churchly agonizing is a high-profile proposal emanating from the Council of Bishops, a comprehensive “call to action” to reorder the denomination “so that leadership, structures, funding, and practices are aligned for faithful witness and fruitful ministry.” Desiring to base the proposal on “independent” and “objective” data and not merely on “opinion” gathering within the church, the Council’s Call to Action Committee employed the services of two consulting firms in a project of “unprecedented data-mining research” to conduct, respectively, an operational assessment of the denomination and an analysis of “best practices for building and sustaining congregational vitality and effectiveness.” Indeed, according to the committee’s report, the research reveals that the principal “adaptive challenge” facing The United Methodist Church today is to “increase the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” All the denomination’s resources, attention, and energy—from local church to annual conference to general agencies to Council of Bishops—should be resolutely redirected toward achieving this aim. Specifically, in its list of five recommendations

for concretely addressing this adaptive challenge, the report suggests that the program and administrative agencies be consolidated and their respective portfolios and resources be aligned with the church's commitment to building vital congregations.⁴

While the bishops' decision to request data mining research and analyses of the denomination's structures drawn largely from corporate business and organizational models is all to the good, I lament the absence of explicit, let alone sustained, theological examination in the process. In what follows, I plead for just such explicit and sustained theological analysis *as an essential part* of any current proposals to reorder our churchly bureaucracy, especially at the general church level. At stake in my complaint is more than the expected grumblings of a theologian upset at an apparent disregard of his craft. I fear that, absent in-depth, persistent theological scrutiny, we can easily miss the fact that our current agonizing over denominational machinery is at heart theological. Put differently, if, as Richey has pointed out, Methodists embed their beliefs, values, and theology in their practices, and if they embody some of those practices in their denominational structures,⁵ then structure, organization, bureaucracy *ipso facto* take on theological significance. As "embodied theology,"⁶ church structures, including general agencies, are visible enactments of the church's ecclesial self-understanding, concrete expressions of our ecclesiology in practice. Structure, mission, and ecclesial identity are inextricably linked. Church structures, then, are not organizationally neutral, straightforwardly comparable or exchangeable with other nonprofit or even for-profit organizations. That such comparisons are fruitful at different levels, of course, no sane individual would deny. However, taken at face value, such analyses often overlook more fundamental factors that explain and drive the shape and behavior of church bureaucracy—a shape and behavior based in divergent theological values and commitments at the assumptive level of church life. Unless these theological factors are taken into account, I suggest, efforts to restructure and reorganize will have limited success at best. This means that no amount of data gathering and institutional analysis that do not incorporate deep-running theological reflection will succeed in enabling United Methodists today adequately to interpret what ails our beloved church, how to understand our identity as church, and what concrete shape our

connection should take for faithful ministry in the years ahead. Such is the argument I wish to pursue in the pages ahead.⁷ Given the intent of this lecture, I focus my reflections on church structures at the general church level, and with specific reference to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

I begin with a brief analysis of two documents in which the general church structure, and particularly the boards and agencies, comes under particular scrutiny: the aforementioned *Call to Action Steering Team Report* (hereafter, *CTA*) and the denominational operational assessment published as *The United Methodist Church: Operational Assessment Project* (hereafter, *OAP*).⁸ In the process, I will seek to indicate how insufficient or, at times, nonexistent *intentional* theological examination leads these analyses to overlook important theological explanatory factors, fail to grasp (or at least, to register) the theological implications of some of their conceptual moves and structural recommendations, and neglect to appreciate the role of their own, largely tacit, theological assumptions in shaping their positive proposals for structural change.

In the second half of the essay I offer a few reflections on the constructive role that theological reflection might play in assisting United Methodists in our present efforts to reorder the denomination for faithful ministry. The chief contribution of a theological perspective, I suggest, is to articulate the crucial link between denominational structure and denominational identity, a link that purely corporate analyses such as the above often miss. Treating churchly structures or bureaucracy as embodied ecclesial practices allows us to see how, for good or ill, structure and identity mutually shape and reflect each other; how, therefore, unilateral organizational efforts at aligning or rightsizing denominational structures can dramatically alter, often unintentionally, central convictions at the heart of our identity as church; and, positively, how linking practice and identity in this way might offer important insights for profound denominational renewal of our United Methodist connection and for the important role the agencies can play in this process. My ultimate aim is to argue that the question of our *identity* as a people called United Methodists, understood and lived out in a vibrant connection, lies at the heart of any effective reordering of our churchly bureaucracy. It is a robust sense of who we are as a connectional people that provides the proper vantage

point for discerning the ecclesial practices we need for effective ministry today and the organizational shape these practices should take at all levels of the connection, including the general church. Specifically, I propose that United Methodists retrieve holiness of heart and life, interpreted through the biblical-theological concept of hospitality, as our churchly identity. I suggest, further, that we resolutely reclaim the Wesleyan means of grace—works of mercy and works of piety—as core practices of holiness as hospitality; and that, from within their formative rhythms, we discern the practices United Methodists should live out uniquely through the ministry of the general agencies. As a working definition of *practices* as the interrelated disciplines through which grace crafts the holy life over time, I appeal to Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass: Christian practices, they say, are “*things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.*”⁹ And on the inextricable and mutually conditioning relationship between practices and identity, I find Miroslav Volf’s description amenable: “Christian practices are such that a Christian normative vision is part and parcel of what these practices are; and Christian beliefs are such that informing Christian practices is part and parcel of what these beliefs do. Practices are essentially belief-shaped, and beliefs are essentially practice-shaping.”¹⁰

In focusing on the question of ecclesial identity and how it relates to ecclesial structure, I am emboldened by findings from a major recent research project involving eight mainline denominations, including The United Methodist Church. The fundamental issue facing North American denominations today, conclude project leaders David Roozen and James Nieman, is not decline or even death but “instead how they can and do bear their particular legacies faithfully and effectively into a changing future.” The second is that these denominations’ national structures, intimately linked as they are to overall identity issues, can play a critical role in strengthening and mediating revitalized denominational identity.¹¹ I conclude the essay with reflections on ways in which the general agencies, and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, specifically, can serve such a mediating role in our current struggle to redefine and revitalize the United Methodist connection for mission and ministry.

A Call to Action for a Church In Crisis

In this section, I briefly cast a theological eye on the diagnosis and key recommendations for change in the reports from the Call to Action Committee. In the process, I ask about implications for the identity of the church and for the place and role of the general agencies in the vision of the United Methodist connection that emerges from these documents.

I begin with a reminder that the reports are not bereft of theological reflection. On the contrary. A cursory look through these documents finds theological, doctrinal, and polity terminology strewn throughout. However, these references are largely perfunctory, anecdotal, and decorative, lacking the coherence of an argument that would provide them with the necessary analytical force. A primary reason for this, I suspect, lies in the committee’s methodological choice to privilege “objective research” over “theories” and “opinion.” (CTA, 41) (Should one assume that the committee considers theology theory and opinion?) Aside from the conceptual difficulties with this objective-subjective schema, for our purposes it has two important practical effects: first, it encourages an uncritical stance toward the methodological approaches and research tools used for data-mining; and, second, it discourages systematic, deliberate theological appraisals as so much theory, thus prohibiting theology from doing any substantive critical and constructive work. Yet, in the nature of the case, theological assumptions, values, metaphors, and beliefs play a role in the documents but now for the most part tacitly and unreflectively, below the surface—at the level of what John McClure and Burton Cooper call “operative theology.”¹² As such, the assumptions, values, and proclivities that *in fact* guide the committee’s analysis, shape its ecclesial vision, and prompt its recommendations for change rarely come up for critical scrutiny in the reports—despite the committee’s claim to have rooted the information, conclusions, and recommendations in their proposal “in the treasures of our Scriptural heritage and Wesleyan theological foundations.” (CTA, 16) In fact, as I pointed out above, the invocation of our heritage is largely perfunctory, anecdotal, and decorative. This is not to suggest that the committee would have arrived at different conclusions had it clarified an explicit theological framework for its work. It might not.

However, it would have required that the committee articulate how its theological predilections, its analysis, and its recommendations for change are informed by and comport with our scriptural and theological heritage. As it stands, what emerges from the committee's work is an understanding of the nature and function of the United Methodist connection and the value, place, and role of the general church within it that I believe are at odds with our deepest Wesleyan and Methodist ecclesial sensibilities. I briefly illustrate with a few examples.

Take the committee's diagnosis of the maladies afflicting the United Methodist machinery and the role of the general agencies in advancing or stymieing the church's mission. The committee's findings reveal a denomination fraught with "the absence of common definitions for the meaning of our mission statement, lack of trust, low levels of mutual respect, the frequent absence of civil dialogue, insufficient clarity about the precise roles and responsibilities of leaders, and a lack of agreed ways to measure success or assure collaboration." (CTA, 7) The boards and agencies, we are told, aid and abet this already dire state of the connection. They are perceived as "a cacophony of voices," whose varying brands and communications compete, thus breeding confusion and disharmony and diluting their impact in the denomination and exacerbating the already problematic "distance" between general church and annual conference and local church. The culprit is the "autonomous" nature of the agencies, each accountable primarily to (and at the whim of?) their individual boards of directors, and resulting in lack of collaboration, mutual competition, turf battles, and the like. (OAR, 19) What is needed in addressing this perceived cacophony, disharmony, competition, and lack of cooperation is decisive tightening up accountability mechanisms and other "process vehicles" to improve management.

It is important to note that this analysis in no small way depends on a prior decision to interpret the United Methodist connection through the metaphor of *machine*—as a "complex 'mechanism' structure." (OAR, 1) This metaphor comports nicely with the analytical model the researchers already employ. And as a description of the way the United Methodist connection currently looks and acts, it is surely accurate. Problems arise when the same metaphor is employed rather uncritically to guide recommendations for

change. Here explicit theological work would have helped immensely in avoiding blind spots and opening up more fruitful reflection on structure, mission, and identity. For example, one might legitimately wonder how the analysis and the subsequent recommendations might have been different had the project leaders taken seriously Russell Richey's searching historical-theological critique of just this metaphor.¹³ At the very least, Richey's critique would have prompted a critical look at the rather unproblematic assimilation of the metaphor in the research, both as an analytical tool and as perspective for framing proposed structural change, evident in the proclivity for language like "streamlining," "aligning," "opportunity levers," and "leverage points." As a consequence, the committee overlooks the deeper *theological* causes of the current malaise that enable both more informed analysis and a more nuanced approach to structural change. As Richey notes, at the heart of the current mistrust, poor communication, lack of accountability, and agency dysfunction within the connection lie theological and policy decisions taken decades ago—at the union of 1939 and the jurisdictional system brought into being at that union, to be precise. It is this system, says Richey, "an accommodation to Methodist racism and (Southern) regionalism," that "fundamentally damaged the church's capacity for decisive, coordinated national strategy." It did so, he continues,

by creating what turned out to be permanent regions, [and] granting the connection-making authority to these regional entities. . . . [I]t was the powers granted to jurisdictions and removed from General Conference that regionalized the church and undercut its capacity to think and act strategically for the connection as a whole. . . . Indeed, 1939 confused or diffused accountability. The general agencies remained creatures of General Conference. Their general secretaries, however, were not. They labored, in effect, for jurisdictionally selected directors. And the bishops, once also nationally and connectionally elected, were jurisdictional officers and area leaders. . . . In interposing jurisdictions between the [general] boards and the conferences and congregations, in making board directors jurisdictional servants, and in removing or sidelining other national leadership, the 1939 scheme

*created what would eventually become communication gaps and occasions for mistrust.*¹⁴

Richey's explanation allows agencies to interpret the cacophony of practices at the top as more often than not reflecting and representing divisions over and even distortions of values and practices embodied elsewhere in the connection. This insight might encourage the agencies to embrace such struggles as a crucial part of their unique stewardship role within and on behalf of the worldwide connection. Be that as it may, no amount of leveraging, downsizing, streamlining, or rightsizing the denomination's national structures will overcome their cacophony, competition, and disharmony, their unhealthy distance from annual conference and local church concerns, and their dilution of denominational mission unless and until these larger theological issues are addressed.

Or consider the adaptive challenge the committee identifies as the primary task before the church in its efforts to revitalize and renew itself: "*To redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*" (CTA, 14, italics and emphasis in original) In many respects, this claim expresses a line of argument about ecclesial identity and connection that has its roots in the 1990 episcopal initiative published under the title *Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples*. There the congregation emerges as the primary locus of denominational identity and vitality and the linchpin of denominational renewal—a view subsequently enshrined in the *Book of Discipline*.¹⁵ The current committee merely takes this line of thinking to its logical conclusion. I have critiqued this episcopal document elsewhere and will not rehearse my conclusions here.¹⁶ Instead, I will focus on consequences of this perspective for our desire to be a worldwide connection, how our identity is understood and lived out in this connection, and the critical role of the agencies in nurturing and mediating a fulsome connectional identity. As I will argue later, our primary adaptive challenge as United Methodists is not congregational vitality *per se* but *connectional* vitality. It is within a connection that is spiritually vibrant *in all its various parts* that congregational vitality finds its crucial purpose and essential contribution.

Furthermore, our identity, too, is inescapably connectional: it is only within and through the *whole* connection that we discover, rethink, and practice who we are as the people called United Methodists. Our identity belongs to the whole connection, and every part of the connection—from congregation to annual conference to general church—has a responsibility in nurturing and implementing that ecclesial vision in unique ways and in distinctive settings. Such a view, of course, requires careful attention to the relationship between identity and connection, a point to which I return later. For now, I point out only that the congregational reductionism—the centripetal pull to the local church—at work in the committee's vision distorts foundational Methodist ecclesial sensibilities, with serious, if unintended, consequences for our desire to be a worldwide church. Moreover, the report does little to clarify the meaning of the church's declared mission of making disciples—clarity required, one would think, for congregations to be effective in carrying out this mission, as the committee envisions.

Let us begin with the reductionism of the committee's proposal. That trimming the purposes of the United Methodist connection to the aims of congregational development contravenes the Methodist way of being church should not require comment. As Richey and others have pointed out, the Methodist connection is a multivalent, multi-dimensional *communal covenant*—an ecclesial vision and ecclesial praxis through whose many spiritual and organizational modalities Methodists have sought to embody their distinctive way of being church. Its "ethic of equity and proportionality" envisioned a distribution of resources (including but not only financial) to enable and support shared mission and ministry *across its various parts*, from local national to global.¹⁷ Calling, as the committee does, for placing the denomination's resources, including its national structures, in the service of congregational vitality (see, for example, CFA, 9, 20) cannot but damage this connectional covenant and undermine the integrity of its various ministries.

One possible consequence of this reductionist vision is its negative impact on the church's efforts to be a worldwide communion. The virtually exclusive preoccupation with the fortunes of the U.S. church (aided by the committee's decision, for reasons of time, money, available data, etc., [CTA, 13-14] to restrict its

inquiry to this region and Europe) might have the unintended consequence of introducing an unprecedented U.S.-centrism at the very time that the denomination seeks to improve equity, mutuality, and equality across its worldwide connection.¹⁸ Consider that the general boards and agencies remain the church's primary official connectional link with its work outside the United States between and on behalf of General Conference. How would the committee's call to radically refocus the mission of the agencies to serve the cause of congregational vitality in United States congregations impair the integrity of the agencies' global mandates and responsibilities? After all, the committee is unequivocal in its insistence that general church funding schemes be "align[ed] with the emphatic concentration on supporting congregational vitality." (CTA, 27) Funding to general agencies is to be based on their ability to implement church priorities (with congregational vitality as the "true first priority"), with "competitive access to substantial performance-based financial grants, and specifically using criteria that is [sic] tightly aligned with increasing congregational vitality." (CTA, 20, 22-23, 27-28) To be sure, the committee does envision a set of key functions that the (reduced number of) agencies would perform "in behalf of the Church," but it never spells these out, leaving one unsure as to what these might be and how they would relate to the agencies' current mandates and responsibilities. (CTA, 28) While the committee no doubt would object that its recommendations do not exclude global obligations, the nature of these proposals and the sense of crisis and urgency that accompanies them virtually ensure a preoccupation with the fate of the U.S. church. United Methodists outside the United States would be well advised to pay close attention to how these recommendations play out and particularly how they impact the nature, scope, and reach of the work of the general agencies.¹⁹

A further issue I wish to highlight is the committee's treatment of the church's mission. Here we approach the matter of the denomination's ecclesial identity—for me, the heart of the matter. In reading the operational assessment report, one can't help but be struck by the picture of a denomination deeply conflicted and confused about its identity and purpose. The report notes a pervasive sense of "loss of mission definition and relevancy and an accompanying sense of loss of identity" (OAR, 8) at all levels of the

denomination. United Methodists appear to be in basic disagreement about "what the Church's mission of 'making disciples' is or should be." (OAR, 9) Not surprisingly, the project identifies "achieving common Church-wide mission clarity, understanding, and congruence" as a "pivotal 'lever' opportunity" for the church. (OAR, 10) In response, the committee recommends "sustained and intense concentration on building effective practices in local churches," using the "drivers of Vital Congregations" recommended by its research on congregational vitality. These drivers include effective pastoral leadership, multiple small groups and programs for children and youth, a mix of traditional and contemporary worship, and a critical mass of lay leadership. (CTA, 8)

While the emphasis on cultivating effective practices in congregational life is to be welcomed, the *aim* of these practices remains unclear. Improving pastoral leadership, expanding worship opportunities, increasing programs for children and youth, etc., are worthy activities—but *to what end?* The obvious answer is: to the end of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." The problem is, as the research points out, it is precisely the *meaning* of discipleship and disciple making about which the faithful are confused and conflicted. Truth is, using it as we do, wrested from an encompassing biblical and theological framework, the injunction to make disciples becomes largely an empty phrase, to be filled with whatever content a particular theological proclivity, contextual demand, or vitality "driver" would give it. As such, *it is a task without an identity*, and particularly vulnerable to being pressed into dubious purposes by a denomination deeply anxious about its future.²⁰ Note that, in this context, the four focus areas (developing principled Christian leaders, engaging in ministry with the poor, combating the diseases of poverty by improving health globally, and creating new places for new people and revitalizing existing congregations²¹), designed to guide practical implementation of the church's mission, do not get us very far. For one thing, the decision to distribute the four focus areas between four general agencies virtually ensures their mutual insulation, encouraging a tendency to pick and choose from among them, and so missing their transformative potential for leadership development and discipleship when considered holistically. Moreover, we are left with questions that go to the heart of the

identity of discipleship: How would our commitment to the poor impact *where, why, and among whom* we start new churches? Would it not involve a fundamental “reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among ‘the least of these,’” as the episcopal initiative *Children and Poverty* insists?²² If so, just what sort of communities do our churches need to be to be faithful disciples of such a God? And what would be the drivers of congregational vitality in such a context? Moreover, what would be the implications for the kind and quality of leader we need for effective ministry in such churches? Questions like these bring us face to face with the key adaptive challenge facing The United Methodist Church today, namely, rethinking our identity as the people called United Methodists and the multifaceted ways in which this identity is shaped, mediated, and reflected throughout the connection. In the next and final section of the paper, I offer some reflections on what such an identity might look like and on the role of the general agencies in mediating and cradling this identity.

Holiness as Hospitality: An Old Identity for a New Time

I begin with a few reflections on how United Methodists might rethink our identity as a connective people in light of the confusion, misunderstanding, and disagreement about the denomination’s current mission. The problem with the current mission statement is not, of course, the injunction to make disciples. This task is absolutely fundamental to the United Methodist way of being, as it is to the Christian community as a whole. The problem lies in the unique *content* and *shape* discipleship and disciple making should assume for United Methodists. What would discipleship look like in the Wesleyan way? What practices would be required to form, nurture, and sustain such discipleship? And how might such discipleship find embodiment in the constellation of practices that constitute the United Methodist connection? A full treatment of these complex questions, of course, is not possible in the remaining pages of this essay. Allow me a few brief comments on each.

To begin, I suggest that United Methodists retrieve *holiness of heart and life* as the substance of their ecclesial identity and the form of their discipleship. After all, as M. Douglas Meeks observes, “sanctification is the substance of Wesleyan ecclesiology.”²³ Similarly,

Marjorie Suchocki considers the Wesleyan vision of Christian perfection as United Methodists’ unique contribution to ecumenical ecclesiology.²⁴ I suggest, further, that we recover the ancient biblical-theological category of *hospitality* to give shape to the radical nature of holy living as the reckless abandonment of self in love to God and neighbor.²⁵ Hospitality offers a disposition and a set of practices that allow United Methodists to reclaim for our time this radical Wesleyan vision of self-giving love. In this understanding, the Wesleyan means of grace—works of piety and works of mercy—recover their place as the core practices through which disciples in the Wesleyan way are formed. As practices of hospitality, these means provide the gracious rhythms through which selves and communities are formed in that experience of holy love that constrained John Wesley and the early Methodists to transgress the boundaries of custom, convention, and decency in compassion for the neighbor in need. As the tradition of hospitality reminds us, such transgressive love is dangerous. For in the act of inviting the stranger into my home, hospitality unsettles my sense of space,²⁶ my identity, opening it to transformation in community with one who is not like me. That is, in opening myself in compassion for my neighbor, I learn once again the paradox of self-emptying love (Phil. 2:5-8): It is in emptying myself for the sake of my neighbor that I find life. Hospitality, then, invites United Methodists to understand the holy life as life lived on the boundary, on the edge, always seeking the company of those who find themselves on the margins of our communities and our consciousness. In this way, disciples formed in the Wesleyan way will look upon encounter with that which is strange, different, out of the ordinary not as a threat but as an opportunity for deeper transformation in the image of God. Such encounters invite deeper respect for the integrity of my neighbor—not the abstract neighbor of my imagination but the concrete one, and especially the vulnerable one whom the world and the church so easily discount, exclude, and forget. And, as Joerg Rieger has astutely observed, our respect or lack of respect for the human other is inseparable from our respect or lack of respect for the divine Other.²⁷ After all, as the biblical tradition of hospitality teaches us, in the face of the stranger we often encounter none other than Christ himself (cf. Matt.

25:31-46).²⁸ Moreover, our ability to respect is grounded not in our own moral goodness but in God's way with us, who comes to God's created other not in overwhelming power but in "the dominion of [Christ's] self-denying love."²⁹ Boundary encounters, then, become spaces of expectation, repentance, grace, and solidarity through which the church can find new life and new forms of community. Indeed, through the prism of holiness as hospitality, United Methodists seek to shape ecclesial communities of "bounded openness."³⁰ Bounded by doctrine and discipline and fashioned in the sanctifying rhythms of the means of grace, disciples in the Wesleyan way strive for a connectional community "formed for openness"³¹ to the God whose transforming love encounters us in the most surprising and unexpected of places and persons.

What are the implications of this all-too-brief vision of churchly identity and discipleship for our discussion thus far? For one thing, a denominational identity thus grounded in our Wesleyan and Methodist sensibilities might go some way toward providing the content and the practices United Methodists need to understand the meaning of making disciples, and so addressing the widespread confusion over the church's mission today. Furthermore, it provides the drivers of congregational vitality recommended by the committee with their rationale and focus. Indeed, the means of grace as practices of hospitality now become the foundational drivers of vitality in congregation and connection. As such, they offer the context within which decisions about pastoral leadership, worship styles, programs for youth and children, and lay involvement find their orientation and purpose. Second, a churchly identity of holiness as hospitality, I suggest, might give new vitality to the four areas of focus as the practical outworking of our discipleship. Integrated by a vision of self-giving love in the company of those on the margins, it unlocks the transformative potential in this initiative. As I mentioned earlier, it would challenge us to ask how our commitment to the poor, the sick, and the forgotten would impact *where*, *why*, and *among whom* we start new churches or which existing congregations we choose to revitalize. Moreover, it would lend a radical edge to our desire for courageous leadership so prominent in the committee's recommendations.

As foundational to discipleship in the Wesleyan way, the means of grace must find intentional embodiment

throughout the connection—now imagined as a complex constellation of communities of embodied practice,³² from general agencies to annual conferences to local churches, and more. In each place in the connection, United Methodists will strive to form communities of hospitality that embody God's radical love. Within the gracious rhythms of each of these communities denominational identity is shaped, nurtured, and lived out in multiple and irreducible ways. To be sure, a general agency is not a congregation, and General Conference is not a class meeting. So we face the challenge of discerning how this identity might find expression in practices appropriate to the distinctive calling and work of each place.

How, then, might the call to holiness as hospitality be lived out in the mission and work of the general agencies? And in pursuit of this identity, what ecclesial practices might the agencies carry out in distinct ways on behalf of the church? I suggested earlier that the agencies should view as their principal task in the current debate over churchly bureaucracy to function as stewards of the denomination's identity *in its worldwide expression*. Given their distinctive location within the global connection, boards and agencies are uniquely positioned as symbolic spaces in which United Methodists can debate, contest, negotiate, and reformulate the meaning and implications of our identity as a people striving to be a worldwide body. As such, the agencies should work to make these symbolic spaces into communities of hospitality characterized by the modalities of self-denying love: mutual respect, vulnerability, openness to difference, and most of all, attunement to the marginal voice among us for the promise of divine encounters of truth, judgment, and repentance. I trust that my analysis thus far has at least intimated the urgency of this task. For our churchwide conversations today continue to be dominated and defined by that part of the United Methodist family at the denomination's center. That is, the failures and fortunes of the North American part of the church continue to set the terms for what we deem worthy of our collective denominational energy, attention, and resources. As my analysis has hopefully indicated, this centripetal dynamic is pervasive yet subtle—and it rarely receives overt critical scrutiny. At stake here is much more than concern over appropriate central conference representation on denominational councils, study

committees, agency boards of directors, and the like. Such concern is laudable and all to the good. However, in the process a deeper problem goes unnoticed: namely, a “self-reflexivity”³³ that assumes that those at the center of the church’s life—that part of the church with taken-for-granted access to power, influence, and resources—are best able to discern what truly matters and therefore what is in everyone’s best interests. Yet, as the tradition of hospitality teaches us, and as United Methodists once knew so well, it is often the margins and not the center that grasp what is truly going on; and it is often here that we learn things about ourselves and about God that we cannot learn while remaining at the center.³⁴ Until we learn these truths once more, the transformative potential of the worldwide covenant we seek will go unrealized, no matter the sincerity and ingenuity of our efforts to reform our denominational bureaucracy. In this context, and given their distinctive role in this worldwide conversation I proposed above, the ecclesial practice the general agencies might most profoundly need to embrace on behalf of the denomination is the means of grace we call *holy conferencing*. To be sure, conferencing often amounts to little more than a search for consensus based on the lowest common denominator. Yet I am persuaded that, disciplined by the radical modalities of hospitality outlined above, conference holds the promise for a worldwide United Methodist Church of a connective covenant characteristic of the Methodist pursuit of holiness in its most authentic moments.

Embracing this responsibility might lead to deep transformation within the agencies as well. For example, how would the practice of holy conferencing thus understood shape the way in which the board relates to its constituents, particularly that growing part of our family outside the United States (as well as many United Methodists within its borders) who so often remain on the margins of our consciousness and attention, despite our best efforts to be inclusive? How might it challenge the way the agency conducts board meetings and approaches its many deliberations and arguments, especially at a time of profound transition in the church like today when anxiety, confusion, and conflict encourages suspicion, recrimination, and a scapegoating?

Finally, how might a denominational identity of holiness as hospitality challenge the way in which

the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry approaches its work, its mission and program, and the distinctive values, vision, and commitments that the church has entrusted to it? Might it not prompt a more self-critical awareness of the myriad ways in which the agency’s life and work wittingly and unwittingly reflect rather than challenge denominational self-reflexivity? How might such theological reflection then help shape an institutional disposition that *seeks out* those places in our connection unfamiliar and perhaps even unsettling to the center, fully expecting to encounter God doing a new thing in our midst? Would such a self-critical ethos not open staff and directors to a different angle of vision on the agency’s charge to prepare a “new generation of Christian leaders. . . characterized by intellectual excellence, moral and spiritual courage, and holiness of heart and life”? And how might such an angle of vision shed fresh light on the agency’s approach to the aims of theological education? To the qualities needed of courageous leaders for a church in transition? Finally, how might a vision of holiness as hospitality inform the board’s work in church-related higher education? What gifts might a United Methodist tradition enlivened by the generosity of hospitality, its attention to difference and diversity, its concern for the voices so often sublimated, neglected, or forgotten, offer to institutions of higher education that seek a meaningful relation to this religious tradition?

Conclusion

Russell Richey, I suggest, is correct. Over our churchly machinery, Methodists have agonized and gloried from the beginning. And so we shall no doubt continue. So, too, is David Roozen’s claim at the beginning of this essay that “organizing religious work is a theological task.” My hope is that if anything I have said in this essay has any merit, United Methodists might just find in the midst of our current agonizing reason and occasion now and again to praise their bureaucracy.

Notes

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1. David A. Roozen, "National Denominational Structures' Engagement with Postmodernity: An Interpretive Summary from an Organizational Perspective," in *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, ed. David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 614.
2. Russell E. Richey, "Methodism as Machine," in *Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2009), 172.
3. See Russell E. Richey, "Reforming the Connection: Breaching Four Walls," in *Methodist Connectionalism*, 234-48, for a trenchant discussion of four walls that hem in contemporary United Methodism's mission to the world.
4. *Call to Action Steering Team Report* (Nashville: The United Methodist Church, 2010), 4, 8, 9, 41.
5. Russell E. Richey, with Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology In Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 5:x.
6. Roozen and Nieman, "Introduction," in *Church, Identity, and Change*, 8.
7. Far from a tactic in the interest of institutional self-preservation, such an insistence upon the priority of theological analysis in fact calls for *more* intense and sustained attention to our structure, this time asking about the theological consequences of changes in structure. For example, how might efforts at downsizing, rightsizing, streamlining, and aligning denominational structure, perhaps especially at the general church level, advertently or inadvertently damage, eliminate, or abandon values and theological commitments crucial to our shared ministry and mission?
8. *The United Methodist Church: Operational Assessment Report*. Prepared by Apex HG LLC (29 June 2010). Both documents are available online at umc.org/calltoaction. Hereafter, references to both documents are cited in the body of the article.
9. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed., Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 18 (italics in original).
10. Miroslav Volf, "Theology for a Way of Life," in *ibid.*, 254.
11. David Roozen and James Nieman, "Introduction," in *Church, Identity, and Change*, 3, 10. Similarly, Kirk Hadaway and David Roozen state forthrightly that the key to revitalizing mainline Protestant churches "is a strong sense of identity and a compelling vision." See their book *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream: Sources of Growth and Opportunities for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 103.
12. See John S. McClure and Burton Z. Cooper, *Claiming Theology In the Pulpit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) for an excellent discussion of "operative theology" in ecclesial life.
13. See "Methodism as Machine," in Russell E. Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2009), 172-82; see also, in the same volume, "Reforming the Connection: Breaching Four Walls," 234-48. For detailed historical accounts of the evolving Methodist connectional covenant in American Methodist history, see the introduction in Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 1:1-20. For a typology of evolving organizational styles and stages of American denominationalism, see Russell E. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 74-98.
14. "United Methodism at 40: Taking Stock," in *ibid.*, 225-27.
15. *Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church. Foundation Document* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1990). For the latest iteration of this perspective in the *Book of Discipline*, see *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2008* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), ¶120.
16. For a critique of this episcopal document and an argument in favor of the ecclesial vision found in another episcopal initiative, *Children and Poverty*, see Hendrik R. Pieterse, *Opting for the Margins, Again: Recovering and Episcopal Vision* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2007).

17. See *Connectionalism*, 1-20; and Russell E. Richey, with Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology In Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).
18. See the relevant proposals of the Committee to Study the Worldwide Nature of The United Methodist Church at the committee's website: www.worldwideumc.org. The committee will submit its recommendation to the 2012 General Conference.
19. The apparent ease with which the church outside the United States disappears from view in these documents should alert us to Janice Love's caution about the impact of power differentials between the U.S. United Methodist Church and United Methodists outside the United States. See her 2006 Willson Lecture titled "United Methodism in a World Context: Navigating the Local and the Global," *Occasional Papers* 100 (December 2006).
20. I examine these issues at more length in Hendrik R. Pieterse, "Die Gastfreundschaft Gottes leben," in *Kirchliches Leben in methodistischer Tradition: Perspektiven aus drei Kontinenten*, ed. Michael Nausner (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2010), 147-73, and also in *Opting for the Margins, Again*.
21. For a summary of the four focus areas, see "Four Areas of Focus," online at http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.4443111/k.D720/Four_Areas_of_Ministry_Focus.htm.
22. For an appreciative discussion and a comparison of this initiative with *Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples*, see my *Opting for the Margins, Again*.
23. M. Douglas Meeks, "A Home for the Homeless: Vocation, Mission, and Church in Wesleyan Perspective," in *Our Calling to Fulfill: Wesleyan Views on the Church In Mission*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2009), 8.
24. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Christian Perfection: A Methodist Perspective on Ecclesiology," in *Our Calling to Fulfill*, 91-107.
25. The biblical and theological literature on hospitality is enormous. The following resources provide a helpful orientation. Harold Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001 [originally published by Augsburg Fortress, 1985]); Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999); Amy G. Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000); Thomas W. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
26. Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God*, 11.
27. For a penetrating analysis of the inextricable relationship between respect for God and respect for neighbor, see Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).
28. For an analysis of hospitality as an encounter with the holy, see Katherine Dell, "Gastfreundschaft: Altes Testament," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Mohr-Siebeck, 2000), 3:475.
29. Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God*, 31.
30. See Serene Jones, "Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism, and the Church Today," *Interpretation* 55/1, 49-60. For a description of boundaries as spaces of encounter, see Michael Nausner, "Kulturelle Grenzerfahrung und die methodistische Konnexio," in *Kirchliches Leben in methodistischer Tradition*, 273-95.
31. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 173, 174.
32. I borrow the notion of the church as a constellation of communities of practice from L. Gregory Jones, "Beliefs, Desires, Practices, and the Ends of Theological Education," in *Practicing Theology*, 185-205.
33. For a detailed examination of the notion of "self-reflexivity" in the context of an emerging world Christianity, see Theo Sundermeier, *Den Fremden Verstehen: Eine Praktische Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).
34. See Joerg Rieger, "What Do Margins and Center Have to Do with Each Other?" in *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition*, ed. Joerg Rieger and John J. Vincent (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2003), 15-30.

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